Confucian Role-Based Ethics and Strong Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Onora O’Neill has argued that an obligations-based anthropocentric ethics can support strong environmentalism. However, the value that non-human nature has in such ethics is still ultimately instrumental. I will argue in this paper that while O’Neill’s ethics is conceptually close enough to Confucian role-based ethics, the latter allows that non-human nature can have a non-instrumental value and thus can support a robust environmentalism while remaining anthropocentric.

KEYWORDS

Confucian ethics; anthropocentrism; strong environmentalism; inherent value; intrinsic value

It is commonly supposed that a strong environmental ethics, one that calls for a sacrifice of some human interests where necessary for the sake of the environment, must be predicated upon an outright rejection of anthropocentrism. At least, this is the case with biocentrism, ecocentrism and Deep Ecology. For supporters of these environmental philosophies, it is not enough to modify, or weaken, anthropocentrism and not enough to accept that non-human nature has values that extend beyond the short-term economic, or commercial, ones, such as the spiritual, scientific, preservational and recreational values (which Godfrey-Smith derives, using what he calls the ‘cathedral’, ‘laboratory’, ‘silo’ and ‘gymnasium’ arguments respectively),¹ or values based on what Bryan Norton calls ‘considered’ (rather than ‘felt’) preferences.² Such values are still

doi: 10.3197/096327111X13150367351375
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instrumental. Thus, it is commonly supposed that a weak, or 'enlightened', anthropocentrism can support only a weak, or shallow, environmental ethics, one in which non-human nature only has instrumental values, and some human interests are sacrificed only for the sake of more enlightened ones rather than for nature's sake. Against such common supposition, Onora O'Neill has argued that anthropocentrism, or rather an anthropocentric ethics, can support a strong environmental ethics, but it will have to be one that departs from traditional ethical theories. Rejecting the traditional rule-based and virtue-based moral theories, O'Neill argues for an obligations-based theory, which, she claims, can serve as the foundation for a strong environmental ethics. The aim of this paper is to show that O'Neill's obligations-based moral theory is close enough to what I have elsewhere called Confucian role-based ethics and thus if it is true that the former can support a strong environmental ethics then so can the latter. This is significant insofar as there is a considerable resistance to the idea that Confucian ethics can support a strong environmental ethics precisely because of its anthropocentric assumptions. The only problem is that, as I will show, O'Neill's obligations-based moral theory fails to support a strong environmental ethics. However, this does not mean that the Confucian role-based ethics will also fail in this regard. Indeed I will show that the latter provides a corrective for the deficiency found in O'Neill's account and will serve as a more solid foundation for a strong environmental ethics.

Before proceeding, the question 'Why Confucianism?' needs to be addressed, as it is bound to be raised by those not predisposed to take Confucianism seriously. Indeed, those who associate Confucianism with China might say that turning to Confucianism for environmental inspiration is a mistake given the horrific images and stories of environmental degradation coming from China, such as lakes covered in green algae, cities shrouded in smoke and haze, children sick from toxic factory discharges and so on. One response to such criticism is that it is not the Confucian beliefs that contribute to the current environmental problems in China, but rather the economic policies pursued by the government, which are designed to attain maximum short-term growth. If anything, given that the claims about Confucianism below are correct, the solution to those environmental problems lies in China returning to its core Confucian beliefs. Another response is that given the scale of the global environmental crisis, no source of ideas should be neglected. Yet another is the practical question of encouraging China, with one fifth of the world population, to enter the environmental debate and to support global environmental initiatives. Without the participation of China, few, if any, globally significant environmental initiatives can succeed, as amply demonstrated at the recent Copenhagen meeting. To secure such participation, the place to start is the Chinese people themselves, and the most effective way, arguably, is to appeal to their cultural heritage, namely Confucianism. From the western perspective, it may be argued that what is needed is a radical shift.
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in perspective and Confucianism may provide a radically new angle to rethink environmental issues. In any case, Confucianism could well complement and enrich western thoughts. Indeed, it is precisely the aim of this paper to show how we can appeal to Confucianism to strengthen O’Neill’s argument for the environmental credentials of anthropocentrism.

1. O’NEILL’S OBLIGATIONS-BASED ETHICS

As noted earlier, environmental philosophies such as biocentrism, ecocentrism and Deep Ecology are ‘strong’ in the sense that they claim that some of our interests may have to be sacrificed for the sake of the environment. One way of underpinning such a claim is to attribute to nature a value that exists independently of humans, respect for which may call for the sacrifice of some human interests. Indeed, taking anthropocentrism to be incompatible with such value, supporters of these environmental theories argue that anthropocentrism is incompatible with a strong environmental ethics and reject the former in advocating the latter. The question is whether it follows that an environmental ethics cannot be strong unless it rejects anthropocentrism outright. O’Neill argues that it does not. The trouble with those environmental theories that attribute to nature a value that exists independently of humans is that they are committed to value realism, or to the view that value exists ‘out there’ independently of valuers. Their critics typically argue that the realist position is difficult to justify. Agreeing with the critics, O’Neill claims that it will be preferable for an environmental theory not to have to suppose value realism, and that an anthropocentric theory has this advantage. This is what motivates her to argue for an anthropocentric position that can serve as a foundation for a strong environmental ethics. Since the traditional moral theories of utilitarianism and deontology are anthropocentric, O’Neill naturally enough goes among them in search of materials to construct her position.

O’Neill considers first utilitarianism but concludes ultimately that the materials it provides are unsuitable for her purpose. She acknowledges that it is possible to include sentient non-human animals in the calculation of utility in order to justify the sacrifice of some human interests for the sake of those animals’ interests (e.g. in not having pain and suffering inflicted on them). However, this way of calculating utility leaves out non-sentient living nature, not to mention non-living nature. An ethics that leaves out much of nature cannot be a foundation for a strong environmentalism. Furthermore, there is nothing to prevent a utilitarian from following John Stuart Mill (who famously said that he would rather be a man dissatisfied than a pig satisfied!) in giving greater importance to human pain and pleasure than to animal pain and pleasure. Even if humans and animals are equal in this respect, as Peter Singer insists, given the fact that
humans have an extensive range of entrenched interests, the interests of animals, let alone those of non-living things, may be sacrificed in the trade-offs that utilitarianism not only permits but also officially encourages.

That leaves deontology. However, instead of the typical rights-based approach, O'Neill argues for an obligations-based approach. The trouble with the rights-based approach is that it requires a robust notion of moral agency, which, in any plausible formulation, is likely to leave out non-sentient nature. Furthermore, it is not clear what rights any particular moral agent is entitled to and on whom they are binding. The result is that it is not clear 'who ought to do what for whom?' (p. 132). In switching to an obligations-based ethics, we can avoid the tricky question of identifying the right-holders and their rights, and yet leave open the possibility that the entity to which we have an obligation has rights. An obligations-based ethics is indeed strongly anthropocentric because only humans have obligations. Nevertheless, it can serve as a foundation for a strong environmentalism if among the obligations that humans have are obligations to the environment, which require us to sacrifice some of our interests for the sake of the environment. If those obligations can be identified, we know what we ought to do for whom. Furthermore, an obligations-based approach does not exclude non-sentient nature, not even the isolated and dispersed elements of the environment, insofar as it is possible to specify obligations to these aspects of nature. The key question, then, is how to identify, or specify, human obligations to nature as a whole.

As an immediate objection to O'Neill's approach, it may be said that an obligation is just a counterpart of a right. However, O'Neill argues that while many obligations do have counterpart rights, there are many obligations that do not have counterpart rights at all (and conversely). The one-to-one correspondence between obligations and rights applies more in the case of legal obligations and rights but less so in the case of moral ones. In support of O'Neill's claim, we might mention the Parfit paradox, which shows that our obligations to future generations do not require any identified future people having counterpart right claims against us. The question now is, what obligations do we have concerning the environment?

According to O'Neill, since our obligations to the environment are moral in nature, they are fundamental obligations rather than institutional. Being fundamental, they must be based on principles that are not just universalisable but also can 'be accepted and adopted (not necessarily discharged) by all agents’ (p. 135). A universalisable principle (e.g. taking the bus to work) will not be accepted and adopted by all agents if any of its alternatives (e.g. taking the train to work) is also universalisable (O'Neill's own example: fasting by day and fasting by night). However, when a principle is universalisable and none of the alternatives is then the universalisable must be adopted as obligatory (and any alternative must be rejected). A Kantian might say that since telling the truth

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is universalisable and its (only) alternative, lying, is not, it is obligatory to tell
the truth, or obligatory not to lie. Here, O'Neill relies on the Kantian intuition
that universalisability gives a moral principle (or maxim) a normative force, in
much the same way as Korsgaard does, insofar as it gives the agent a reason for
acting as Korsgaard puts it. However, universalisability alone is not sufficient to
guarantee that the moral principle has an objective moral force. ‘Universalisable’
is not the same thing as ‘universal’. O'Neill may be said to have improved on
Korsgaard’s account of the source of normativity. For Korsgaard, ‘the source
of normativity … must be found in the agent’s own will’ (p. 19). The problem
for Korsgaard is that there is no reason why my ‘own will’ (e.g. to fast by day
or to take the bus to work) should square with someone else’s (e.g. to fast by
night or to take the train to work). By stipulating also that the alternatives of
the universalisable principle must be non-universalisable, O'Neill’s procedure
succeeds in giving moral principles objective normative force, or a reason for
acting that can be ‘accepted and adopted … by all agents’.

O'Neill goes on to identify a principle that serves her purpose, namely the
principle of rejecting the commitment to injure because it is universalisable and
its only alternative, the commitment to injure, is not. For O'Neill, rejecting the
commitment to injure is a fundamental human obligation. To discharge this
obligation, a human society must develop institutions designed to minimise
injury to persons. Since we can be injured by living in a degraded environment,
we have an obligation not to damage the environment:

... if the rejection of systematic or gratuitous injury to other agents is a funda-
mental obligation, then it will also be obligatory not to damage or degrade the
underlying powers of renewal and regeneration of the natural world. The basic
thought here is that it is wrong to destroy or damage the underlying reproductive
and regenerative powers of the natural world because such damage may inflict
systematic or gratuitous injury on some or many agents (p. 137).

Since the ‘reproductive and generative powers of the natural world’ are not
confined to sentient creatures, our obligations extend beyond them. From here,
we can argue for an extensive and far-reaching protection of the natural world.
For those aspects of nature that still remain out of reach, we can establish ‘…
indirect arguments deriving from human obligations for … [a] … wider protec-
tion, or … choose to establish positive obligations’ for such protection (p. 139).
All this, O'Neill claims, should be sufficient to endorse the perspective of strong
environmentalism and should thus satisfy strong environmentalists. For those
who think that the protection of the environment that can be justified in terms
of her obligations-based ethics is not extensive enough, O'Neill points out that
existing strong environmentalist theories can only endorse a limited range of
fundamental rights for animals, and even fewer for non-sentient nature, giving
them no greater protection than her obligations-based approach does. As a final
defence of her approach, O'Neill contends that even if the gain falls somewhat

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short of what current strong environmentalist theories promise, the shortfall is more than made up for with the conceptual gains of greater clarity concerning who ought to do what for whom, and of the freedom from any commitment to value realism.

Should strong environmentalists be satisfied? Unfortunately, no principled strong environmentalist should be. The amount of protection for the environment that we end up with is not a selling point for an ethics that promises to serve as a foundation for a strong environmentalism. What needs to be kept in mind is that a strong environmentalism is committed to the view that, where necessary, human interests have to be sacrificed for the sake of the environment. To put it differently, strong environmentalism is committed to the view that some aspects of the non-human natural world have a non-instrumental value which may have to be preserved at some cost to human interests. O’Neill’s obligations-based ethics does not deliver on this score. The aim of the principle of non-injury is to protect human agents, and the protection of nature is called for only in the service of this aim. Recall O’Neill’s own words: ‘... it is wrong to destroy or damage the underlying reproductive and regenerative powers of the natural world because such damage may inflict systematic or gratuitous injury on some or many agents’ (p. 137). It may be a strict requirement not to destroy or damage the natural world, but the protection of the natural world is only instrumental to the avoidance of ‘systematic or gratuitous injury on some or many agents’. It follows that the natural world, or some aspects of it, may be destroyed or damaged if no injury to any agent will result. Surely, there must be some aspects of the natural world, the isolated and remote ones, that will fall into this category. Indeed, as O’Neill herself concedes, certain harms to animals, such as the destruction of their habitat, may not cause any injury to any agent in a lot of cases. Of course, as she puts it in the remark cited above, we can always ‘choose to establish positive obligations’ to protect them anyway. We may so choose but on the other hand we may not. The point is that there is nothing in her ethics to force us to make this choice. O’Neill admits that if we choose any such obligation, it will be an institutional rather than a fundamental one. In the end, the problem with O’Neill’s ethics is that its anthropocentrism is exclusive of the non-human world, because obligations therein are derived from a moral principle – the rejection of commitment to injure – that applies only to humans. Animals and the rest of the non-human world are left out of the loop, and can be considered only institutionally rather than fundamentally.

It now looks like strong environmentalists are right after all, namely a weak or enlightened anthropocentrism can only support a weak environmentalism, or alternatively, strong environmentalism calls for a total rejection of anthropocentrism. If this is right then we must abandon all hope for Confucianism to be used as a foundation for a strong environmental ethics insofar as Confucianism is thoroughly anthropocentric. I will now argue that this is not the case, but it
is useful to note first that O’Neill’s obligations-based ethics is close enough in structure and in its anthropocentric assumptions to Confucian ethics, which I have argued elsewhere as best understood as a role-based ethics.

2. CONFUCIAN ROLE-BASED ETHICS

For many commentators, Confucian ethics is a kind of virtue ethics, given its emphasis on virtues such as ren, yi and li. The trouble with this view is that the Confucian texts also speak of strict moral rules that one ought to follow, either because they are entailed by certain duties, or because following them has desirable consequences, such as a harmonious world. However, Confucian ethics is best understood as neither a virtue ethics nor a rule-based ethics, but as an ethics in which virtues and rules fall out of an understanding of the self as constituted by the roles determined by the relationships in which a person stands. If Confucian ethics is based on anything, it is based on the roles that make an agent the person who he or she is. It is a role-based ethics.

To read Confucian ethics as a virtue ethics or a rule-based ethics is to ascribe to Confucianism a conception of the moral agent very different from the way Confucians conceive of a moral agent. To be sure, there is a disagreement among commentators about what this is. However, a plausible account is Chenyang Li’s, according to which the ‘Confucian... self is not an independent agent who happens to be in certain social relationships’.6 Rather, the self ‘is constituted of, and situated in social relationships’ (ibid.). The Confucian self does have an identity, but this identity is not arrived at, or defined, independently of the society in which the self finds itself. Rather, the self defines itself in terms of the social roles it occupies in the society. The society, in turn, is constituted by distinct individual selves acting in different roles. Roger Ames and David Hall have helpfully employed the focus-field metaphor to characterise the relationship between the individual self with the social network of relationships in which it finds itself. For Hall and Ames, the Confucian self is a focus in that ‘it both constitutes and is constituted by the field in which it resides’, the ‘field of social activity and relations’.

For Confucians, social relationships are characterised by social roles, and the latter are defined in terms of obligations. To each role is attached a set of obligations, and to be in a role is to be under a set of obligations, the important ones being encoded in the rites, li. To be in a social relationship, then, is to stand under certain obligations. It follows that the Confucian self, being ‘constituted of, and situated in social relationships’, is defined in terms of a set of social obligations. Thus, I am who I am by virtue of standing in a network of social relationships, a father to A, a husband to B, a friend to C, a citizen of D, and so on, and being a something entails that I owe them certain things, such as
benevolence, faithfulness, respect, loyalty, and so on, as set out in *li*. We may, of course, reject the Confucian characterisation of being a father, or a friend, or someone in any other social role. Different societies have different rites and rituals, different *li*. But there is no denying that, in general, a social relationship entails certain obligations, no denying that to be such-and-such to someone entails that we owe something to that someone. A father owes certain things to a son and conversely. It does not seem to make much sense to say that I am your friend but I owe you nothing. It does not make much sense particularly to the Confucians to say that I am a self, a person, but I owe nothing to others. Thus, in Confucian ethics, moral obligations are derived from the roles that define an individual as a person, or an agent.

The reading of Confucian ethics above is consistent with the Confucian ideas of rectifying names and learning to be sincere, extensively discussed in Confucian texts. The process of becoming a Confucian self requires self-cultivation, which in turn requires dedication, hard work and making choices. It requires understanding what it is to be something and learning to be sincere. The former, in turn, requires the rectification of names. Names such as ‘father’, ‘friend’, etc. denote specific social roles and indicate specific obligations. It is our task to learn the nature of the role that goes under a name and to try to live up to what the name specifies. The process of rectifying names, *zhengming*, has two sides. On one side, we are to use a name, such as ‘father’, ‘son’, ‘ruler’ etc., that fits what is named, i.e. a person with certain qualities. On the other side, we are to rectify our selves to fit the name that one bears, or the role that the name specifies. It is the process of learning to recognise and accept one’s obligations, and to do what one ought to do as a person named. Someone who is an X must rectify himself or herself to be truthful to the name X. When this is done all will be well. Thus, Confucius said that ‘when the father is father, the son is son, the elder brother is elder brother, the husband is husband, and the wife is wife, then the family is in proper order. When all the families are in proper order, all will be right with the world.’ The rectification of names is the process of learning to be true to the self that one already is, which is to be true to the names that describe the social relationships in which one stands. It is to accept the roles entailed by such relationships and to play these roles properly by discharging specific duties and obligations and cultivating specific virtues.

To be true to the self that one already is, is to be sincere. This is why learning to be sincere is equally stressed by the Confucians. Indeed, this is the same process as self-cultivation, although the stress here is on the outcome. That sincerity consists in being true to the nature of things is made clear in the Great Learning (*Daixue*) where great learning is said to consist of firstly ‘investigating things’ so as we come to know their true nature, and then ‘making one’s will sincere’. Since what ‘one really is’ is a moral person, to be sincere is to be motivated to do the right things: ‘Hold on to sincerity and you will move to what
is right' (Analects, 3.12). Now, as we have seen, the moral obligations entailed by social relationships are encoded in li. It follows that the cultivated persons (junzi), the perfect Confucian selves, are those who have rectified themselves and are sincere. They know what their obligations are and will do what is good or right and refrain from doing what is bad or wrong.

If I am right in my reading of Confucianism above then it is clear that Confucian ethics is a role-based ethics in which obligations are derived from the social roles that an agent sees himself or herself occupying, which is consequent upon seeing his or her self in terms of a network of social relationships. It is clear also that Confucian ethics is close enough in structure and crucially in its anthropocentric assumptions to O’Neill’s obligations-based ethics. Naturally, the two remain very different ethical theories. One important difference lies in the fact that obligations in O’Neill’s account are not grounded in special relationships or roles. It follows from this that there is a difference in the nature of the fundamental universal moral principles from which O’Neill’s obligations and Confucian obligations are derived. As we have seen, the problem with O’Neill’s ethics is that its fundamental principle of non-injury ranges over humans only: our primary obligations are to our fellow human beings and our obligations to the natural world are derived from them and thus secondary. O’Neill’s anthropocentrism is exclusive of the non-human world. In the case of Confucianism, obligations are derived from fundamental moral principles that are based on the conception of the self as a person standing in a network of social relationships, or more specifically from the social roles in terms of which Confucians define themselves. I will show that it is precisely this difference that allows Confucian ethics to overcome the deficiency found in O’Neill’s ethics, a deficiency that, as I have argued, prevents the latter from serving as a foundation for a strong environmentalism. In particular, I will show, in Section 4, that since Confucian anthropocentrism is based on a particular conception of the self, it can be inclusive of the non-human world and provides ample conceptual space for the non-human world to be attributed with a value of its own, one that is not subordinate to human interests.

3. CONFUCIAN ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND UNIVERSAL MORAL PRINCIPLES

Implicit in O’Neill’s ethics is the meta-ethical claim that for obligations to have a normative force, they must be grounded in fundamental universal moral principles. I do not wish to challenge this claim. Nor do I wish to challenge O’Neill’s procedure for identifying them. The question is, in what universal moral principles we can ground Confucian obligations so as to give them a normative force. Given my account of the Confucian role-based ethics above,
the following principle can be plausibly stated: $C = \text{Commit oneself to live by the roles with which one identifies one's self (or by which one conceptualises one's self).}$ We can now follow O'Neill's own procedure and argue that $C$ is the fundamental universal principle that grounds Confucian ethics and gives the obligations therein their normative force. To do so, we need to show that $C$ is universalisable and its negation is not.

That $C$ is universalisable is almost self-evident. If my reading of Confucian ethics above is correct, no Confucian self is thought of as anything other than someone who stands in a network of social relationships. Since social relationships are defined in terms of social roles, to commit oneself to live by those roles, or to cultivate oneself into those roles as Confucius and Mencius would put it, is a requirement for all Confucian agents. Insofar as the roles themselves are understood in terms of specific obligations and responsibilities, moral and otherwise, $C$ certainly has a normative force, or reason for acting, or being, as O'Neill (and Korsgaard) would say. Indeed, it can give those not predisposed to Confucianism a reason for acting because $C$ does not depend on how the roles themselves are actually conceived – how to be a father or a son, a teacher or a pupil – and what precise obligations and responsibilities go with what role. Confucians and non-Confucians are bound to have different conceptions (and there is no agreement among Confucians themselves on these matters of details). Such non-Confucians can in fact follow a line of influential western thinkers, which include Dorothy Emmet, who grounds duties and obligations in social relationships, and Charles Taylor, who takes social relationships to be the main ‘sources of the self’ in general, and the moral self in particular.11 None of these authors would accept all the details of the Confucian account of what it is to be a father, or a son, or generally someone in a certain role. Indeed, these authors, and the Confucians, may be said to go beyond O'Neill in identifying the normative source of moral principles, locating it in our reflections on our selves as persons standing in networks of social relationships and on the obligations and responsibilities we take on as such persons. In any case, there is no reason to deny that $C$ is a reason for acting whether or not I succeed in my argument below to show that it is a reason for everyone. Returning to Confucianism, Confucians believe that all agents are capable of observing $C$, even though different thinkers have different views about how difficult it is to do so. They further believe, as we have seen, that all will be well, that there will be universal harmony, if we all successfully observe $C$. Not only that there is no conceptual difficulty with the idea of everyone adopting $C$, or willing it to be a universal law, thus satisfying the Kantian criterion for universalisability, there will be an optimal outcome if everyone adopts and abides by $C$.

As pointed out earlier, universalisability by itself is not sufficient according to O'Neill. For $C$ to be a fundamental moral principle, it has to be universal, not just universalisable. For $C$ to be universal, the negation of $C$, namely $\text{Not-}C = \text{Reject}$
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the commitment to live by the roles with which one identifies one's self (or by which one conceptualises one's self), has to be shown to be not universalisable. This is harder to establish, but a plausible argument can be given. Thus, while it may be possible for an isolated individual to reject the commitment to live by his or her roles, such as a father or a son to refuse to act as a father or a son, such rejection, or Not-C, cannot be willed to be a universal law without running into conceptual difficulties or practical absurdities. Differently put, since social roles arise from networks of social relationships, they are inter-connected such that playing a certain role requires others to play corresponding, or matching, roles. For me to play the role of a teacher, or a sovereign, requires others to play the role of a student, or a subject, and so on. Thus, for me to exist as a Confucian self, I cannot will that others adopt Not-C. Thus, Not-C is not universalisable. As above, this point applies also to non-Confucians, if O'Neill's arguments for her obligations-based ethics is accepted, particularly when they are bolstered by attempts by Emmet, Taylor, Smiley and others to ground moral obligations in social roles in much the same way Confucians do. In any case, the important thing is that Not-C is not universalisable in terms of O'Neill's obligations-based ethics, which has to be presupposed since the main point of this paper is to show that Confucian role-based ethics can overcome a deficiency in O'Neill's argument. Now, since the non-universalisable Not-C is the negation of the universalisable C, following O'Neill, we have a fundamental obligation to adopt C, which is the ground of all other obligations that go with social roles.

The crucial difference between O'Neill's obligations-based ethics and the Confucian role-based ethics is now clear: in the former, obligations are grounded in the principle of rejecting the commitment to injure while in the latter, they are based on C, or the commitment to play certain social roles, or to be sincerely a Confucian self. O'Neill has argued, problematically as we have seen, that the principle of rejecting the commitment to injure can serve as the basis for a strong environmental ethics. The question now is whether C can do a better job. I believe it can. All that is needed is the acceptance that the self, essentially social as it is, is part of a larger community with its own moral standing, and as such there can be human social obligations to that larger community for its own sake. One idea found in all of the strong environmental philosophies is the idea that humans are part of a larger biotic community, one in which we are members as much as other living things are, and as members, we are all dependent in various ways on the non-living environment. This is facilitated by, if not clearly implied in principle C, given my reading of Confucian ethics as role-based ethics. Thus, in Confucianism, a person who learns to conceptualise the self as a relational self and who has done so will be much more ready to make the necessary step to extend the network of relationships beyond what is social toward the nonhuman elements. We are here reminded of the Confucian process of self-cultivation as one that begins with the individual and then extends
outward to the family, then to the community and finally to the world. While there is no explicit mention, in the Confucian writings, of an extension beyond the human world, the Confucian idea of extending the self can itself be easily extended to reach the nonhuman world. Indeed, it may be said that such extension is logically implied insofar as the Confucian path of extension is meant to follow the grooves of the dao, and insofar as Confucians understand that the path of the dao leads beyond the human world. Furthermore, the Confucian self is equipped with xin, or heart-mind, the ‘heart’ element of which is affective, giving the Confucian agent the capacity to empathise with the rest of nature. As for the ‘mind’ element, it is arguable that the network of social relationships is meant to be extendable to include the nonhuman world, that social rites and rituals, or li, are meant to be extendable to include obligations towards and responsibilities for the environment. There is enough evidence to suggest that for the Confucians, social relationships can be fostered in a favourable natural environment and harmed in adverse ecological conditions. Indeed, social relationships may be said to be logically continuous with ecological relationships. Thus, the traditional social obligations and responsibilities imply, or at least can be extended to include, those pertinent to the environment. The social li can be seen as continuous with, or incorporating the ecological li. It is li not to pollute the environment and not to waste natural resources, it is li to respect nonhuman living things and to protect the ecological systems that support them and so on. The Confucian saying ‘Let the father be father, the son be son …’ implies, or at least can be extended to include ‘Let the citizen be citizen’, where ‘citizen’ is understood as citizen of a biotic community.

It may be said that there is no direct evidence for such extension, let alone implication, in the Confucian writings. However, if the claims above concerning the Confucian account of the human-nature relatedness are correct then the extension of Confucian role-based ethics to include roles regarding, hence obligations to, non-human nature, or the biotic community, is justified. Indeed, some commentators have argued that Confucianism is at least compatible with the widest possible extension of the self to something akin to the ‘Self’ of Deep Ecology. Thus, according to Tu Wei-ming, Confucianism is best described as ‘anthropocosmic’ rather than simply anthropocentric. In Section 4 below, I will present my own version of the Confucian ‘anthropocosmic’ view. Borrowing from Tu, Mary Evelyn Tucker has argued that the Confucian conception of the self can be interpreted in such a way as to show that Confucianism is compatible with the fundamental tenets of Deep Ecology. In particular, Tucker claims that ‘Confucians would agree’ that ‘nature has inherent value’ (p. 130), a claim that will be explicitly supported in Section 4 below.
4. CONFUCIANISM AND STRONG ENVIRONMENTALISM

Can Confucian ethics be developed into a strong environmentalism? I will now argue that it can be developed into an environmentalism that is sufficiently robust even if it may not be as strong as some environmentalists demand. Typically, strong environmental ethics supposes that nature possesses an intrinsic value, respect for which may require the sacrifice of some human interests. Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear what the notion of intrinsic value amounts to. To make matters worse, some authors speak of ‘inherent value’ and take this term to be equivalent to ‘intrinsic value’. In what follows, I take these two terms to refer to different things and propose to account for them in terms of the source and the basis of value. The basis of value is that by virtue of which an object is valuable, or that by virtue of which value is determined. The source of the value is its ground, which can be thought of metaphysically as that by virtue of which value comes to exist, or epistemically as that by virtue of which value comes to be known. We can then say that an object has intrinsic value if both the basis and the source of value lie in the object itself. Thus, a human being (with normal cognitive faculties – as for others, a moral decision will have to be made) is intrinsically valuable. If non-human nature has intrinsic value then such value exists independently of us humans, that is, it exists whether we know it or not, and whether we can measure it. Such value is also non-instrumental. On the other hand, an object has inherent value if the basis of value lies in the object itself, but the source of value lies outside of it, such as in human valuers. A work of art is typically of the latter kind, the value of which (as a work of art) is determined by properties inherent in the work, but the source of value is still human valuers. While such value is not instrumental, it does not exist (or is not known to exist) without valuers (though a work of art can also have an instrumental value, for instance, as a piece of investment). The question is whether non-human nature only has a value that is purely instrumental to humans (insofar as we value it on the basis of human needs and preferences), or whether it can also have a non-instrumental value. The latter can be either an inherent value, which depends on there being human valuers, or intrinsic, which is totally independent of humans.

In their outright rejection of anthropocentrism, or in attributing intrinsic value to nature, biocentrism, eco-centrism and Deep Ecology are ‘strong’ environmental philosophies, calling for the sacrifice of some of the human interests, including the enlightened ones, for the sake of the environment. The question is whether it follows that an environmental ethics cannot be strong unless it rejects anthropocentrism outright, or attributes intrinsic value to nature. Given the distinction above between intrinsic and inherent value, there can be an environmental ethics that accords to nature an inherent value, which also calls for the sacrifice of some of the human interests in respecting nature’s inherent value, while denying that it has intrinsic value. Such an ethics would be anthropocentric insofar as the
inherent value that it attributes to nature has its source in human valuers and insofar as it denies that nature has an intrinsic value that is totally independent of humans, or human valuers. In recognising nature’s inherent value, such an ethics is robust even if it is not as strong as those that attribute intrinsic value to nature. If Confucian ethics, while decidedly anthropocentric, leaves enough conceptual space for attributing inherent value to nature then it is capable of supporting a robust environmental ethics, one that attributes to nature a non-instrumental value. I will now argue that it does.

In a move similar to what I have proposed above, Hourdequin and Wong argue that the Confucian relational conception of the self allows for ‘the nonhuman world [to] enter into human identities’, and see Confucian ethics as carving out a third position in between ‘the instrumentalist and intrinsic value approaches to environmental ethics’. For Hourdequin and Wong, the idea of intrinsic value ‘often appears as inscrutable or flaky’ (p. 19). However, they claim that if the self is relational then we can identify ‘a ground for attributing value to the nonhuman world’ (p. 27) that is independent of humans. The process of identification ‘starts from uncontroversial assumption that human beings have value, and asks what must be true for them to have value’ (ibid.) Hourdequin and Wong hold that ‘we cannot attach value to human beings or to whatever promotes their interests without attaching value to the constituents of their identities...’ (ibid.) Thus, the ‘ground for attributing value to the nonhuman world’ is the extent to which the nonhuman world shapes the identity of human persons. What Hourdequin and Wong refer to as the ‘ground’ is clearly just what I mean by the ‘basis’ in my discussion of intrinsic and inherent value above. Thus, there is a basis, or ground, for attributing value to the nonhuman world that is independent of humans. Hourdequin and Wong are right in saying that this position does not commit us to the ‘flaky’ idea of intrinsic value (which, on my account, requires also the source of value to be independent of humans). The question now is whether there is textual evidence for the claim that Confucians attribute to the non-human world a non-instrumental inherent value while staying true to its anthropocentrism by denying that it has an intrinsic value.

Some textual evidence for this claim can be found in the works of Xunzi. In Book 9.18 and Book 17.3, we find Xunzi claiming that human persons form a part of the great Triad, with Heaven and Earth forming the other two parts. One possible construal of this claim is that human identity emerges from our connections with Heaven, or tian, and Earth, the latter two together constitute the non-human parts of the Triad. This is consistent with the fact that Confucians subscribe to a broadly Daoist cosmology, as pointed out above, thus subscribing to the belief that it is the dao, literally the way but commonly translated as nature, that shapes human identity. Xunzi goes on to say that humans are the ‘summation’ of the myriad of things and that without the moral rules established by human sages, Heaven and Earth would be devoid of any order. Arguably, this

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can be construed as saying that humans are the source of values, including the value of the non-human parts of the Triad. However, the value of the myriad of non-human things cannot be instrumental even though its source lies in humans, simply because they shape the identity of human persons and form part of the great Triad, with which humans must live in harmony. By my account above, Xunzi may be said to attribute inherent value to nature while denying that it has intrinsic value. The same thing can be said about Confucius. It is the dao that shapes human identity and so we must model our conduct on the dao. Thus, at Analects 4.5, Confucius urges us not to seek honour and wealth, or avoid poverty and a humble station, in violation of the dao, and at 1.14, advises us to associate ourselves with those who are known to follow the dao in order to correct our faults. Clearly then, the basis of the dao's value lies in the dao itself. Nevertheless, since it is humans who understand the value that the dao possesses in its shaping of human identity and choose to conduct ourselves in accordance with it, such value has its source in humans, at least epistemically speaking. Thus, at Analects 15.28, Confucius says that 'it is not the dao that makes man great but rather man that makes the dao great'. Again by my account above, Confucius may be said to attribute an inherent value to non-human nature. If I am right then even though Confucianism is anthropocentric, it is committed to the view that there is value inherent in non-human entities, which is not, or not purely, instrumental. On my account, even though it is 'man who makes the dao great', even though Heaven and Earth would be devoid of any order without the moral rules established by human sages, insofar as the dao, or nature, has an inherent value the basis of which lies in itself, we are obligated not just to protect and preserve it but also to follow it, and not just to follow it but to do so with respect and reverence as if it were our teacher or indeed our parents, as stated in the 'Great Declaration' in the Book of History (5.1.1): 'Heaven and Earth are the parents of all creatures'.

If I am right in my arguments above then while Confucianism is anthropocentric, its anthropocentrism is at best a weak kind, to borrow Norton's terminology. Its commitment to anthropocentrism is either at the epistemological level or the metaphysical level, but not at the ethical level. P.J. Ivanhoe agrees that Confucianism subscribes to epistemological anthropocentrism, the view that nature can only be understood, and its value reckoned, from the human point of view, but argues that this form of anthropocentrism 'is not necessarily bad at all'. He goes on to say that Confucianism does not subscribe to the strong version of metaphysical anthropocentrism, or the view that humans 'are created apart from nature and stand above it, a separate, superior, and sui generis kind' (p. 66), nor to the strong version of ethical anthropocentrism, or the view that 'only human needs and desires have value, and the rest of nature exists for our sake' (p. 67). Relying on textual evidence similar to that cited above, Ivanhoe concludes that Confucianism is committed only to a weak kind of anthropocentrism.
If I am right in my claims above, this weak kind of anthropocentrism can be more precisely interpreted as one that ascribes to nature an inherent value, even though it rejects what O'Neill calls ‘value realism’, or the view that nature has an intrinsic value that is totally independent of humans. The basis of such value lies in nature itself even though its source, epistemic or metaphysical, lies in humans, in our understanding of our selves in relation to nature.

Also in support of my reading of Confucianism, comparison can be made with Tu Wei-ming’s account of the ‘Chinese Visions of Nature’. According to Tu, ‘the Chinese ... subscribe to the continuity of being as self-evidently true’ (p. 106). He goes on to say that ‘the notion of humanity as forming one body with the universe has been so widely accepted by the Chinese ... that it can very well be characterised as a general Chinese worldview’ (p. 113). In the paper cited earlier, Tu describes this Chinese worldview as ‘anthropocosmic’, a view that allows for a development of ‘more comprehensive environmental ethics’ (p. 19). As pointed out then, the ‘anthropocosmic’ nature of this worldview supports the claim that the obligations of the Confucian self as a self that stands in a network of social relationships can be extended to include obligations to the non-human community. Tu points out that the harmony that Confucians are committed to attaining is the ‘Great Harmony’ that encompasses all of nature (p. 111). In the terminology of the environmental debate, this might be called the great harmony of the biotic community. This is not to say, of course, that human identity is lost in the cosmic whole: Tu insists that ‘the human being ... is unique’ and cites a well-known Confucian who says that ‘human beings alone ... receive [the Five Agents] in their highest excellence’ (p. 115). This is consistent with my claim here that the Chinese view is deep-down anthropocentric, but I have shown that its anthropocentrism can support a robust environmental ethics.

If I am right in my characterisation of Confucian ethics, it is plausible to conclude that the anthropocentrism embedded in it is distinct from the kind of anthropocentrism that attributes to non-human entities only an instrumental value. To be sure, some commentators, such as O'Neill, have argued that a strong enough environmentalism can be constructed on the basis of the ascription to nature of a value that is instrumental to our well considered preferences (to borrow Norton’s terminology), such as the preference not to ‘inflict systematic or gratuitous injury on some or many agents’, which requires that we do not ‘destroy or damage the underlying reproductive and regenerative powers of the natural world’ (p. 137). However, the strength of such environmentalism is contingent on the link between the preservation of the ‘reproductive and regenerative powers of the natural world’ and the avoidance of ‘systematic and gratuitous injury’ to human agents. Such link logically implies that there is no need to protect and preserve, let alone respect and revere, the natural world if the welfare of human agents is not at stake. Those environmentalists who find this thought disturbing may wish to look for a different kind of anthropocentrism.
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that attributes to nature a value that is at least in part independent of human agents. They are likely to find it in Confucianism if I am right in my reading of its ethical theory.\(^9\)

NOTES

1 Godfrey-Smith 1979.
5 Korsgaard 1996.
6 Li 1999, p. 94.
7 Hall and Ames 1998, p. 43.
8 *The Yi King*, in Legge 1885, p. 240.
10 Translations from the *Analects* have been adapted from various sources.
12 Tu Wei-ming 1998a.
14 Hourdequin and Wong 2005.
15 Translation adapted from Knoblock 1994.
17 Ivanhoe 1998.
18 Tu Wei-ming 1998b.
19 I wish to thank the referees for *Environmental Values* for valuable suggestions that have helped improve this paper.

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