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A CONFUCIAN-KANTIAN RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENTAL ECO-CENTRISM ON
ANIMAL EQUALITY

ABSTRACT

Environmental eco-centrism, the claim that all members of the biosphere are ontologically and axiologically equal, presents a challenge to traditional ethical conceptions of the special status of humanity. Confucian and Kantian ethics approach this topic, and its application to other animals, in different ways: Confucianism employs stories that promote insight into the importance of sincerity and compassion to *all* animals, including non-human ones; Kant employs abstract reasoning to argue that non-human animals deserve respect because we humans share their basic nature. We argue that, taken together, these two approaches preserve what is most important in eco-centrism, but without sacrificing human dignity in the process.

I. THE CHALLENGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ECO-CENTRISM

Should human beings treat animals with respect, or may we use them as tools without

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feeling any pangs of conscience? If animals *are* worthy of our respect, what is the basis for this claim? Are human beings and animals essentially equal as beings worthy of respect, or is any respect we may owe to animals derived solely from something within *us* as human beings, something that is an essential part of *human* nature that other animals do not share?

Recent western scholars in what we shall call the “eco-centric” tradition have tended to answer the foregoing questions by claiming that humans *do* owe respect to animals and that the basis for this respect is a strict equality or even identity between human and animal natures. The eco-centric tradition is exemplified by deep ecology, which holds the thesis of biospherical egalitarianism: all beings in nature are equal in value.¹ The challenge this tradition presents to more conventional ways of understanding the relationship between humans and other animals is to defend what, if anything, is the *source* of the uniqueness of human nature that supposedly makes humans and humans alone objects of *intrinsic* respect and (as such) bearers of rights.

In this essay we shall respond to the eco-centric challenge by appealing to two very different, yet we believe compatible, traditions: Confucian and Kantian philosophy. As we shall see, the Confucian tradition offers a qualified account of respect for animals that grounds such respect in the feeling of compassion human beings may have, in the face of animal suffering. While various scholars, especially Christine Korsgaard, have recently employed Kantian philosophy in the service of defending animal rights, we know of none who have recognized the

relevance of Kant's *Religion* to this issue. After separately examining these two ethical traditions, we shall suggest a set of common features shared by both, which together amount to an effective Confucian-Kantian response to eco-centrism.

II. CONFUCIANISM ON ANIMALS

In facing the challenge from modern environmental eco-centric perspectives, many scholars have been eager to rearticulate various ideas stemming from Chinese resources, especially Confucianism, in response to the western anthropocentric approach to the relationship between human beings and nature.² Generally speaking, the western dualist conceptuality is not found in the Chinese holist and organic worldview; instead, the poles of transcendence and immanence integrate within each other to construct a more dynamic and developmental cosmic whole. Tu Weiming asserts that Chinese ontology is regarded as the continuity of being in which all modalities of being are organically connected.³ Spiritual and material realms are co-related under the vital force. All beings, whether living or non-living, consist of this vital force. Without the concept of a creator God and the Christian idea of creation out of nothing, Chinese thought emphasizes a spontaneously self-generating life process within which all beings, human and non-human, are integral parts of an organic continuum.⁴ Under this Chinese way of thinking, human and animals share the same cosmic creative force, so that a kind of kinship relationship

develops between them both.

Human beings are not treated as the master of the universe in Confucianism, because all beings in the world are included within the cosmic moral order. As the Song dynasty Neo-Confucian philosopher Chang Tsai expresses this point in his book *Western Inscription*:

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.⁵

This cosmic moral order constitutes the basic ontological structural relationship between humans and other beings. Using the metaphor of kinship order, all beings in the world are arranged into an orderly relational structure. Humans are the sons / daughters of heaven and earth, and other non-human beings are regarded as our companions. It seems that, in Confucianism, “human beings are organically connected with rocks, trees and animals.”⁶ In this sense, we can state that it is no problem for Confucianism to agree with the anti-anthropocentric approach of environmental ethics, that human beings and animals should each have intrinsic value, because they are equal in the sense that all are subject to the transformative influence of heaven and earth.

However, in opposing the anthropocentric approach, Confucianism would reject some ideas of its defenders, inasmuch as care for animals is based on the assumption of an equal moral

status shared by human beings and animals. In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, human nature is decreed by Heaven on the assumption that humankind receives, at least in potential, this mandate of Heaven in its highest excellence.⁷ Therefore, among the creatures in the cosmos, human beings are assumed to be the most sentient beings and the mandate that comes from Heaven establishes the ideal moral process and ideal personality as grounded in sincerity:

Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can then fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.⁸

In the *Doctrine of Mean*, the word “sincerity” (*Cheng*, 誠) is not only regarded as a human moral quality, being trustworthy to other people and oneself, but also treated as an ethical ontological substance of heaven and earth. “Sincerity is a way of heaven. To think how to be sincere is the way of man.”⁹ To be sincere is identical with developing and cultivating the potentiality of others. The Confucian ideal moral person is a person who can fully actualize the inner goodness mandated by Heaven, and then also cultivate others’ inner goodness in order to fulfil the ultimate self-cultivating ends in union with Heaven and Earth.

Along the lines of the eco-centric approach, which emphasizes the axiological unity of

human beings and non-human beings, Confucianism finds no difficulty in asserting the intrinsic value of all beings. However, under the above analysis, “Heaven-Human-Earth” consists of the organic and holistic worldview in which human beings should play a unique role: transformation of the moral potentiality of other beings in the world. In this sense, Confucian tradition does not hold the thesis that human beings and animals share an equal moral status, because animals do not have this vocation to assist others in self-cultivation.

III. CONFUCIAN ETHICS ON ANIMALS

If we assert that Confucianism can contribute positive resources towards solving the problem of care for animals, then what kind of animal ethics would arise, given that the moral status of human beings is much higher than animals in Confucian tradition?

In Fan’s analysis Confucianism supports universal love but not equal love. This “love in differentiation” emphasizes that devotional love to parents and benevolent love to people should not be overridden by sympathetic love towards animals. There is not a quantitative but qualitative difference between these three types of love.¹⁰ Therefore, under certain circumstances, the sacrifice of animals’ lives is morally permissible. However, Rodney Taylor’s article, “Of Animals and Humans: The Confucian Perspective”, discloses a more subtle discussion within Confucian tradition: under a unity of moral vision, human beings and animals

are similar as regards their principle but different in terms of material force. This implies that human beings are regarded as having a *fuller* moral nature, but animals possess moral virtue, even though it is not in a “complete” form.¹¹ He seems to draw the conclusion that the difference between human beings and animals is not in kind but in degree only. Actually, Fan’s emphasis is not incompatible with Rodney Taylor’s. The latter focuses more on the ontological unity between humans and animals under the unifying metaphysical vision in Confucianism, especially Neo-Confucianism, and defends sympathetic love towards animals based on this vision. The former focuses instead on the social moral perspective under which a more practical and naturalistic understanding of human moral sentiment towards others is mentioned.¹²

In addition to the above, another line of Confucian thinking emphasizes the unbearable suffering of others. For example, a strong sense of ethical compassion towards the suffering of other, non-human beings can be observed in Mencius’s sayings, such as:

The king asked again, “Is such a one as I competent to love and protect the people?”

Mencius said, “Yes.”

“From what do you know that I am competent to do that?”

“I heard the following incident ... from Hu He:-

The king, said he, was sitting aloft in the hall when a man appeared, leading an ox

past the lower part of it.

The king saw him, and asked, "Where is the ox going?"

The man replied, "We are going to consecrate a bell with its blood."

The king said, "let it go. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, as if it were an innocent person going to the place of death."

The man answered, "Shall we then omit the consecration of the bell?"

The king said, "How can that be omitted? Change it for a sheep."

Then Mencius said, "The heart seen in this is sufficient to carry you to the imperial sway. The people all suppose that Your Majesty grudged the animal, but your servant knows surely, that it was Your Majesty's not being able to bear the sight, which made you do as you did."

"Indeed it was because I could not bear its frightened appearance, as if it were an innocent person going to the place of death, that therefore I changed it for a sheep."¹³

It seems that Confucianism holds that human beings should have moral obligations towards other animals not because non-human beings share the same moral status of human beings, or any rights or qualities that non-human beings possess, but because animals are able to suffer. Put more accurately, human beings should have compassion towards animals because we human beings perceive their sufferings, which reminds us of the sufferings of our own kind. As Bao-Er

mentions, the key point of Confucian ethics towards animals is that we should expand our own natural compassion to encompass everything in the universe, including non-human beings. Even though Confucianism holds a hierarchical moral order, it does not exclude the well-being of non-human beings.¹⁴

However, we may ask, how about the sheep? Why can the king tolerate the suffering of the sheep? First, it seems that the text exhibits no intention to develop a kind of abstract thinking for the universal consideration of all animals. Perhaps, we can surmise, when the king sees the suffering of the sheep on the next occasion, he may also have the same compassion towards its suffering in that new context. Second, this question points to a rather fundamental attitude of Confucianism towards the status of various types of animals. Due to its practical and natural tendency, Confucian ethical consideration typically adopts the idea of “relative importance”. The following dialogue between Wang Yangmang and his student aptly illustrates this point:

I said, “The great man and things form one body, Why does the *Great Learning* say that there is a relative importance among things?”

The Teacher said, “It is because of principles that there necessarily is relative importance ... We love both plants and animals, and yet we can feed animals with plants. We love both animals and men, and yet we can tolerate butchering animals to feed our parents, provide for religious sacrifices, and entertain guests... What the *Great Learning*

calls relative importance means that according to innate knowledge there is a natural order which should not be skipped over. This is called righteous. To follow this order is called propriety. To understand this order is called wisdom. And to follow this order from beginning to the end is called faithfulness.”¹⁵

For Wang, the order of moral preference in the outside world and in the inner human mind are self-evident: though non-human beings are the objects of moral compassion, the human social order has ontological and moral priority over the animal world. This understanding enhances the notion of the degree of the compassion. Although Confucianism never mentions the criterion for evaluating the degree of importance, it seems that Confucianism assumes the criterion is innate in our human inclination. As we turn our attention now to an examination of Kant’s (in many ways very different) philosophical view on animals, we shall find a surprising resonance with the foregoing rationale for our treatment of non-human beings.

IV. KANT ON ANIMALS

At first sight certain key aspects of Kant’s moral theory seem totally opposed to an eco-centric concern for the well-being of animals as such. For the core principle of Kantian ethics is that we must treat *humanity* as an “end in itself”; hence anything *non*-human may be safely treated as a means to our own enjoyment or benefit. From a strictly legal point of view,

Kant argues that non-human animals have the status of *property* in relation to human beings, so that any rights they may enjoy are only indirect, resulting from their relationship to human beings. Indeed, Kant goes so far as to claim at one point that when a human being

first said to the sheep, ‘the pelt you wear was given to you by nature not for your own use, but for mine’ and took it from the sheep to wear it himself, he became aware of a prerogative which, by his nature, he enjoyed over all the animals; and he now no longer regarded them as fellow creatures, but as means and instruments to be used at will for the attainment of whatever ends he pleased.¹⁶

Christine Korsgaard has recently made a surprising attempt to defend eco-centrism by reconstructing this aspect of Kant’s moral and political philosophy, in hopes of proving that it *can* be used to ground a full-fledged theory of animal rights. She claims that Kant’s general justification for rights is faulty as it applies to animals, because it is not *rational* beings as such that are ends in themselves, but on Kant’s own view *any* being for whom “things can be good or bad” (13) by definition enjoys the status of being such an end.¹⁷ According to Korsgaard, the only non-arbitrary assumption regarding the right to ownership of any kind (23) is eco-centric: “the world belongs in common to all of the creatures who depend on its resources.” From this presupposition it is only a short step (indeed, one that Korsgaard treats as virtually self-evident) to the conclusion that other animals (being the most important of the non-human “creatures” with

whom we share the earth's resources) must be bearers of rights (25): "the only way we can be rightly related to them [i.e., to the "other creatures" who, with us, rely on the world's resources to obtain what is good for them] is to grant them some rights."

Unfortunately, Korsgaard fails to notice several key objections that plague her reconstruction of Kant's argument. First, if it is not the possession of a distinctive rational nature (a la Kant) that grounds the conferring of rights on a living creature, but only the bare fact of *being* a creature in the first place, then we would have to give rights not only to other animals, but also to plants, non-living creatures such rocks and dirt, and even the *properties* that such creatures exhibit. Surely it can be bad for my laptop computer to be dropped from a height; yet this does not give me an obligation *to* the computer, not to drop it. Likewise, the fact that it is good for the property of "freshness" to store fresh food at a cool temperature does not mean I *owe it* to freshness to keep all fresh things cool. The latter extension is not ruled out by anything Korsgaard argues; yet it reduces her position to absurdity, for *every* property has an opposite: what is bad for freshness may be good for the property of being spoiled; yet I cannot have a duty *both* to preserve the freshness of things *and* to promote the process whereby things become spoiled!

Kant's own position is that we do not (indeed, we *cannot*) be obligated directly to animals; rather, any duty we have to treat them humanely is a duty we have to ourselves and/or

to other human beings. Korsgaard's case for reconstructing Kant's argument so that it (allegedly) leads to the conclusion that other animals are *themselves* bearers of rights, thus making us directly obligated *to* them, is self-defeating. The only way it could succeed would be for us to share with the animals *a common* moral system, and as Korsgaard herself admits (24) the only moral/legal system commonly shared by other animals is the so-called "state of nature": "might makes right". Yet it is precisely "might makes right" (the law governing animals in general, *including* human animals) that systems of *human* rights are meant to supersede. In a subtle but serious inconsistency, Korsgaard sums up her argument for animal rights (26, emphasis added) as resting on "a presupposition of *our own* rational agency and of *our* moral and legal systems"—namely, "that the fate of every creature, every creature for whom life in this world can be good or bad, is something that matters." With this closing statement, she inadvertently *affirms* the very point that leads Kant to deny rights to animals: rights are a *human* invention that we employ to govern relations between *humans*; they do not (and *cannot*, self-consistently) impose *direct* obligations that we behave in any specified way towards *any* non-human beings, whether they be other animals *or* other forms of *moral* being, such as God.¹⁸ In other words, Korsgaard's conclusion is ruled out by Kant's fundamental conception of human agency.

Whereas Korsgaard's approach to the challenge of eco-centrism would surely satisfy most adherents of the latter, it does so only at the cost of a near total destruction of the essential

Kantian position. Indeed, rather than *meeting* the challenge, her position essentially just *gives in* to it, rendering Kant's nuanced view of the animal-human(-God) relation otiose. How could such an eminent Kant scholar as Korsgaard come to such an unKantian conclusion? One key contributing reason is that the evidence she appeals to comes exclusively from Kant's ethical writings, where Kant is addressing not so much the real day-to-day struggle to be human, but the ideal *principles* for understanding a perfectly good moral life. Little or no attention has been paid in the literature on this topic to the more pragmatic, anthropological reflections on the crucial role that "animality" plays in human nature, according to Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793/1794). Rather than rehearsing the arguments for and against Korsgaard's position, which have already been presented elsewhere, we shall therefore focus our attention here on this neglected aspect of Kant's theory of the human-animal relationship, in search of evidence that Kant had some awareness of a Confucian-type holism that might respond adequately to the challenge of eco-centrism, without simply adopting the radically reductionist claim that human beings are *nothing but* animals.

V. ANIMALITY IN KANT'S *RELIGION*

The root of Korsgaard's misinterpretation of Kant lies in the fact that she assumes "freedom" to mean merely "the freedom to use your own body to carve out some sort of a decent

life in the world where you find yourself” (24); this may be, to some extent, what Kant means by freedom in its strictly *legal* sense. But for Kant legal freedom is derivative on an underlying *moral* freedom (i.e., beings with rights necessarily bear those rights only by virtue of being *moral* beings); so the crucial question is not whether other animals need (like us) to use their bodies “to carve out some sort of a decent life” for themselves, but whether in the process of doing so they have access to *moral freedom*, as we do. Only a being with *moral* freedom can be a bearer of rights.

While the absolute necessity of this nuance in Kant’s theory may not be entirely clear in his primary ethical writings (*GMM*, *CPrR*, and *MM*), it comes to the fore in Kant’s work on religion. Near the beginning of the “First Piece”, the first of the four essays that compose *Religion*,¹⁹ Kant introduces three “levels” of the “predisposition to good in human nature” (*Religion* 6:26):

1. The predisposition to the *animality* of the human being as a *living* being;
2. To the *humanity* of him as a living and at the same time *rational* being;
3. To his *personality* as [that of] a being who is rational and at the same time *capable of imputation* [of actions to him].

What sets *Religion* apart from Kant’s purely ethical writings is that he clearly, explicitly, and repeatedly presents our animal nature (i.e., the source of all human inclinations) as being not the

source of evil, nor even merely neutral, but as the foundational feature of the essential *goodness* of human nature. Animality is good because, through the impulse to self-love that lies at its root, it promotes the propagation of the species. Moreover, as animal beings it is the satisfaction of our inclinations that primarily brings us happiness—and happiness, as Kant had argued in *GMM* and *CPrR*, is an essential component of the highest good.

Korsgaard portrays Kantian inclination as *nothing more* than an animal being's capacity for recognizing something to be good or bad "for me"—a position that, admittedly, seems implicit in some passages of *GMM* and *CPrR*. Yet in *Religion* we find that inclinations are the source not only of what is good *for me*, but of the goodness of human nature *as such*. How can this be? What tends to go unnoticed even by interpreters who *do* focus on Kant's *Religion* is that his theory of the threefold human predisposition contains within it an explanation of the source of human freedom itself. Kant's new theory in *Religion* is that human volition (*Willkür*) first arises *only* when these three elements, *in combination*, are found together in a single being. Everyone who has the least familiarity with Kant's moral theory knows that what he now calls "personality" (i.e., the presence of the moral law within us) is a necessary requirement for volition. But what comes to the fore only in *Religion* is that without our *bodies*, we *also* would not be free to choose whether our volition is to be guided by self-love or concern for others. In other words, *animality is a necessary condition for the possibility of moral (human) goodness*;

but it is not a sufficient condition, for personality must also be present in order for human rationality to experience the presence of genuine choice.

If indeed the *interaction* between the three predispositions (and in particular, the presence of the first and last within the second, within *humanity*) is what first gives rise to freedom, then if we were to cease to be animals, we would also cease to be free. This is precisely the reason Kant thinks God is not free in the *human* sense of having the potential to choose evil, even though God *is* moral and “the divine will is *free*” in *some* sense: God lacks the animality that is necessary for free volition (*Willkür*) to be possible.²⁰ It is also why animals *cannot* have rights, even though they do (as Korsgaard rightly observes) have inclination-based needs arising out of what is good or bad for them. By itself (i.e., without the opposing predisposition provided by the moral law), as Kant puts it in *Religion* 6:35: “*Sensibility*...contains too little to indicate a basis of the moral-evil in the human being; for since it removes the incentives that can emanate from freedom, it [taken by itself] makes the human into a merely *animal* being.” Kant’s point here is not that being an animal is bad; quite to the contrary, it is that being “a *merely* animal being” (my emphasis) *cannot* be “good” in the relevant (moral) sense, because animals lack a volitional principle to *govern* their choices through a prioritization of a higher purpose over their animality.

Thus, when Korsgaard claims that “the objects of our inclinations are not, considered just as such, intrinsically valuable” (2012:9), she is, indeed, reflecting the impression Kant gives in

GMM and *CPrR*. According to the more nuanced picture that emerges in *Religion*, by contrast, any *specific* inclination that we may draw purely from our animal nature may still lack intrinsic value (for it is good only because it *seems* good *for us*), yet the *general fact* of our animal nature—our “sensibility” as such, or our inclinations taken as a whole---*are* deemed to be intrinsically valuable. They are valuable not in a way that confers *merit* onto us, but only insofar as our animality as such is part of the package that makes moral obligation *possible* in the first place. This bare *possibility* is what gives human nature its peculiar dignity. Take away our animality, and human dignity itself would be destroyed.

When Korsgaard (commenting on *GMM* 4:429) rejects Kant’s claim that “your rational nature ‘marks you out’ as an end in itself” (2012:10), she is rejecting a far more simplified theory than the one Kant actually defended (in *Religion*, at least). In *Religion*, as elsewhere, Kant associates our humanity with the impulse to be *sociable* creatures; yet not only animals but many lower forms of life (e.g., many types of insects) exhibit highly developed forms of sociability. This raises the question: *who counts as having a rational nature?* Kant’s generally positive portrayal of the way human beings ought to treat animals²¹ suggests that he would welcome modern research highlighting the many ways that animals actually share human rationality—a point that might seem at first to support an eco-centric position. What Kant’s argument in the First Piece of *Religion* makes clear is that the *sociability* aspect of our rationality is not the

feature that confers rights on us as rational beings; rather, rights are due only to those who combine personality (i.e., a moral predetermination [*Bestimmung*]) and animality in one being.

VI. ANIMALS IN KANT'S *RELIGION*

Scholars who include *Religion* among their repertoire of Kantian texts typically focus on Kant's highly complex (and often perplexing) account of *evil* in human nature, typically misleadingly assuming either that the so-called "propensity to evil" amounts to the theory that we are bound to be bad because we are animals, or that evil arises *out of* our social nature as such.²² As we have seen, a proper understanding of Kant's theory of our threefold predisposition to *good* can nip this misunderstanding of his position in the bud. But what has rarely, if ever, been noticed by commentators is that Kant also refers not only to animality as a feature of *human* nature, but also to animals *as such* in no less than four²³ distinct passages. Briefly examining each of these will provide further evidence that, when applying his idealistic ethics to real situations, Kant's view of animals already suggests a response to the eco-centric challenge.

In a footnote added to the second edition (*Religion* 6:29n), Kant distinguishes between four types or levels of "propensity". Someone who has a propensity to *d*, he explains, will not be aware of having an *inclination* to *d*, prior to the first occasion of experiencing it; however, once one experiences *d*, the inclination to experience it again will surely follow. In between these two

states (i.e., between an undeveloped propensity and a fully developed inclination) is “instinct”, which Kant describes as “a felt need to do or enjoy something of which one does not yet have a concept” (29n). Kant’s two examples of instinct are “the impulse to skill in animals” and “the impulse to sex”. In both cases, there is no essential difference between human and non-human animals: humans are born with in-built abilities to perform some actions more skillfully than others—traits that differ between individuals just as much in humans as in other animal species. And until recently, humans could propagate their species only through the same means that all other animals use to reproduce their own kind. What is noteworthy about this reference to animals is that Kant is in no way deprecating them, nor is he making any assumption that they, unlike humans, can be treated as means to human ends. Rather, he is explicitly arguing that what is *good* about human beings is first and foremost the same as what is good about all other animals: we have in-built desires that incline us to seek out *what is good*.

Kant’s second and most detailed passage referring to animals also comes in a footnote (*Religion* 6:73-4n), this time in the Second Piece, where he argues that a person who undergoes a genuine religious conversion will experience the ills of life as vicarious “punishments” for evil deeds committed in the past. His footnote on “punishments” considers the theological “hypothesis” that “all ills in the world are to be regarded in general as punishments for committed transgressions” (73n). Kant finds this assumption to be plausible, *provided* we

interpret it as an application of reason's overall tendency "to connect the course of nature to the laws of morality"; he thus accepts the biblical depiction of Adam and Eve as being condemned to work the soil and to experience pain in childbirth "on account of their transgression". However, he adds a crucial qualification that explicitly refers to the first human parents as *animals*: "it is impossible to see how, even if this transgression had not been committed, animal creatures provided with such limbs could have expected a different predetermination." In other words, the fact that we have a certain type of *animal body* is what causes work and childbirth to be painful at times; yet reason bids us to *interpret* this pain as aimed at a higher (moral) purpose. Kant thinks the point of the biblical story, therefore, is not to cast shame upon the first parents for *giving in* to their animal appetite, but to encourage us to interpret all aspects of our animal nature as part of our moral destiny.

Kant then compares the *wrong* interpretation of the biblical story to two similarly distasteful views, both related explicitly to animals: Hindus allegedly believe that "human beings are nothing more than spirits...locked into animal bodies" (73-4n); and Malebranche allegedly claims that "nonrational animals [have] no souls at all, and thereby also no feelings" (74n). With wry humor clearly intended to emphasize how ridiculous it is for "even a philosopher" to miss the true (moral) point of the biblical story, Kant adds that Malebranche felt compelled to deny the natural tie that obviously links humans to other animals, because if animals *did* have souls,

then there would be no way to explain why “horses had to endure so many torments ‘without yet having eaten of the forbidden hay.’”²⁴ Kant’s message here is surprisingly responsive to the eco-centric challenge:²⁵ just as our animality is to be affirmed as a part of our nature that is inherently *good*—indeed, without which freedom, and thus our moral destiny itself, would be impossible—so also animals are to be respected as part of this process, and thus *not* subjected to senseless torments merely for human gratification.

The third reference to animals also occurs in the Second Piece, in another second edition footnote: in attempting “to figure out” the “difficult” problem of why Christian theology requires Jesus to be “born of a virgin mother” (*R* 80n), Kant surprisingly declares this doctrine to be “an idea of reason” that is “not to be denied.” He proceeds to *defend* the doctrine as an accurate reflection of *common sentiment* about sex: “we regard natural generation... as something of which we are to *be ashamed*... [and] which therefore seems to us to be something immoral, irreconcilable with the perfection of a human being”. This widespread opinion arises because the “sensual pleasure” that inevitably accompanies reproduction “seems to bring us... into far too close kinship with the universal animal genus”. Yet for every normal human being, the sex drive is “grafted in his nature”; it is therefore typically assumed that it is “also passed on to [our] descendants as an evil predisposition.”

Kant is not endorsing the common assumption that the sex drive is “an evil

predisposition”, for he has already argued in the First Piece that our animality in general, and our sex drive in particular, is an inherently *good* predisposition. Rather, his point appears to be that *for anyone who views sex as evil*, Jesus (regarded as the firstborn model of the “archetype”— i.e., the idea of a perfect person, which Kant has previously argued is an idea that necessarily resides in human reason) would indeed *need* to be born of a virgin, to escape that evil “predisposition”.

Once we recall, however, that Kant regards our animal predisposition as *good*, not (as in the common view) evil, the true message of this added footnote becomes evident. Kant is not offering a blanket endorsement of the view that embracing our animality will pose a threat to “the dignity of humanity”; rather, his underlying message is that anyone who embraces animality as a necessary requirement for human freedom need *not* appeal to such a doctrine, because experiencing animal pleasures is in no way *incompatible* with being good, but is its precondition.

Kant’s fourth reference to animals comes in Division Two of the Third Piece, as one of eight examples (*R* 130-1) of how the history of the Christian Church exhibits just as much evidence of evil and corruption as that of other religious traditions. The sixth example compares the fact that “both Christian parts of the world...were attacked by barbarians” to “the plants and animals that, near their disintegration through a disease, attract destructive insects to complete the disintegration” (131). While this is only a passing comment, it does aptly illustrate Kant’s deeply-grained belief that it is not only human individuals, but also human societies as a whole

that are so deeply ingrained in their animal nature that they obey the very same natural laws. Of course, in this passage Kant is focusing only on the negative; but elsewhere he makes it clear that the forces of nature (or “providence”, as he sometimes calls it), in which all animals participate, also work ultimately for our good—including the moral good.

VII. A CONFUCIAN-KANTIAN SYNTHESIS

The foregoing accounts of Confucian and Kantian ethics demonstrate that in both cases human beings are viewed as distinct from other animals in a way that eco-centrism denies, yet in both cases the essential unity of human beings and animals is preserved. Confucianism portrays both human beings and non-human animals as sharing the same cosmic creative force; yet humans live under a distinctive mandate of Heaven. Similarly, Kant portrays human beings as having a predisposition to “personality” that makes us essentially religious beings, even though we share exactly the same “animality” that makes other animals what they are. In both cases our moral nature distinguishes us from the other animals; yet in both cases this distinction does not justify human beings in viewing themselves as *so* superior to other animals that we have no duty to feel sympathy for their suffering, because both traditions also view us as essentially united with the other animals. Thus, both Confucian thinkers and Kant himself portray sympathy for

animals as an essential feature of a good moral character. As such, Kant's systematic theory can provide a philosophical nomenclature for effectively defending the Confucian understanding of the unity-in-diversity of human beings and other animals.

Our overview of Kant's references to animals in *Religion* has suggested four key features that are each upheld in the Confucian tradition as well. First, it is *good* to be a creature of desire, and in this respect we are no different from the other animals. Indeed, Korsgaard is correct to affirm this point, as the basis for defense of animal rights; what she neglects is that this mutual participation in animality is *not* sufficient to make non-moral animals *persons* and that for this reason attributing rights to them is going too far. Second, a crucial reason for affirming the goodness of our animal nature is that it is an essential ingredient in what makes us free; for rational beings who are not also animals do not share the same volitional, autonomous self-determination that is such a central feature of being human. To subject non-human animals to senseless suffering is immoral not (a la Korsgaard) merely because animals also have desires, but because in so doing we are disrespecting *an aspect of our own nature*, as it manifests itself in non-human animals. Although not expressed in such a principled manner, this compassion for animals is clearly expressed in the Confucian stories related above. Third, the capacity to experience animal pleasures is therefore a *precondition* for being a good human being; one who tolerates senseless suffering in animals is thereby condoning a stance toward animality in general

that is incompatible with the necessary requirements for human morality. That is, even though animals may cause other animals to suffer, when they interact with each other in the wild, and even though this situation cannot be regarded as immoral or evil in itself, we human beings – given our ability to step out of a purely natural (“wild”) condition and act on principles of free volition – *are* immoral if we deny the goodness of animality in *any* form. Finally, as beings whose moral predetermination calls us to be religious, and thus to believe that nature itself has an inbuilt purpose that goes beyond the law of the jungle, we must acknowledge that doing unnecessary harm to *any* part of this natural world (perhaps even to forms of life lower than the animals) only harms our own (human) status.

Each of these four points that were drawn from our observations on Kant’s treatment of animals in *Religion* also finds a deep resonance in the (albeit, less systematic) Confucian texts we have examined, as well as others that are beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, Kant’s portrayal of animality as a precondition for human freedom provides a strong justification for integrating a Confucian notion of the essential goodness of human nature with an appreciation for moral sentiment; for we can now see that moral feelings such as compassion do not contradict but enhance the force of a moral law that often seems cold and overly formulaic in Kant’s purely moral writings. All in all, this Confucian-Kantian standpoint provides us with a way of meeting the challenge of eco-centrism: in order to treat other animals (or indeed, all of

creation) as in some sense *equal to ourselves*, it is not necessary to conflate the clear distinctions that exist between human beings and other forms of life (or non-living things) in the natural world. In other words, portraying animals as bearers of rights is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for persuading human beings to be concerned for their well-being. This way of attempting to guarantee their status as equal partners in the natural world ironically backfires. Rather, what is needed to achieve the main objective of the eco-centric program (i.e., to encourage or even to require humane treatment of non-human animals) is for human beings to recognize that we are denying our own humanity, and thus turning a deaf ear to the mandate of Heaven, when we allow *any* animals (human or otherwise) to suffer needlessly.

¹ For an example of eco-centrism that focuses on the equality of all living being, see George Sessions (ed.), *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1995).

Approaches that focus more specifically on animals include the excellent and influential work Peter Singer (especially his *Animal Liberation* [New York: Harper Perennial, 1975]; but see also the relevant chapters in his *Practical Ethics*³ [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2011] and Tom Regan (especially his *The Case for Animal Rights* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004] and *Defending Animal Rights* [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois

Press; 2000]). Exploring the similarities and differences between each of these approaches to eco-centrism is beyond the scope of this article, as these scholars do not focus on the interface between Confucianism and Kant's ethics.

² *Confucianism and Ecology*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Bertrrong (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³ Weiming Tu, "The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature," in *Ibid.*, p.105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.108.

⁵ Wing-tsit Chan, trans. and ed., *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.497.

⁶ Weiming Tu, "Continuity," p.113.

⁷ Wing-tsit Chan, *Source Book*, p.98.

⁸ Wing-tsit Chan, *Source Book*, p.108. On the centrality of sincerity to Confucian thought, and its counterpart in Kant, see also A.T. Nuyen, "The Kantian Good Will and the Confucian Sincere Will: The Centrality of *Cheng* (誠, 'Sincerity') in Chinese Thought," in Stephen R. Palmquist (ed.), *Cultivating Personhood: Kant and Asian Thought* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), pp.627-38.

⁹ Wing-tsit Chan, *Source Book*, p.7.

¹⁰ Ruiping Fan, "How should we treat Animals? A Confucian Reflection," *Dao* (2010) 9:79-96.

The main thesis of Fan's essay is that Confucian ritual use of animals is morally defensible (p.81).

¹¹ Rodney Taylor, "Of Animals and Humans: The Confucian Perspective," in *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp.300-301. Emphases are the author's.

¹² The other issue raised by Fan's article is that Fan claims that it is necessary and morally permissible for Confucians to use animals for sacrificial purposes. His ideas were recently attacked by Richard T. Kim's article, "Confucianism and Non-human Animal Sacrifice," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (forthcoming, 2015; read online, at https://www.academia.edu/3754751/Confucianism_and_Non-human_Animal_Sacrifice, accessed Nov, 26, 2014).

¹³ James Legge, *The Four Books: The Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean, Confucian Analects, the Works of Mencius* (Shanghai: International Publication Society, 1938), pp.452-454.

It is possible that Confucius himself would have taken a different approach on this issue.

Analects, Book 10, Section 11, says: "There was a fire in the stables. When the Master returned from court, he asked: 'Was anybody hurt?' He didn't ask about the horses." Some interpreters take

this to imply that Confucius (“the Master”) was merely concerned about the well-being of humans (“was anybody hurt?”) and ignored the condition of animals (“the horses”). However, other interpreters point out that if the punctuation marks (not in the original text) are rearranged, then the meaning of the last sentence could become: “Was anybody hurt? No. Then, ask the horses?” On this reading of the text, there would be no obvious conflict between this passage and the one quoted from Mencius in the main text.

¹⁴ Bao-Er, “China’s Confucian horses: the place of nonhuman animals in a Confucian world order,” in Neil Dalal and Chloë Taylor (eds.), *Asian Perspectives on Animal Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p.83.

¹⁵ Wing-tsit, Chan (trans.), *Instructions for Practical Living and other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yanh-ming* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), para. 276, pp.222-223.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, 8:114. Unless otherwise noted, translations of Kant’s writings are all taken from the Cambridge Edition, citing the volume and page number(s) of the Berline Academy Edition.

¹⁷ Christine M. Korsgaard, “A Kantian Case for Animal Rights”, in *Animal Law: Developments and Perspectives in the 21st Century (Tier und Recht—Entwicklungen und Perspektiven im 21.*

Jahrhundert, ed. Margot Michel, Daniela Kühne, and Julia Hänni (Zürich: DIKE, 2012), p.13.

She later (p.20) adds that Kant is (or should be) “committed to the idea that if I am the sort of being for whom things can be good or bad, a being with interests, then I should be treated as an end in itself.”

¹⁸ Korsgaard interprets Kant’s denial (e.g., in *MM* 6:442) that human reason can discover any duties that human beings owe to God as being grounded on our ignorance of God’s existence. She claims that Kant’s qualification is intended “to leave room for duties owed to God and grounded in faith” (11n). While the failure of all theoretical proofs for God’s existence is surely part of the overall “package” of Kant’s philosophical theology, it is not the basis for his denial of duties to God. Kant denies the existence of *direct* human duties to God even more explicitly in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (hereafter *Religion*; see note 18) 6:154n; but in exactly the same way we can have indirect duties to animals, Kant also allows for duties to God (e.g., those arising out of a particular faith tradition), provided we regard them as *indirect*. The reason Kant *never* allows for a direct duty to God will become clear in the next section.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, tr. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008), as revised in Stephen Palmquist, *Comprehensive Commentary on Kant’s Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Chichester: Wiley, 2015); hereafter abbreviated “*Religion*”.

That Kant uses the word “*Stück*” to label the four main parts of *Religion* has caused significant confusion among English commentators, as it has been variously translated as “Book”, “Part”, and “Chapter”. In German as in English, “*Stück*” (“piece”) can refer to a journal article as well as to part of something; with Pluhar, we maintain that Kant selected this word intentionally, to allude to the fact that he first wrote the four parts of the book as journal articles, but his plan to publish them as such was made impossible when the Second Piece was rejected by the king’s censor.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, tr. Allen W. Wood in Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (eds.), *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28: 1066-1067.

²¹ Kant’s rejection of cruelty to animals included: a denial of the legitimacy of using animals for sport or even for speculative medical exploration; a requirement that those who use animals as part of their work force must limit their work so that it is no harder than that of human workers, to treat such animals generally as members of their own household, and to provide them with a good retirement; and the requirement to slaughter animals (in situations where this is genuinely necessary) in a quick and painless way (see *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:442-443, and *Lectures on Ethics*, 27:459-460; cf. Korsgaard, “A Kantian Case,” p.14n).

²² This claim has been advanced by interpreters such as Sharon Anderson-Gold and Allen Wood.

For a summary of their position and an argument against its accuracy, see Palmquist's

Commentary, chapter II.

²³ I am excluding here several passing references Kant makes to different *types* of animals. Thus,

for example, he refers to the Eastern European tribal religion whose member "lays a bear skin's

paw on his head with a short prayer" in *Religion* 176.

²⁴ See Palmquist, *Commentary*, note V.115, for a discussion of the accuracy of Kant's quip about

Malebranche's position. In short, Kant's source was most likely not anything that Malebranche

himself actually wrote, but rather the portrayal of Malebranche's position put forward in C.A.

Helvétius' 1758 book, *De L'Esprit* (p.4n), which had been translated into German in 1760.

²⁵ The surprise here arises out of the fact that Kant was writing two centuries before the

eco-centric challenged was conceived in its contemporary form. We do not mean to imply that

Kant's references to animals in *Religion* are surprising to those who are familiar with Kant's

other discussions of this topic. In the section of his *Lectures on Ethics* (*Collins*) entitled "Of

Duties to Animals and Spirits" (*Ak.* 27:458-60), for example, he argues that a variety of

kindnesses toward animals can be justified *as if* they were duties, because in practicing such

kindness "we thereby promote the cause of humanity."