



## Confucian Statement on the Environment

*This is the full text of the statement prepared by Professor Tu Weiming of the International Confucian Ecological Alliance (ICEA) and announced at the ARC meeting in Trondheim, Norway in July 2013.*

The Interfaith Center  
for Sustainable Development

### I. A virtuous, responsible and caring life

Confucian humanism sees its primary role to be the promotion of education designed to enable people to become truly human. Its purpose is the cultivation of a virtuous, responsible and caring person. Learning to be genuinely and fully human is an end in itself. Simultaneously it is also a dynamic and transformative process of self-realization, social engagement and cultural creativity.

As Confucius said:

*“Even though you have only coarse grain for food, water for drink, and your bent arm for a pillow, you may still be happy. Riches and honours without justice are to me as fleeting clouds.”*

This process is set within the greater context of humanity and Heaven. It is well expressed in The Great Learning:

*“Only when personal lives are cultivated are families regulated; only when families are regulated are states governed; only when states are under Heaven. Therefore from the Son of Heaven to the common people, all, without exception, must have their root.”*

Confucians know that the earth is alive. We observe its presence, appreciate its beauty and participate in its creativity. We therefore share its richness and fecundity with all life on the “Blue Planet”.

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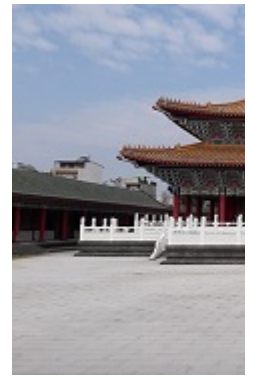
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### II. An ethos of responsibility and care

Confucian humanism is aptly characterized as an ethic or ethos of responsibility and care. As Wing-tsit Chan (陈荣捷) notes in his celebrated Source Book in Chinese Philosophy,

*“If one word could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophy, that word would be humanism – not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power, but one that professes the unity of man and Heaven. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese thought through the dawn of its history.”*



The notions of reciprocity and benevolence are of great importance in Confucian humanism. Such principles can be traced back to Confucius himself who, when questioned by Lord of Lu how to make his people respectful, loyal and zealous, replied that he should:

*“Approach them with dignity and they will be respectful. Be [him]self a good son and kind father, an good and train the incompetent, and they will be zealous.”*

Wang Yangming (1472-1529) wrote in his Inquiry on the Great Learning:

*“The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one person. As to those who make a cleavage between objects and distinguish between self and others, that the great man can regard Heaven, Earth and the myriad things as one body is not because he does so because it is natural to the humane nature of his mind that he do so.”*

### III. Working through the structures of the world rather than rising above them

The principle spiritual exercise of Confucianism is self-cultivation whose practice leads to true selfhood. Through following this virtue, we embrace or enable family cohesiveness, social solidarity, national integrity, and world peace. It provides an authentic possibility of transcending selfishness, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, regionalism, and anthropocentrism.



Success in this matter is dictated by an ethic of responsibility informed by a transcendent vision. We do not depart from or transcending above our earth, but by working through them. Indeed, our daily life is a response to an onto-cosmological decree. Since Heaven enjoins us to take part in the great enterprise of co-creating in our nature, we are Heaven's partners, and thus we realize the order and spirituality of heaven through personal self-knowledge.

### IV. Humanity as a partner with both Heaven and Earth

Confucianism sees humankind to have a deep and cosmic significance. This significance manifests in the relationship between Heaven and Earth forming the classic Chinese trinity of Heaven Earth and Humankind, together making up nature itself. The Doctrine of the Mean succinctly captures the essence of this cosmological thinking.

*“Only those who are the most sincere [authentic, true and real] can fully realize their own nature. If they can fully realize their own nature; they can fully realize human nature. If they can fully realize human nature, they can fully realize the nature of things, they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can form a trinity.”*

Zhang Zai in the 11th century wrote a brief essay that is the basis of Neo-Confucian ethics. The Western Inscription (whose name comes from the fact that it was inscribed on the west wall of his study) states that:

*Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst.*

Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.

All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

## V. The Earth is alive

Confucians know that the earth is alive. We observe its presence, appreciate its beauty and power, and therefore share its richness and fecundity with all life on the “Blue Planet”. Wang Yangming also states:

*“When we see a child about to fall into the well, we cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. Our humanity (ren) forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same family as we, but we observe the pitiful cries and frightened appearances of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, and we cannot help a feeling of ‘inability to bear’ their suffering. This shows that our humanity forms one body with birds and animals. Birds and animals are sentient beings as we are. But when we see plants broken and destroyed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that our humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as we are, but when we see tiles and stones shattered and crushed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows our humanity forms one body with stones.”*

However, humankind has repeatedly abused this beautiful gift by exploiting it recklessly, ignoring the interconnectedness and harmony.

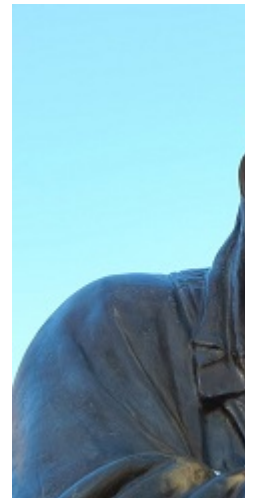
Mencius said:

*“The woods on Ox Mountain were once beautiful. On account of its being on the edge of a large country, axes and hatchets, and then how could it remain beautiful? The refreshing breezes of day and night, rain and fog, did not fail to give rise to sprouts of vegetation. But cows and sheep have been repeatedly grazed on it, and for this reason it has remained desolate. People observe its denuded state and assume that it never had been beautiful. Could this state be the true nature of this mountain?”*

## VI. The world is a precious inheritance

What Mencius reminds us is a core Confucian value that this world is a precious heritage passed on to us from our ancestors and it is a resource entrusted to us by numerous generations yet to come.

*The sage, namely, a human who has attained the highest stage, is similar to Heaven and Earth and therefore his conduct would not violate Heaven and Earth. His knowledge is comprehensive of all ten thousand things and his way will save all under Heaven. Even in acting in terms of special considerations, he does not deviate from rectitude (cheng).*



## VII. A sustainable harmonious relationship between humans and nature



The idea of the unity of Heaven and Human dimensions of the human condition: self, community distinctiveness of each enhances rather than impedes the others. The self, as a centre of relationship interacting with community variously understood, village and beyond. A sustainable harmonious relationship between species and nature is not merely an abstract ideal but practical living.

Confucians believe that our human nature comes from Heaven is accessible through self-knowledge. To understand the Mandate of Heaven we must cultivate ourselves.

This completes the triad of Heaven, Earth and humankind. Nature is as an unending process of transformation, and as such is a source of inspiration by which we understand the dynamism of Heaven. The Book of Change symbolizes, Heaven's vitality and creativity are without end and we humans must emulate this vitality and creativity.

The sense of "awe and reverence before the universe" is prompted by our aspiration to respond to the universe in a way that makes our lives purposeful and meaningful.

Whether we come from a creationist or an evolutionist perspective, we are indebted to "Heaven, Earth and Nature" for our existence. To repay this debt we cultivate ourselves so as to attain our full humaneness amidst the challenges of the world.

## VIII. Just do what is right and proper and then all will be well

From these Confucian values, comes not just academic study but considered action. The ethos of Confucius is not just for the past. Its teachings, translated into action can now do the same for the future. The following are the principles around which we will create a programme of action. As the Classic of Documents says in chapter 22:

*"Just do what is right and proper and then all will be well."*

**The brief statement can be found [here](#)**

**For other faith's statements on the environment, please click [here](#)**

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