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THE CONFUCIAN CONCEPT OF LEARNING AND THE AESTHETICS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

AN ECO-ONTOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

David Samuel Meyer (꽃기린)
Department of Education, Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea
ORCID: 0000-0001-6773-9991
https://giraffleur.org
dr.goat@giraffleur.org

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abstract ‖ This paper examines the Confucian concept of learning, or xue (學), from the perspective of ecological humanism. Through a comparative interpretation, this paper attempts to disclose the significance of Confucian xue conceived as a practice of aesthetic appreciation and creativity, emphasizing in particular its function within an eco-centric worldview. The author reviews the relevant concepts of ecological humanism as expressed in the ideas of John Dewey and Thomas Alexander, then applies these as a theoretical framework for interpreting xue and its related concepts and practices as they appear in the Confucian text the Lunyu (論語). It is argued that xue is a process of developing and expressing virtuosity and artistry in the "arts of life," and that its practice was understood as a direct participation in the creative development of nature. The significance of such a concept of learning for contemporary educational philosophy is discussed in conclusion.

keywords | Confucianism, John~Dewey, Eco-ontology, Aesthetics, Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Learning, or xue (學), is at the core of Confucian civilization and philosophy. Understood generally as the art of living, learning for Confucians was the process through which one would become and embody ren (仁), the supreme human virtue, and through which harmony (和) would be established in society and the world at large. This educational scheme, like Confucian philosophy generally, is typically understood in moralistic or ethical terms; namely, that learning is a means for achieving the ultimate end of moral perfection. Undoubtedly, Confucians were very concerned with problems of morality and virtue, but to what extent we may characterize the entire Confucian project as one of striving for moral perfection is debatable. Ni[1] argues that not only is this conventional interpretation inadequate, but more importantly, it obscures the fact that the ultimate ideal of Confucianism is not moral but aesthetic. Ni explains that Confucian aesthetics may be reasonably described as "a kind of aesthetic view that takes moral qualities as a feature of what is beautiful,"[2] but interpretations that consider moral practice to be the end rather than the means of learning fail to appreciate that "the fundamental aim of Confucianism is to reach a state of aesthetic enjoyment and creativity."[3] In other words, the "art of living" for Confucianism is not a matter of living the *right way* per se, but rather being able to cultivate and actually live *your way*—to develop a mastery and virtuosity in life such that you may "sojourn in the arts [of living]."[4]

The aesthetic ideal pursued by Confucians may elude modern conceptions that typically exclude the qualities of utility and practicality from the category of the aesthetic. This is especially true when discussed in the context of learning and education, which are strongly associated with practical aims and values remote to their

1 Ni, "Life as Aesthetic Creativity and Appreciation".

2 Ni, 181.

3 Ni, 171.

4 Confucius, *The analects of Confucius*, 112; 論語, 7:6.

practice. The Confucian pursuit of virtuosity in the arts of life, however, obtains greater significance when understood in the context of Confucian ideas about existence and nature. Ames[5] describes Chinese cosmology as being processural, contrasting it in sharp relief with the familiar idealistic or theistic models that have been historically dominant in the Western philosophical sphere. The processural quality of nature refers to its "continual regeneration" of itself[6] and the fundamental continuity of all existences; that is, the "indivisibility of the one and the many."[7] In Chinese philosophy, it is almost taken for granted that relationships and situations are primary, and that individuals are wholly embedded within these. The aesthetic encounter, in this context, represents the fullest, most immediate awareness one may have of oneself and one's world. Learning as a practice of developing one's virtuosity in the arts of life has to do with not only appreciating as much as possible the aesthetic qualities through which one is in communion with one's world, but also one's active participation in the expression and creation of them as such.

Viewed in this way, Confucianism—and Chinese philosophy generally—appears to have much in common with the philosophy of John Dewey. Indeed, over the past several decades, this topic has been somewhat widely studied in the field of comparative philosophy.[8] A common theme to emerge among many of these studies is the peculiar centrality of the aesthetic in Confucian and Deweyan philosophy; in particular, its significance not only in the theoretical foundations of their cosmologies, but also in their views of human endeavour and culture generally. This paper aims to contribute to this ongoing discussion by examining the significance of learning as it is conceived in such an eco-

5 Ames, "Collaterality in Early Chinese Cosmology".

6 唐君毅, **中西哲學思想之比較論文集**, 9.

7 唐君毅, 16.

8 Ames, "Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism"; Ames, "Collaterality in Early Chinese Cosmology"; Ames, "'Bodyheartminding'(Xin 心)"; Ames, Chen, and Hershock, *Confucianism and Deweyan Pragmatism*; Grange, "John Dewey and Confucius"; Shusterman, "Pragmatist Aesthetics and Confucianism".

centric paradigm.[9] Ecological humanism[10] is especially relevant here not just for its affinities with Confucian ideas, but also in that it provides a conceptual framework for approaching these ideas in Confucian thought and interpreting them using concepts and language familiar to modern thinkers. This paper will review the most relevant concepts of ecological humanism to establish a framework for interpreting the concept of learning as it appears in classic Confucian literature; the *Lunyu* (論語), also known as the *Analects*, in particular. This interpretation will attempt to disclose how learning was understood in terms of the aesthetic ideal of Confucianism, and how this concept of learning reflects the eco-centric, processural ontology of Confucianism.

THE ECO-ONTOLOGY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING

Working through the "ecological humanism" of John Dewey, Alexander[11] uses the term "eco-ontology" to disambiguate Dewey's view of nature and culture from its common association with reductionistic scientism.[12] The naturalist, or eco-ontological project of Dewey is a reconstruction of ontology and traditionally dualistic views of nature. Rather than interpret nature in terms of *being*, it interprets being in terms of nature; or, in other words, it understands nature to be primary,

9 Here the term "eco-centric" is being used to denote a worldview in which nature is understood to be primary, as opposed to being secondary to "Being" as in the case of Greek metaphysics.

10 Ecological humanism is the philosophical investigation of the "aesthetics of human experience" (Alexander, *The Human Eros*, 1). Thomas Alexander uses this as an alternative and hopefully less ambiguous or contentious name for Dewey's philosophy, which he himself referred to as "cultural or humanistic naturalism." See Lamont ("New Light on Dewey's Common Faith," 26).

11 Alexander, *The Human Eros*, 17, 105.

12 The rejection of scientism is a common theme among philosophies of environmental education. A notable example is Bonnett's ("Environmental Consciousness, Sustainability, and the Character of Philosophy of Education") rejection of what he calls the "metaphysics of mastery," which he describes as a defining characteristic of the scientistic attitude toward nature.

and that it *is* what it *does*.[13] There are no original essences, forms, ideas, or absolute orders that either govern or determine nature; nor is nature the sum of all accidental representations or incarnations of these. It has no identity apart from the actual and potential interactivity of concrete existences themselves. Given that nature is primary, it is all-inclusive, and so ontologically speaking, nothing can be "unnatural." Anything that exists expresses a genuine possibility of nature. Even something so destructive and iconically "unnatural" or "artificial" as an atom bomb does not and cannot exist outside of or in opposition to nature.

As the totality of all possibility, nature itself is indeterminate. What it *is*, then, becomes not a question of identity but of activity; more specifically, of continuity. It becomes a matter of what it does—what has happened, what is happening, and what could happen. For this reason, Dewey's radical reconstruction of metaphysics dismisses any and all *supernatural* speculation, and instead concerns itself with disclosing the *generic traits of nature* expressed in the experience of concrete existences in all their diversity. To be clear, Dewey's metaphysics does not systematically catalogue these traits, nor does it suppose that they can be determined and described unequivocally or definitively. However, his work as a whole may be read as an attempt to disclose the significance of one of these traits in particular: the principle of continuity.

Being primary, nature contains both being and non-being—both the modalities of actuality and potentiality. The special implication to note here is that existences are not substances which have or are qualified by identity, but rather they are events—concurrences— qualified by time. That is, every "thing" is continuous in time and space from the point of view of nature, and continuity, or growth, is what nature generically does or is. According to Dewey,[14] the principle of continuity is not self-explanatory, yet its meaning is clearly illustrated by the

13 Alexander, *The Human Eros*, 17.

14 Dewey, *Logic The Theory Of Inquiry*, 23.

"growth and development of any living organism from seed to maturity." This growth is not teleological in the classical sense. It is the "process of *organization* through which emerge the distinct structures and orders of nature,"[15] and which "[excludes] either the possibility of being reduced to one identical type or of being utterly disconnected into self-enclosed, autonomous categories."[16] An illustrative example of this is the emergence of and evolution of organic life on Earth through the "transactions" of myriad inorganic matter.[17] It is not simply that early Earth happened to acquire the prerequisite conditions for "life" per se, but that through these conditions and processes emerged new structures and orders we call "life." This is not to say that life on Earth was the first or only occurrence of "life" in the universe. The point is that "life"—or something similar—could happen any number of ways precisely because it is not merely the realization of an idea of "life," but a vital and functional outgrowth of the concrete dynamics and processes with which it is itself continuous. It is entirely plausible that non-carbon–based life forms could exist, or that the traits of life as we know it could be exhibited by existences which in no way resemble organisms on our planet. Even on Earth, the existence of replicants—such as viruses— or the amount of biodiversity that this planet has seen as a result of evolution provide us with enough material to imagine how wildly different "life" could be elsewhere in the universe—or even right under our noses. The point organic life demonstrates is that existences do not merely abide some immanent orders or laws of "being" or of the universe, but rather orders emerge through the continual and constant interaction of *mutually situating* existences. To exist is to exist not only *in* but *of* nature as a confluence of ongoing processes; to situate and be situated by other existences in time. Any one "thing"— including the apparently regular orders we observe in

15 Meyer, "Learning as Inhabitation," 69.

16 Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature*, 99.

17 Dewey uses the term "transaction" to denote interactions through which functional continuities among existences are established. Generally speaking, it is the process through which novel structures and orders—or "wholes"—*emerge* and *organize* in nature. Dewey and Bentley (*Knowing and the Known*) explain this concept somewhat thoroughly in their book *Knowing and the Known*.

nature—is not a given readymade of predetermined identity and potential, but a process whose very existence includes and is contingent on an indeterminate number of ongoing interactions with other existences. Alexander[18] uses the example of a cougar to illustrate this point:

> For the sake of pointing out, we "define" the cougar or mountain lion by its visible shape; but any biologist knows that the animal inhales, excretes, establishes territory, catches prey, mates, and occupies a position in the ecology of its environment. The term "cougar" simply signifies an organized integration of complex relationships, activities, and events which incorporate a whole transactional field. To understand the cougar is to understand it transactionally rather than simply as an individual thing which one can point at in a zoo.

Given this principle that all existence is continuous, the traditional dichotomies of man/nature, experience/reason, or mind/body which suppose of a fundamental discontinuity of experience (or existence) and nature become plainly unwarrantable. One's experience, however specific and unique, is itself—for lack of a better expression—an extension of or a realization of nature. The absence of arbitrarily demarcated domains of "experience" and "nature" has important ramifications for the concept of "experience," to which Dewey's legacy is a living testament, but also for the concept of "learning." The important connection between experience and learning to be examined here is rooted in Dewey's reconception of experience as being fundamentally aesthetic in nature.

If existences are not substances having discrete identities, but rather concurrent "events" continuous with each other in space and time, then experience becomes a matter of *how* existences are continuous. In other words, experience becomes an aesthetic encounter with the

18 Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature*, 109.

qualities[19] of "things"—with the way they are continuous with each other in a given situation.

This notion of experience as paradigmatically aesthetic in nature was first conceptualized by Dewey in what he referred to as the postulate of immediate empiricism, which stated that "things—anything, everything, in the ordinary non-technical use of the term 'thing'—are what they are experienced as."[20] This postulate was originally published in an article written as a critical response to William James' "radical empiricism," which Dewey found to retain the age-old dichotomy of mind/body it was meant to displace. The postulate was not well-received by Dewey's peers, because it eluded the canonical domains of rationalism, empiricism, idealism, realism, etc. Consequently, many of Dewey's critics read the postulate as some kind of subjectivism. The claim of immediate empiricism, however, is not that things *objectively are* whatever one subjectively perceives them to be. After all, in Dewey's naturalism, *being* is not the ultimate ground, and "things" are not "essential beings." The point of the postulate is that there is a fundamental distinction between questions of reality and questions of knowledge and truth.[21] What does this imply about experience generally and aesthetic experience in particular? The claim that puzzled Dewey's interlocutors was that not only is experience not primarily a matter of knowledge or cognition—or even consciousness— but it is fundamentally qualitative and aesthetic. The implication is that *meaning* is more generic than either truth, fact, or knowledge, and moreover it derives from the qualities of a given situation as they are

19 It is worth clarifying that qualities are not essential, self-evident attributes of an object. The term "quality" refers to the *individuality* of a thing, which is necessarily indeterminate given that actuality and potentiality are basic to all existence. In other words, what a thing "is" cannot be defined, because, to reiterate, from an eco-ontological point of view "things" are not essential identities but continuous events *qualified by how they are or could be*. For more on Dewey's concepts of individuality and quality in this context, see his essay, "Time and Individuality," in (*The Essential Dewey, Volume 1*, 1:217–26).

20 Dewey, "The Postulate of Immediate Empricism," 393.

21 Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature*, 74.

directly experienced. Dewey[22] illustrates this point with the mundane example of being startled by a noise:

> I start and am flustered by a noise heard. Empirically, that noise is fearsome; it *really* is, not merely phenomenally or subjectively so. That is *what* it is experienced as being. But, when I experience the noise as a *known* thing, I find it to be innocent of harm. It is the tapping of a shade against the window, owing to movements of the wind. The experience has changed; that is, the thing experienced has changed—not that an unreality has given place to a reality, nor that some transcendental (unexperienced) Reality has changed, not that truth has changed, but just and only the concrete reality experienced has changed. […] The content of the latter experience is doubtless truer than the content of the earlier; but it is in no sense more real. To call it truer, moreover, must, from the empirical standpoint, mean a concrete *difference* in actual things experienced.

What Dewey wishes to emphasize about the immediacy of experience is that, in general, experience is not something that merely occurs in and over the top of a pre-existing, objective world of self-contained, isolated existences or essences. Instead, it is a vital phase of the world in general and of the current situation in particular. In the absence of some arbitrary ontological division between nature and experience—or mind/body, essence/appearance, etc.—what is immediate in experience are not "facts," concepts, or even symbols relating (or not) to an underlying reality—which are indeed *mediatory* themselves—but rather they are the qualities of the situation which makes it uniquely individual. In other words, the aesthetic is not only the "ground" through

22 Dewey, "The Postulate of Immediate Empricism," 395.

23 Dewey's essay "Qualitative Thought" is rather instructive on this topic. In it he gives an account of the immediate, qualitative situation as the condition of meaning: "[The] selective determination and relation of objects in thought is controlled by reference to a situation—to that which is constituted by a pervasive and internally integrating quality, so that failure to acknowledge the situation

which meaning becomes possible,[23] but it is "experience in its integrity";[24] or, the very paradigm and telos of experience.[25]

What exactly is "the aesthetic," then? What is an "aesthetic experience?" Dewey[26] explains rather tersely that the aesthetic refers to the "clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience." Because experience is not external to or superimposed over a given reality, but rather, is itself a phase of a given situation that develops along with it,[27] experience functions as a "moment of coordination" that attempts to organize and reorient the whole situation into a unity[28] —"completing" or "consummating" it. The aesthetic is this selective disclosure of qualities which pervade every part of an experience or situation and thereby unify it as such. It is the distinctive sense or meaning of a situation that makes it that situation and no other. For Dewey, every experience which we may denote as *an experience*—an individual, distinguishable experience—is so because of the aesthetic that integrates its various aspects and phases as an individual, whole thing or situation. Experiences that do not come to a close, that drift, or that are scattered and distracted lack such aesthetic integrity to be distinguishable or recognizable as *an experience*. In this way, every experience is aesthetic, for it begins in the pre-reflective, aesthetic encounter and "ends," "culminates," or "consummates" there also, enriching itself with a greater capacity to appreciate and establish continuities among situations. This is to what Dewey refers in his books on education when he repeatedly emphasizes the continual enrichment of experience. Moreover, grasping this process in concrete life experiences is, according to Dewey, "the objective of all intelligence."[29]

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leaves, in the end, the logical force of objects and their relations inexplicable" (Dewey, *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1*, 1:197).

24 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 274.

25 Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature*, xiv.

26 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 48.

27 Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature*, 74.

28 Alexander, 76.

29 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 46.

While experience itself is aesthetic in nature, an "aesthetic experience" is an experience in which the aesthetic becomes its focus or purpose. Such experiences are of the sort we typically associate with *the arts*, but Dewey asserts that aesthetic experience and art are in no way limited to the domain of conventional art forms, nor are they mutually exclusive with conventionally intellectual activities, such as science. It is not science or the intellect that is on opposition to art, but routine and impulse,[30] for art, in the most general sense, is "the quest for concretely embodied meaning and value in human existence."[31] Meaning and value are not present in activities that are either so menially rote or so compulsive that they become utterly mindless. Meaning and value must be created and recreated in situ if they are to function as such in any experience. They cannot simply be transplanted into one's experience—they require actually having the experience, which, as we saw, requires some degree of aesthetic appreciation and creativity. Dewey[32] describes art as "the solvent union of the generic, recurrent, ordered, established phase of nature with its phase that is incomplete, going on, and hence still uncertain, contingent, novel, particular," which locates it not in the objects, materials, or techniques of an activity, nor in any field or special domain of experience, but rather in the act of experiencing itself. The implication here is that any activity may become art or be artful. Furthermore, it suggests that not only is art the "complete culmination of nature"[33] —or the fullest human experience of nature—but it is also a direct participation in the continual development, growth, or qualitative transformation of nature generally.

Learning, in the most general sense, is this process of realizing or establishing continuity in life situations. All significant growth begins in an encounter with the concrete dynamics of a situation, and through an appreciation of the aesthetic in which they are continuous *as a situation*, produces a perspective which preserves the aesthetic

30 Dewey, *Experience And Nature*, 360.

31 Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature*, 269.

32 Dewey, *Experience And Nature*, 359.

33 Dewey, 358.

integrity of that experience as *an experience*, thereby enriching it with greater possibilities for further experience and growth. Even grasping abstract concepts, such as learning to count to ten, is not only possible because it is embedded in a taken-for-granted, sense-giving qualitative situation, but its generic outcome is the qualitative enrichment of immediate experience. However modest, it results in a greater appreciation of how "things" are and how they could be—in which a "thing" may be any existence, including actions, ideas, feelings, animals, or physical objects.

The general consequence of learning so conceived, then, exceeds the construction or acquisition of knowledge, facts, or skills themselves. Learning is an adjustment whose effect is realized as an awareness and expression of how one is in the world. Even the most trivial or rudimentary instance of learning results in an altered sense of oneself, one's world, and possible ways of being and acting in it. With each phase of growth, the sense-giving context of experience is changed, if only so slightly, and new possibilities of action, meaning, and value continue to appear on the horizon. As a person pursues these to learn and grow, not only does *her* world change, but the world as a whole is changed *because she is a vital part of it*. This change may be imperceptible or even seemingly insignificant, but it is a real change nonetheless.

Understood this way, learning reveals the vital continuity of nature and culture. Human "things" are not unnatural or artificial, at least not ontologically speaking. All human accomplishments and failures are, without exception, genuinely "natural" in that not only does nothing exist "outside" of nature, but they have all *emerged* through the organization of physical, biological, and psychic energies over vast stretches of time and space. This includes everything from formal logic to Dadaism. This process, in general, is continuity, and in the particular context of human experience is "learning" in the broadest sense of the word. Deriving the theory of relativity, painting the *Mona Lisa*, or baking muffins with your children may be learning. It is a profound source of power as much as it is the most ordinary and mundane thing in human life. Understanding it as a kind of aesthetic appreciation and creativity

—as the *work* of art, or an exploration of the aesthetics of human experience or culture—is both humbling and empowering. It does not suggest that one can simply intuit the truths of the universe by contemplating the ripples of water in a lily pond, for example, but rather that existence can be made more meaningful through a greater capacity to appreciate how it is and could be, and being able to creatively respond to the dynamics of concrete situations so experienced. It is the idea that learning, as continuity itself, consists of a vital participation in the reorganization of nature in general and culture in particular. In human life, it represents perhaps our most intimate point of contact with our world and how we most fully realize meaning through it; how we adapt ourselves and our world to make it a home.

CLASSICAL CONFUCIAN XUE AS AESTHETIC APPRECIATION AND CREATIVITY

Confucianism has a reputation for being austerely moralistic. While morality is indeed a central theme in Confucian thought, the conventional interpretation which reads its ultimate aim to be moral perfection obscures its more interesting, profound, and even more characteristically Confucian insights about life and learning. In order to read beyond conventional interpretations to appreciate the significance of learning in the context of the Confucian aesthetic ideal, the concepts and language of the previous section will be applied to construct an alternative reading of the place of xue in early Confucian thought. In particular, we will examine how xue relates the Confucian aim of being able to sojourn in the arts of life. As we will see, xue is not simply a means or method for attaining such skills or artistry, nor does it suppose of a particular curriculum for doing so. It is the very practice of this art of living in one's real life; the generalized and inclusive transdisciplinary work of striving to achieve harmony (和) in all one's affairs. Embodied in the concept of xue promoted by Confucius is a view

of human existence and endeavour as being embedded in the creative cycles of nature; a view which orients human activity not toward a control of these cycles, but rather toward the artful participation in them as a vital phase of them oneself.

THE CONFUCIAN XUE REVIVAL

A persistent theme of *Lunyu* is the contrast between the conventional concept of xue and its special meaning among the numerous other familiar concepts reinterpreted by Confucius in his treatment of the classic literature of the time. To be clear, Confucius does not present his ideas as new concepts, but rather challenges the common practices and perceptions of his time by appealing to what he considered to be the authority of tradition. For example, Confucius explains that the customary meaning of xue as "studying" or "book learning" is at most *supplementary* or secondary to xue as it was originally practiced by the ancient sage kings; that is, as a more general practice of striving to maximize the meaning of one's interactions through a sincere devotion to interpersonal relationships and mundane roles and activities.[34] This interpretation of xue is even confirmed by Zixia (子夏), a notoriously pedantic disciple of Confucius, who explains that a "learned" person is not necessarily an "educated" person, but rather someone of integrity who cares for and serves others to the utmost.[35] Indeed, sincerity (信) and devotion (忠) in action are what keep the xue of "exemplary persons" (君子) from stagnating (固)[36] into the aloofness characteristic of pedants who merely "learn to impress others."[37] In contrast, the ancients learned "for their own sake,"[38] which is to say that, for them, learning was the process of continually striving to improve oneself and consequently the life shared in community with others. To have a "love of learning" (好學), for Confucians, is to appreciate this *renewed*

34 論語, 1:6.
35 論語, 1:7.
36 論語, 1.8.
37 論語, 14:24.
38 論語, 14:24.

tradition of xue by immersing oneself in it—by committing oneself to practising it tirelessly and associating with others who share the same dedication.[39] In other words, xue was a project of meliorative communication in the literal sense of being and becoming a community; of cultivating what is common to a group of people.

Confucius clearly perceived the popular association of studying with social status and material gain[40] to be antithetical to xue, but it should be noted that Confucius' differentiation of xue from ordinary studying was not a dismissal of literature or culture (文), nor of intellectual activities generally. Confucius reportedly refrained from speculation (意) and making claims to certainty (必),[41] and he did routinely admonish his disciples from neglecting their real-life learning to pursue metaphysical speculation.[42] Clearly, he understood xue to be something that cannot be reduced to thought (思),[43] but he also affirmed the mutually interdependent relationship of thought and xue.[44] Nevertheless, Confucius and his followers are remembered for their distinctively unyielding practical bent. Why did the practical and mundane mean so much to Confucians, especially in their ideas about education? Was it out of a concern for duty, hierarchy, or normative social roles? Were they overly concerned with the application of knowledge or with moral perfection? Or were they after a completely different vision of learning altogether?

We get a clue to the latter in a famous—albeit opaque—exchange between Confucius and his disciple Zigong (子貢).[45] When asked if he thinks Confucius has learned a lot and remembers it all, Zigong's unsurprising response is affirmative. But Confucius denies that this is true, and instead explains that he simply "[puts] it all together on one

39 論語, 1:14, 19:5.
40 論語, 8:12, 15:32.
41 論語, 9:4.
42 論語, 11:12.
43 論語, 15:31.
44 論語, 2:15.
45 論語, 15:3.

continuous strand" (一以貫之).[46] A variation of this curious expression appears elsewhere in *Lunyu*, in which Confucius states that it is his "way" (道) that is so bound together with one continuous strand.[47] After taking leave, Zhengzi (曾子) explains to the other disciples that Confucius' "way" is simply one of devotion (忠) and empathy (恕). What is meant by this "continuous strand" in the context of learning, and what does it have to do with devotion and empathy?

In these passages, Confucius is challenging his disciples' common-sense notion of xue as accumulative with an alternative view of it being *appropriative* in nature. As Xiè Liáng Zài (謝良在) explains in the *Lunyu Commentaries* (論語集註), to "learn broadly"(博學) is not a matter of accumulating a broadly scoped miscellany of skills or facts about the world, but more an effort to expand and enrich one's perspective and involvement in it. According to him, the "universe does not form each thing piece by piece," and so the "continuous strand" Confucius refers to is the notion that there is a pervasive sense or meaning among all things.[48] For Xiè and his contemporaries, this pervasive sense or principle among all things would have been understood in the context of the complex metaphysics of their processural cosmology. It refers to the simultaneous indivisibility and multiplicity of existence, the "unity" of which is apprehended aesthetically and immediately. To be clear, for Confucius, this "pervasive meaning" is not an absolute or normative order to be abided. The point Confucius is trying to make with the "continuous strand" is that xue is a matter of artistry, not material, memory, or technique alone. To put it in Deweyan eco-ontological terms, in Confucian cosmology, situations and relationships are primary—[49]individual things are themselves expressions of these—and so to perceive and respond to the qualities that "pervade" and "integrate" them is the natural objective of learning. In other words, Confucius' xue

46 Confucius, *The analects of Confucius*, 184.

47 **論語**, 4:15.

48 成百曉, **論語集註**, 436.

49 Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*; Ames, "Collaterality in Early Chinese Cosmology"; Ames, "'Bodyheartminding'(Xin 心)"; Hwang and Meyer, "Relations as the Aim of Education in Joseon Neo-Confucianism".

is a rejection of what we might perceive as dichotomies between theory/practice or reality/appearance in favour of a learning that appreciates the ontological primacy of *situations*, and which therefore strives to appropriate their potential meanings to establish harmony(和).[50]

It is because this situatedness is so crucial to the Confucian concept and practice of xue that in characteristically Confucian style, Zhengzi clarifies the meaning of "the continuous strand" for the other disciples not by hazarding formal or speculative definitions—like this very paper ironically attempts—but instead by offering practical instructions or recommendations for seeing for oneself in ordinary, quotidian situations. With any activity, to do your utmost (忠) or fully immerse yourself in it necessarily requires that you remain open to the dynamics of the concrete situation (恕)—to the way it is and the way it could be—which entails that one's very presence in a situation contributes to its creation as such. To truly understand how xue refers to this sort of artistry demands that one try their hand at the craft; that one experiences it firsthand. A corollary of this radical situatedness of xue is that all activities and events are opportunities for learning and growth—which is, indeed, the theme with which the *Lunyu* begins. In the *Lunyu* C*ommentaries*, Xiè Liáng Zài interprets xue in the opening line of *Lunyu* as a matter of "leaving no moment unpracticed," even if one is just sitting or standing.[51] The Cheng brothers comment that learning is basically this effort to continually *practice* xue, which Zhuxi likens to the constant flight of birds—suggesting that learning is the fundamental modality of human life and existence.[52]

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50 Harmony here is not the mere observance of rules of taste or even the resolution of conflict, but as Ames ("Collaterality in Early Chinese Cosmology") describes it, a kind of *creatio in situ*—an artistry enabled by one's "virtuosity" (中庸) in "constant conscientious practice in one's ordinary common life so that one can hit the proper target all the time" (Ni, "Life as Aesthetic Creativity and Appreciation," 182). Just as, for example, mastering the art of sculpture requires actually sculpting, for xue and life in general, there is no substitute for a direct and sincere involvement in real-life situations.

51 成百曉, **論語集註**, 28.

52 成百曉, 28.

XUE ARTISTRY, HUMAN EXISTENCE, AND NATURE

Xue, in this way, is understood as a process of aesthetic receptivity and creation. In the language of Deweyan eco-ontology, it is a process of striving to remain sensitive and responsive to the qualities of experiences and situations to realize an aesthetic which establishes them *as* experiences and situations. It is not about simply doing your job or fulfilling your role to the best of your ability, and certainly not a matter of perceiving and conforming to some esoteric, absolute cosmic order. It is about "sojourning in the arts" of life; or, striving to creatively establish and embody meaning in real-life situations *as a vital part of them*. Human beings, and all existences, are completely embedded in the relationships through which they exist.[53] For Confucius, immersion and empathy in situations is not simply a matter of deference to or consideration of other isolated "things," but a realization of how one exists *through* their relationship with these; or, how they are mutually *situating*. For this reason, xue and striving to become or embody ren (仁), individually and collectively, are mutually entailing in Confucian thought. Traditionally, their relationship has been understood moralistically: xue being the general means for cultivating oneself to attain the supreme virtue of ren, with li (禮) functioning as the concrete, normative practice or discipline of xue. In consideration of the aesthetic nature of xue and the aesthetic ideal of Confucianism generally, the relationship between xue, ren, and li becomes much more interesting, and discloses much about how art and learning are bound up in the Confucian view of existence and nature.

Ren is the supreme human virtue in Confucianism. However, it is not an ideal personality or a moral code, and neither are li and xue merely disciplinary means for attaining "renhood," so to speak. Ren encompasses the entirety of one's person—one's cognitive, aesthetic, moral, and religious sensibilities as they are *concretely expressed* in one's roles and relationships.[54] There can be no formula or even

53 Ames, "'Bodyheartminding'(Xin 心)".

54 Confucius, *The analects of Confucius*, 49.

definitive criteria for ren, because as a "qualitative transformation of a *particular* person … it must be understood relative to the specific concrete conditions of that person."[55] Xue in this context becomes an irreducibly creative process, for it requires one to be as sensitive and responsive to the dynamics of even the most mundane of life situations as possible. Even in the neo-Confucian orthodoxy—which elaborated on the metaphysics of ren and elevated it into a principle of cosmic unity and compassion—ren and all "virtues" must be *embodied* concretely in the way one behaves and lives, and this process is itself xue.[56]

Ren does not exist independently of the lives and relationships through which it is expressed, so its embodiment and expression cannot be easily reduced to normative forms, attitudes, or behaviours—nor to apprehending a priori principles. This is a point Confucius emphasizes throughout *Lunyu*, and which also draws our attention to the aesthetic nature of xue and li. For example, Confucius often contrasted ren with the characteristics with which it was commonly associated in his day; namely, guile (巧言) and pretentious appearance (令色),[57] eloquence (佞),[58] leadership,[59] and status, power, and authority.[60] In spite of the fact that it is discussed over 100 times in *Lunyu*, Confucius' disciples state that he rarely spoke of it,[61] which we can take to mean that, like other core ideas of his, he avoided arresting them with definitions. When he does provide examples or descriptions of ren, they are always exemplars of xue that emphasize the themes of "loving learning" and the "continuous strand": sincerity, doing one's utmost or immersing oneself in a situation, and remaining open to its possibilities and

55 Confucius, 50.

56 See 황금중, **학이란 무엇인가**. It is significant that in his commentary on the first chapter of *Lunyu* (成百曉, **論語集註**, 28), Zhuxi describes xue as a process of learning or doing by example (效). The general point he makes is not that learning is simply receiving instruction, but that xue cannot happen in isolation. Ren virtuosity is not a private affair, but artful interaction with the rest of existence.

57 **論語**, 1:3, 17:17.

58 **論語**, 5:5.

59 **論語**, 5:8, 5:19.

60 **論語**, 3:1–3.

61 **論語**, 9:4.

perspectives. In other words, he emphasizes that ren is at the heart of an artful life.[62]

This idea is clearly expressed by Confucius when he explains that being ren is a matter of (to adapt the common English saying) reaping what you sow only after you have actually sown it.[63] Ren is the process of caring for the would-be crops of experience. It takes sincere, sustained focus and effort to achieve. It is not an ideal to merely identify with, nor an abstract concept to be applied in real or hypothetical life situations. It is always near at hand in any situation,[64] which is partly why it is primarily discussed in terms of interpersonal relationships; it is through these that we exist in the first place—what else could be more immediate and encompassing of human life? So when Master You describes filial and fraternal devotion (孝悌) as the root of ren,[65] or when Confucius pithily "defines" ren as loving others[66] or being deferential, respectful, and sincere,[67] they are not merely making prescriptions about morality—and certainly not reducing ren to subordination or obedience—[68]but rather, they are trying to draw their students' attention to the fact that being ren requires creatively participating in the concrete situations and relationships that constitute one's life. Actually loving others and devoting yourself to those in your life is distinct from the mere fulfillment of the duties and obligations those relationships might involve. The difference is a matter of artistry. It is one thing to live among others, and another to intimately involve yourself with them such that in trying to stand yourself up you stand them up also.[69]

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62 In *Lunyu* (論語, 19:6), Zixia comments that ren is basically the practice of xue—of learning broadly yet being focused in your purposes, and inquiring with urgency yet reflecting closely on the question at hand (Confucius, *The analects of Confucius*, 219).

63 論語, 6:22.

64 論語, 7:30.

65 論語, 1:2.

66 論語, 12:22.

67 論語, 13:19.

68 論語, 15:36.

69 論語, 6:30.

This work of cultivating ren artistry—or, in other words, xue—is likened by Zixia in *Lunyu*[70] to the work of craftsmen mastering their craft by devoting themselves to practising it. Without immersion, dedication, and sincere practice in real-life situations, not only is one incapable of developing their virtuosity, but they also lack opportunities to express or embody ren in the first place. The point is, not only does it take effort and actually doing it to learn and "master" ren, but what ren *is* or *means* in one's life is specific to the *work* it does in experience as art. This is not unlike the way the so-called fine arts are understood: the "artwork" is not in the materials, techniques, or principles of design themselves but rather in the overtly aesthetic experience to which they contribute when combined in just such a way. Indeed, Confucius held that ren is self-originating in the sense that it derives from one's own experience and practice—that its artistry does not originate externally in the form of formal methods, customs, tastes, or any kind of secret ingredient—and therefore it is a matter of individual self-cultivation.[71] It is worth pointing out, as the translators Ames and Rosemont do, that this self-cultivation is not the discipline of an ego-self to be overcome, but an "inchoate, incipient, radically embedded 'self' that needs cultivation and extension."[72] To put it differently, it is a cultivation of the whole situation one inhabits at a given time; the concrete relationships and situations through which one exists as an individual in a given moment. Here we again encounter the cornerstones of xue as aesthetic receptivity and creativity: immersion, dedication, sincerity, and empathy—or being receptive and responsive to other perspectives. Confucius was enthusiastic about this cultivation of the situation-and-relations-embedded self, believing that it had a meliorative power that could bring peace and harmony to the world.[73] This meliorative social artistry was understood as li; or, the observation of ritual propriety.

70 論語, 19:7.

71 論語, 12:1.

72 Confucius, *The analects of Confucius*, 250.

73 論語, 12:1.

At first glance, "ritual propriety" seems out of place with the thesis of this paper, especially if we consider the fact that li was notoriously codified into official "rules of propriety" under the various orthodoxies from the Han dynasty onward. Li as a virtue, however, has always exceeded its reductive definition as an ethical code even among orthodox Confucians, and this is especially true for Confucius himself, who refused to equate it with mere custom and routine.[74] Contrary to its common conception as a mechanism for enforcing conformity, li is highly creative, personal, and fundamentally appropriative in nature. "For Confucius, the appropriate observance of ritual propriety requires personalization and participation. Compliance with bald formal conducts not only fails to qualify as the observance of li, but in fact … such rote submission is a travesty that jeopardizes communal harmony."[75] Confucius demonstrated this in his own conduct, most notably after the death of his protege Yanhui (顔回).[76] In this rather dramatic episode, Confucius refuses to mourn Yanhui in the manner customary at the time: through a solemn yet lavish burial ceremony. Instead, Confucius' reaction to his death was uninhibited and almost hysterical, claiming in effect that his love and respect for Yanhui— and Yanhui's exceptional character—warranted such a candid yet unorthodox display of emotion. What this demonstrates is that to *properly* mourn the death of his beloved pupil—that is, to observe ritual *propriety*—required departing from the usual customs to adequately express his respect and love for him. It is not a matter of self-indulgence and caprice, but a performative and participatory *appropriation* of the situation to adequately realize and express its meaning. "Full participation in a ritually-constituted community requires the personalization of prevailing customs, institutions, and values. What makes ritual profoundly different from law or rule is this process of making the tradition one's own."[77] This applies as much to less extreme, mundane situations, and in fact, the

74 論語, 11:9–11.

75 Ames, "Observing Ritual 'Propriety Li' as Focusing the 'Familiar' in the Affairs of the Day," 145.

76 論語, 11:9–11.

77 Confucius, *The analects of Confucius*, 51.

point of li understood this way is not to achieve "harmony" through conformity—which is more accurately "unison"—or simply to transmit tradition down through the generations. More profoundly, it is an attempt to make all aspects of life as artful as possible; an attempt to be as receptive and responsive to the diverse dynamics of every life situation such that they may contribute to the establishment of a quality that expresses *how* they are uniquely situated.[78] It is this *disclosure* of harmony that is the aim of li, and the customs, rituals, etc. of any given time and place can serve as but the tools and techniques for practising this. The artistry lies in the virtuosity one achieves through sincere and devoted effort in being as present as possible.

The significance of this sort of presence is highlighted by the fact that xue evolved into an ascetic practice of mindfulness (敬) in neo-Confucianism. Mindfulness for neo-Confucians was a total immersion (主一無適) in life situations;[79] an ability to quiet the mind and yet still actively respond to the dynamics of the situation as it develops. As such, the practice of mindfulness was both the aim and the means in this "sage learning" (聖學) in that it was the continual cultivation of the virtuosity and artistry characteristic of sagehood. The idealized neo-Confucian sage is not a magical being, nor is he enlightened in the sense of transcending a world of appearances or illusions to obtain privileged, esoteric knowledge of reality. Rather, he is a humble steward of nature; mindful of its dynamics—the so-called 10,000 things (萬事萬物)—as a vital phase of them himself. This heightened awareness of his own embeddedness in his world and the dynamics of life situations does not yield any form of omnipotence or even absolute certainty, but instead affords a perspective from which to make wise decisions to achieve optimal fluency and meaning among the existences involved. In this way the ideal of the sage represents the aesthetic ideal of Confucian xue, of the artistry and virtuosity it pursues. The sage is a master of sojourning

78 This is what Confucius means when he explains that becoming ren is a matter of overcoming oneself and returning to li; or, living every aspect of life as an observance of ritual propriety (**論語**, 12:1).

79 황금중, "지속가능한 미래를 위한 마음교육," 216.

in the arts of life, such that he actively participates in establishing order and harmony among the existences he encounters.

Neo-Confucians saw humans as having been born of the same womb as all of existence, and considered the embodiment of ren in an artful life to be the peak of human potential. To embody ren through the continual practice of xue was, in effect, a profound appreciation of life and the world, and likewise the spontaneous and creative expression of such an experience and the particular perspective it affords. Such high-level virtuosity in the arts of life was understood to be meliorative for this reason. The effect of ren's expression, however, was not a magical, enlightening revelation. It is simply that because situatedness and relationships are primary in the Confucian worldview, the embodiment of ren could not be a private or personal affair. It is always interactive in the sense that it is itself the realization or establishment of harmony in a concrete situation.

The neo-Confucian model of education, as one might expect, was designed around this very assumption. The general trajectory of sage learning spanned three phases or domains: self-cultivation (修己), rectifying others (治人), and establishing peace on earth (平天下). It is a rather ambitious scheme, but it discloses how Confucians perceived their existence and the role of xue artistry in the world at large. These three phases of sage learning are not mutually exclusive steps along the path to sagehood. More accurately, they represent an eco-centric worldview in which embeddedness in nature is taken to be primary; a worldview which likewise understands the ability to live artfully as having profound implications for nature as a whole. It is a view of learning that sees art as the most intimate point of contact with and fullest experience of one's world.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion attempts to disclose the aesthetic nature of xue and the significance of that orientation within Confucian thought generally, particularly within the distinctly eco-centric cosmology of Confucianism. The concepts and language of eco-ontology help us to interpret xue in a way that facilitates a reappreciation of its meaning in the context of the Confucian aesthetic ideal. While such an interpretation of xue is fascinating in itself and provokes its application in the interpretation of Chinese thought generally, can it provide contemporary philosophy of education with any insights relevant to the milieu of industrial society in the twenty-first century? In the very least, such an eco-centric, aesthetic concept of learning provides us with an alternative way of thinking about life, learning, and our world. While I cannot speak definitively about the potential significance of xue and the perspectives in which it may consequence in contemporary life, I would like to address two important ways in which it is particularly relevant to educational theory and practice today.

First, our planet is facing a massive ecological crisis. It is clear that we humans must substantially rethink our very concepts of nature and reconsider our ways of inhabiting it. Such an adjustment would not only require education to play an active role, but would presumably require a sober and thoroughgoing re-examination of its theories, practices, values, institutions, and therefore its very function in society. Despite the increasing urgency of such a fundamental reconstruction, the response in the field of education has been short-sighted.[80] In the philosophy of education, for example, environmental issues have

80 Affifi et al. ("Introduction to Ecologizing Philosophy of Education," 229) have characterized the response as having handled the problem "largely by *ad hoc* tinkering, adding on units to the existing curricula, and ignoring the very likely possibility that the curriculum itself and its pedagogical delivery may be intrinsic to the problem." Kahn ("From Education for Sustainable Development to Ecopedagogy") has also criticized education programs for "sustainable development" for ironically perpetuating the neoliberal, consumerist values largely responsible for destabilizing the ecosystem and jeopardizing our and many other species' inhabitation of it.

historically accounted for a marginal number of the studies published in the primary journals of this field.[81] According to Humphreys and Blenkinsop,[82] a surprising amount of the academic research on this topic is ironically anthropocentric, reasserting Morgan's[83] nearly 30-year-old assessment that "education is still a strictly social process that takes place apart from and in opposition to non-human thought."

To realize more ecologically inclusive perspectives about education, learning, and existence generally, these traditionally anthropocentric concepts must be problematized. In re-charting the terrain, so to speak, philosophers of education have sought to think beyond the duality of the Anthropocene[84] to discover and disclose some of the potential conditions and characteristics of de-anthropocentrized alternatives. For example,[85] reconceptualizes learning as the process of inhabitation, exploring its meaning from the point of view of learning situations themselves and of nature in general.[86] identifies the inherent intersectionality of ecological, moral, cultural, and technological problems in education. In a similar vein,[87] presents a rather intriguing thesis of "panbiotic educational interaction," which proposes that learning and being learned from are basic to the life process and the biosphere in general.

As we attempt to think through these more ecologically inclusive perspectives to reimagine our ways of life and learning, the literature of the Confucian tradition may provide itself as a valuable resource for its

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81 Humphreys and Blenkinsop, "White Paper Concerning Philosophy of Education and Environment".

82 Humphreys and Blenkinsop.

83 Morgan, "Reconceiving the Foundations of Education," 264.

84 See Affifi ("More-Than-Humanizing the Anthropocene"; "Anthropocentrism's Fluid Binary"). The "Anthropocene" refers to the current human-induced geological epoch responsible for mass extinctions and other numerous effects on the biosphere generally. See Waters ("The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene") and Ceballos ("Accelerated Modern Human–Induced Species Losses").

85 Meyer, "Learning as Inhabitation".

86 Laird, "Learning to Live in the Anthropocene".

87 Affifi, "The Metabolic Core of Environmental Education".

having dealt with the topic of eco-centric learning and education for hundreds of years. That is, while we would not expect it to provide a drop-in solution to our contemporary crisis, it offers itself as a paradigmatic example of a philosophical system based on an eco-centric or processural worldview in which learning and life were understood as vital phases of the interactive dynamics of the cycles of nature. Bridging the gap between contemporary discourse and the remote world of classical Confucianism using concepts from ecological humanism help make xue accessible to educational theory and practice as we face the novel problems of this century.

Second, the concept of learning as a practice of aesthetic appreciation and creativity presents a serious challenge to the relatively narrow concepts of learning and education in modern industrial society, especially in consideration of its eco-ontological significance. Even if we concede that, generally speaking, education aims to facilitate the attainment of something resembling "the good life," can we say with confidence that as it actually operates in our society, education adequately cultivates humans *capable of actually living* a good life? From the perspective of Confucianism, it would appear that not only does modern society seem preoccupied with a *materially* "good life," it appears to take life itself for granted. As a result, it becomes satisfactory to externalize the aims of learning. Not only does this overlook the fact that the good life is a matter of *living well*—that it is in itself a matter of artistry—but it precludes or at least inhibits the possibility for learning to become the craft of the learner; for learning to become her life's work, her masterpiece. Indeed, the concept of learning discussed in this paper represents values fundamentally different from those of industrial society, and while they may appear to be simply incompatible with our current milieu, their consideration is not a fruitless exercise. With the development of increasingly advanced large language models and artificial intelligence technology, we can expect to be continually challenged to reconsider the nature of learning and education—and consequently, what these have to do with human life and existence generally. It is uncertain whether or not our society would

be able to appreciate and actually accommodate a concept of learning like xue, or under what conditions this would be possible, but the notion of learning as practising one's virtuosity in the arts of life will undoubtedly remain an intriguing and attractive option so long as we remain human.

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