

# Harmonising with Heaven and Earth: Reciprocal Harmony and Xunzi's Environmental Ethics<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Xunzi's philosophy provide a rich resource for understanding how ethical relationships between humans and nature can be articulated in terms of harmony. In this paper, I build on his ideas to develop the concept of reciprocal harmony, which requires us to reciprocate those who make our lives liveable. In the context of the environment, I argue that reciprocal harmony generates moral obligations towards nature, in return for the existential debt that humanity owes towards heaven and earth. This can be used as a normative basis for an environmental ethic that enables humanity and nature to flourish together.

## KEYWORDS

Confucian ethics, Xunzi, instrumental harmony, relational harmony, reciprocal harmony.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Xunzi is one of the first Confucians to explicitly discuss the relationship between humanity and the environment. Despite living in the third century BC, he envisaged an ecological balance between human needs and environmental interests, which is directly relevant to contemporary concerns about climate change. Additionally, Xunzi conceptualises harmony as a triadic relationship between heaven, earth and humanity. As some scholars have pointed out, his ideas appear to attribute a non-instrumental moral standing to nature (Hourdequin and Wong 2005; Nuyen 2011), which can serve as the normative basis for an environmental ethic that respects and protects the environment.

However, this is contradicted by the widespread belief that Xunzi, like many other Confucians, is committed to weak anthropocentrism (Ivanhoe 1991; Li 2014). Not only does he claim that humans are superior to all other forms of life, he also repeatedly emphasises the instrumental value of nature for human well-being. Understandably, this creates the impression that human interests are far more important than the interests of the environment. Such views have been criticised by environmentalists for encouraging the relentless pursuit of human interests at the expense of nature, which is one of the underlying ideological causes of contemporary environmental crises.

These conflicting interpretations of Xunzi's views about nature have yet to be systematically discussed within the literature. In my view, existing interpretations of Xunzi do not sufficiently explain why we have moral obligations to ensure that nature flourishes, which Xunzi stipulates as the goal of the triadic relationship between heaven, earth and humanity. Instead, I will show that Xunzi's treatment of heaven and earth as the root of life implies that humanity has an

existential debt towards nature that we ought to reciprocate, which grounds our normative obligations to ensure that nature flourishes. By developing and critically assessing different conceptions of harmony between humans and nature, this paper demonstrates that Confucian ethics provides a rich conceptual resource for thinking about human obligations towards nature.

This paper will be organised as follows. Section two explains Xunzi's cosmology and his ecological vision of a triadic harmony between heaven, earth and humanity. Section three focuses on Ivanhoe's anthropocentric reading of Xunzi, which interprets this vision as an *instrumental harmony* between humans and nature. In contrast, section four draws upon Nuyen's interpretation to elucidate the idea of *relational harmony*, which ascribes non-instrumental value and an independent moral standing to nature. This is further developed in section five, where I propose the concept of *reciprocal harmony* to explain why humanity has normative obligations towards nature to bring about the common flourishing of all life.

## 2. XUNZI'S ECOLOGICAL VISION

In this section, I provide some background by explaining Xunzi's conception of nature. It is worth noting that contemporary Chinese phrases such as 'nature' (*daziran* 大自然) and 'the environment' (*huanjing* 环境) were not used in ancient Chinese texts. Instead, within Xunzi's cosmology, 'nature' is loosely differentiated into three separate elements: 'heaven' (*tian* 天), 'earth' (*di* 地), and 'myriad life forms and humans' (*wanwushengren* 万物生人).

Some scholars argue that Xunzi's philosophy can be reconciled with naturalism (Hagen 2007; Tan 2015). On this reading, heaven has no religious or supernatural element. Instead, it is composed entirely of natural forces. There is significant support for this view, since Xunzi

generally refers to heaven as the sky above, which is characterised by the regularity of the four seasons. This enables people to grow crops with predictable success (*Xunzi*, 9/79)<sup>2</sup> and, more generally, to harness these natural processes for human ends, much like how the regularity of scientific laws helps to spur contemporary advances in technology (Hu 2003). Additionally, Heaven is described as having its own impersonal logic that pays no regard to human affairs or intentions (*Xunzi*: 17/5). In a striking criticism of the superstitions of his time, Xunzi dismisses the efficacy of spiritual practices such as rain sacrifices, divination, and rites to save the sun from eclipses. As he pointedly states, ‘heaven does not stop winter because humans dislike the cold’ (17/22). This suggests that Xunzi’s understanding of heaven has close parallels to our contemporary conception of a disenchanting, scientifically rationalised nature.

Just as heaven can be interpreted in naturalistic terms, the same can be done for the rest of Xunzi’s cosmology, which includes earth, human life, and nonhuman life. When describing the characteristics of the earth, Xunzi focuses almost exclusively on its broadness, distance and measure (17/23). This suggests that ‘earth’ refers to the physical landscape. With heaven providing predictable weather conditions, the earth becomes a fertile foundation for life to germinate, to sustain themselves, and to grow (19/14). This explains the origin of human and nonhuman life, thus completing Xunzi’s overarching cosmology.

Typically, naturalistic interpretations imply that nature is devoid of ethical significance, making it unlikely for us to have an ethically meaningful relationship with heaven and earth. However, Xunzi rejects this conclusion. Instead, he envisages a triadic harmony between heaven, earth and humanity. According to Li (2014), Confucian harmony can be understood using the

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<sup>2</sup> All references to the *Xunzi* in brackets are to the chapter and line numbers found in *A Concordance to Hsun Tzu* 荀子引得 (1950). All quoted passages from *Xunzi* are my translations, unless indicated otherwise.

metaphor of a musical orchestra, where different instruments coordinate and mutually enhance one another, giving rise to a beautiful symphony. Through this metaphor, several key features of Confucian harmony can be identified. Firstly, it presupposes at least two parties that are different from each other. Their differences may create discord and tensions, but through coordination and interdependence, these parties can mutually enhance and transform one another, resulting in a harmonious relationship where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Secondly, harmony has different levels of scale and applicability. For example, harmony can describe the internal state of an individual, an interpersonal relationship, relationships between social groups, and even relationships between humanity and the universe. Lastly, harmony can describe the state of an existing relationship, but it is also normative in its prescription about what a relationship ought to be like. Harmonious relationships are never finalised, so it is by constantly renewing these relationships that parties are able to continue flourishing together.

These features of harmony can be identified in Xunzi's ecological vision:

Heaven and earth give birth to exemplary people, and exemplary people bring order to heaven and earth; exemplary people form a triadic partnership with heaven and earth. They are supervisors for the myriad things, and are fathers and mothers to the people. (*Xunzi*: 9/65-6)

In an ideal state, heaven, earth and humanity form a harmonious triad. Each party perform different roles that mutually enhance each other's capabilities to achieve a common end. Heaven and earth provide suitable environmental conditions for the creation and reproduction of living beings. In return, humanity has the duty to create order in the cosmos, and this duty

belongs to exemplary people (*junzi* 君子)<sup>3</sup> or sages, who are exemplary people *par excellence*. These are individuals who have achieved the pinnacle of moral self-cultivation, making them ideal candidates to lead, organise and care for human society. Sage kings, in particular, bear the responsibility of supervising and managing the natural world:

This is how the sage king operates: he observes heaven above, and applies this knowledge to the earth below. He organises everything between heaven and earth and enables the myriad things to flourish. (9/81)

The efforts of sage kings help to bring peace, order and prosperity to the universe itself, enabling nature to flourish. This grand vision is presented as one of the ethical goals of the triadic partnership between heaven, earth and humanity.

It is important to note that the *Xunzi* is a large text that was not specifically written as a thesis on environmental ethics. Hence, it may be subject to different interpretations as far as its implications for environmental philosophy are concerned. Between different readings of *Xunzi*, the main issue of contention lies in the status of triadic harmony: Whence does this ethical goal, and how should it be achieved? If heaven and earth are disenchanted natural phenomena, in what sense can we have a relationship with them at all? On Ivanhoe's reading, triadic harmony primarily serves human interests and well-being, which I refer to as *instrumental harmony*. Conversely, other scholars emphasise the relational nature of the Confucian self. Based on what I term *relational harmony*, this approach attributes a non-instrumental standing to heaven and

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<sup>3</sup> In order to avoid patriarchal implications, I follow Tan (2004) in translating *junzi* 君子 as 'exemplary people', as opposed to 'gentlemen' which is found in most translations of Confucian texts.

earth. In the next two sections, I will discuss these two interpretations of Xunzi and their respective drawbacks.

### 3. INSTRUMENTAL HARMONY

For Xunzi, harmony is achieved through the employment of rituals (礼) and *yi* (义)<sup>4</sup>, which are essential tools for producing the best possible society. Rituals generally refer to a range of practices that constitute a system of ‘cultural grammar’ (Li 2007). Just as grammar describes and prescribes appropriate linguistic expression, rituals constitute a framework that describes the typical behaviour of members of a community and prescribes normative standards of conduct that they ought to aspire to. Conversely, *yi* refers to the collection of social meanings, norms, ethical standards and roles, which determine the distribution of the privileges and responsibilities across society (Hutton 2014; Yang 2021)<sup>5</sup>. Together, rituals and *yi* shape social reality by prescribing appropriate meanings, practices, roles, and responsibilities that people ought to fulfil. Since rituals and *yi* are used interchangeably by Xunzi (Nivison 2000), I will refer to them simply as ‘rituals’ from this point on. Collectively, rituals constitute the Confucian Way, a moral order that guides how individuals should live and how the world should be managed (Ivanhoe 1991; Hutton 2014).

Rituals are central to Ivanhoe’s interpretation of Xunzi. In an important passage that describes the origin of rituals, Xunzi writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Like other contemporary interpreters of Xunzi, I leave *yi* untranslated due to the difficulty in finding a suitable English word that accurately reflects its intended meaning.

<sup>5</sup> *Yi* is typically translated as norms, roles, and ethical standards. This is recently challenged by Yang (2021) who claims that *yi* refers to the ‘meaning-bestowing’ ability of humans to manipulate abstract meanings, symbols and linguistic names. Through collective agreement, the meaning of names can become customary and take on a normative force about how they ought to mean, which shapes our understanding of social reality, which includes norms, ethical standards and social roles. This is an important debate, but it is too complex to discuss this within the limits of this paper. For my purposes, I focus only on the function of *yi* in shaping social reality.

Humans are born having desires, but when they are unable to obtain the objects of their desire, they cannot stop seeking these objects. Without any measure or limit to their seeking, they cannot help but to struggle with one another; struggling leads to chaos, and chaos leads to impoverishment. The sage kings hated such chaos, so they established rituals and *yi* in order to divide things, to nurture people's desires, and to satisfy their seeking. The sage kings caused desires never to exhaust goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires. Desires and material goods support each other and prosper, and this is how rituals originated. (*Xunzi*: 19/1-3)

In this passage, Xunzi depicts how conflicting desires and human self-centredness result in a Hobbesian state of nature, which is marked by violence, uncertainty and poverty. However, unlike Hobbes, Xunzi does not see the need to restrain human desires through the use of force. Instead, he seeks to transform the character of people through rituals, which they should grow to love (Wong 2000: 136). According to Ivanhoe (1991), Xunzi views rituals as 'intrinsically valuable practices worthy of profound respect and complete devotion' (310). Indeed, the rituals and the Way are considered ends in themselves. Since the sage kings have already perfected the rituals through a long process of experimentation and reflection, Xunzi believes that it is unnecessary for them to be modified. Simply by devoting themselves to carrying out what rituals prescribe, human desires can be transformed and cultivated towards moral ends (320). The result is a 'happy symmetry' where human needs are balanced harmoniously with the ability of nature to provide for these needs (315).

As we have already seen, the role of the sage kings is crucial for Xunzi's ecological vision. Heaven and earth are the source of life, but only the sage kings are able to understand the Way



and bring order to heaven, earth and nonhuman life through the successful implementation of appropriate rituals (*Xunzi*: 9/64). Since the well-being of nonhumans and the environment is dependent on the actions of human sage kings, both Ivanhoe (1998) and Li (2014) argue that Xunzi is committed to weak anthropocentrism. Ivanhoe's interpretation is reinforced by Xunzi's claims about human superiority and the instrumental value of nonhuman life, which are typical features of anthropocentrism (Callicott 1984: 299). As a case in point, Xunzi asserts that the ability to make social distinctions is a unique human characteristic that no other animal possesses, and it makes humans the most precious beings in the natural world (*Xunzi*: 9/70). This ability enables humans to form harmonious communities through clearly assigned social roles and divisions of labour. The resulting efficiency empowers humanity to 'order themselves with the four seasons, control the myriad things, and bring benefit to all under heaven' (9/72).

This reading implies that humans have the right to control and treat nonhuman lives instrumentally. Indeed, Xunzi claims that nonhuman lives are instrumentally valuable as sources of food and symbols of authority. For example, fine goods such as tiger and leopard skins should be used to 'decorate good and worthy men' (9/61-2). Additionally, sage kings should use 'the myriad things as resources, which are his means to nourish the people' (9/54). Xunzi's focus on instrumental value extends even to nature itself. For example, he suggests that when triadic harmony is achieved, people will be able to harness seasonal changes and the fertility of the land to maximise the production of natural resources. Instrumentalising heaven's weather patterns and earth's fertility results in an utopian state filled with riches and material goods, where people are able to fulfil all their needs and desires (10/66-7). If so, the consequence of triadic harmony appears to be the maximising of human well-being by regulating the manner in which society exploits heaven, earth, and nonhuman lives for natural resources.

Since the happy symmetry between human needs and natural resources appears to be instrumentally valuable for human interests, this approach can be appropriately characterised as a form of *instrumental harmony*. Instrumental harmony recognises the interdependence between humanity and nature. Just as humans rely on natural resources to fulfil their needs and desires, the flourishing of the natural world depends on the ability of humans to regulate both themselves and nature. This can be done by limiting the amount of resources we use and the kind of activities we carry out, while promoting environmentally friendly practices through which we can fulfil our ethical responsibility to ensure that nature flourishes (Ivanhoe 1991: 70-1).

Ivanhoe's interpretation of Xunzi demonstrates that there are good reasons to read Xunzi as advocating weak anthropocentrism. However, this approach is unable to accommodate important features of Xunzi's triadic harmony. In the first place, the implication that all things can potentially be exploited for the sake of human well-being cannot be reconciled with Xunzi's assertion that heaven and earth are partners with exemplary people. Instrumental harmony is consistent with a purely naturalistic understanding of heaven and earth, which limits their roles to providing suitable environmental conditions for the production of material goods to fulfil human desires (Ivanhoe 1991, p.315). In this light, any talk of partnership with nature appears to be a thinly veiled metaphor for the human exploitation of nature, which forecloses the possibility of an ethical partnership with heaven and earth. Instead, Ivanhoe traces all ethical obligations to the Way, which he presents as an object of religious reverence that 'describes the way the universe ought to be' (317). This seems to beg the question as to how the ethical goals described in the Way can be grounded and justified philosophically.

In the same vein, it is difficult to see how instrumental harmony coheres with the sage king's ethical obligation to ensure that nature flourishes. On Ivanhoe's reading, it is certainly true that humanity flourishes. Rituals regulate how useful resources are taken from the environment, so perhaps anything that has instrumental value to human well-being can also potentially flourish. However, what about aspects of the natural world that has no apparent instrumental value? It seems quite plausible for humans to attain instrumental harmony while systematically allowing all forms of life that cannot be used as resources to be eliminated. This can hardly be called 'flourishing'. It remains to be seen how the obligation to ensure that nature flourishes can be justified and reconciled with Xunzi's view of triadic harmony, which calls for a more expansive interpretation of our partnership with heaven and earth.

To summarise, instrumental harmony is about finding a balance between environmental resources and human needs. However, as I have argued, instrumental harmony is inconsistent with the ethical goals of triadic harmony and with Xunzi's ideal of a partnership between heaven, earth and humanity. In the next section, I will discuss an alternate reading based on the concept of relational harmony.

#### 4. RELATIONAL HARMONY

According to Hourdequin & Wong (2005), one central feature of Confucianism is the recognition that the self is relational in nature. Not only is our character influenced by our relationships with others, our sense of self is also constituted by these relationships (21). Additionally, rituals provide a normative framework that prescribes the kind of relationships we should cultivate and the kind of people we ought to become (23). This implies that we can

only develop a virtuous character when we are able to cultivate the right kinds of relationships with others as prescribed by the rituals.

These claims can be illustrated by Xunzi's belief that people can surpass their selfish desires to become exemplary people if they have exemplary models and teachers to guide them, which he claims to be far more efficacious for moral cultivation than merely studying and practicing rituals (*Xunzi*: 1/34). Nevertheless, rituals help to regulate teacher-student relationships: for example, there are professional boundaries between students and teachers that should not be crossed. For Xunzi, rituals also set normative standards that each party ought to fulfil. Students should put in the effort to learn from their teachers, to emulate their behaviour, and subsequently, to embody their values, or else it would be impossible for teachers to teach effectively. Conversely, teachers must adapt their lessons to fit their students' personalities (1/43) in order for students to learn effectively. Hence, both parties co-constitute each other's identities. They can become good students *qua* student and good teachers *qua* teacher when they enter into the right kind of relationships with one another by performing their respective roles well. This helps to illustrate what I will subsequently refer to as *relational harmony*: a relationship has relational harmony when both parties positively co-constitute each other based on a normative framework.

According to Hourdequin & Wong (2005), relational harmony can be extended to our relationships with the natural environment and the nonhuman. In this context, we are shaped by the places and nonhuman beings that constitute a valuable aspect of our identity. For instance, a city-dweller whose way of life is made possible by ecosystem services from a nearby forest should consider this forest to be constitutive of her personhood. Similarly, a rock climber who regularly climbs Yosemite would treat the national park as a second home since it is constitutive

of her identity. The latter example, in particular, suggests that relational harmony provides a normative basis for attributing non-instrumental value to the world around us, since Yosemite has no instrumental value to the rock climber. Hence, this explains why we have ethical obligations towards nature. To the extent that humans consider ourselves to be intrinsically valuable, the environment must also be considered valuable as a necessary condition for us to have value as human beings (27). Indeed, Confucians can theoretically extend the scope of their relationships to make the whole world their home, as long as they are prepared to take on the responsibilities that accompany these relationships (32).

This is further developed by Nuyen (2011), who argues that relational harmony enables us to attribute what he calls inherent value to nature as a whole. If nature has *inherent value*, it has an independent moral standing that humans attribute to nature. This is consistent with anthropocentric assumptions that are generally shared by many Confucian thinkers, such as their epistemological claim that humans are the only source of ethical values (563). Unlike the concept of intrinsic value that is commonly employed within environmental philosophy, inherent value does not entail a metaphysical commitment to value realism, which problematically assumes that ecosystems and nonhuman species can be primary bearers of ethical values (Donner 2002: 103), while retaining the explanatory power to demonstrate why people experience feelings of respect, awe and love towards the natural world and nonhuman beings (McShane 2007). Moreover, the concept of inherent value creates situations where human interests must be sacrificed in order to protect the interests of the environment (Nuyen 2011: 561). Such an ethic is centred on respect for the moral standing of nature and the recognition of the harmful consequences of human self-centredness.

According to Nuyen, the triadic partnership that Xunzi envisages between heaven, earth and humanity provides strong evidence that nature has inherent value rather than intrinsic value. He interprets this to mean that ‘the human identity emerges from our connections with heaven and earth’ (562). In other words, our value as morally cultivated individuals is contingent on us attaining relational harmony with the natural environment. This requires us to recognise the inherent value of nature and to protect it, not merely because this is beneficial for human well-being, but because it is a necessary aspect of moral cultivation and the Confucian Way. A relevant passage in the *Xunzi* reads as follows:

If the mountains and forests are despoiled, the birds and beasts will abandon them. If the state and family lose their proper governance, the well-bred men and common people will abandon them. Without land, there is nowhere for people to dwell securely. Without people, the land will not be guarded. Without the Way and the proper models, people will not come. Without exemplary people, the Way will not be upheld. (14/9-10)

Here, Xunzi points out some of the problematic consequences of environmental degradation. Aside from the problems that environmental degradation causes for humans, its ultimate cost lies in the Way not being upheld. Like Ivanhoe, Nuyen (2011) asserts that the Way is not an anthropocentric ethics of human creation since ‘the basis of the Way’s value lies in the Way itself’ (563). Without the Way, there will be no exemplary people to bring order to the chaotic world, and no means for nature to flourish. This seems to support Nuyen’s interpretation that relational harmony can serve as a basis for an environmental ethics that is non-instrumental, even if nonhuman lives and aspects of nature are sometimes instrumentalised for the purpose of promoting human well-being.

However, there are two problems with this approach. Firstly, the Confucian relational self is typically discussed in terms of social relations to other human beings rather than to nonhuman beings. Our ethical obligations to our family, for example, is rooted in the nature of our social relationships with family members. Since the theories presented by Hourdequin and Wong (2005) and Nuyen (2011) are consistent with the idea that heaven and earth are naturalistic entities, the concept of relational harmony presupposes the possibility of a relationship with naturalistic heaven and earth in order to generate ethical obligations towards nature. This makes sense only if a relationship with nature is analogous to relationships with other human beings, which form the basis of obligations towards others. However, it is questionable whether the analogy can be maintained. As illustrated by the example of student-teacher relationships, relational harmony is established when both parties react and respond to one another in accordance with rituals. Since nature does not have conscious agency, it is difficult to see how relational harmony can be extended to our relationships with heaven and earth. Much like my earlier critique of Ivanhoe, an ethical relationship with nature seems implausible, which brings into question whether Xunzi's triadic relationship should be understood in naturalistic terms.

Secondly, it is unclear whether merely recognising the inherent value of the environment is sufficient as a basis for ethical obligations to ensure that nature flourishes. For Nuyen (2011), if nature has inherent value, then it has a non-instrumental moral standing that makes it necessary for nature to 'be preserved at some cost to human interest' (554). This may involve efforts at rewilding or the maintenance of agricultural landscapes (Deliège 2016). More generally, it requires us to avoid taking actions that are harmful towards nature and to preserve its existing state in good condition. However, Xunzi seems to understand 'flourishing' in a stronger sense. In the context of human society, society flourishes when it is able to generate

so much wealth and agricultural yields that ‘the surplus will pile up like hills and mountains’ to the point that some needs to be burned for the lack of storage space (*Xunzi*: 10/67). If we were to apply the same standard of flourishing to nature, what Xunzi might have imagined is a world where humans actively took action to ensure that each ecosystem has optimal environmental conditions for growth and an ideal balance in its biodiversity. In addition, he also advocates strict regulations against harvesting natural resources before their reproduction cycle is completed. For instance, he asserts that ‘when the grasses and trees are flowering and abundant, axes and hatchets are not to enter the mountains and forests, so as not to cut short their life, and not to break off their growth’ (9/76). This suggests that ‘flourishing’ involves efforts to ensure that all living things are able to reproduce as much as possible while maintaining a healthy ecosystem. While this approach may be costly in the short term, Xunzi believes that it will be beneficial to human interests in the long term.

If I am correct, Xunzi’s ecological vision requires people to actively benefit the environment and that enhances its value. In contrast, relational harmony does not seem to motivate actions beyond respecting and preservation of the environment’s inherent value. This may indeed be effective in encouraging people to prevent or to avoid environmentally harmful actions, but it does not oblige them to take actions that are environmentally beneficial to the extent of capturing Xunzi’s idea of ‘flourishing’. Instead, it is quite possible for most people to remain environmentally neutral in their attitudes by merely doing no harm. In today’s world, such attitudes are no longer sufficient to avert the crisis of climate change, which requires us to actively change our consumption patterns – not just to avoid harming the environment, but to reverse the harmful effects inflicted over the past few centuries. This makes it far from convincing that merely respecting the inherent value of the natural world is enough to justify



strong moral obligations to ensure that nature flourishes, which is the ethical goal of Xunzi's triadic harmony.

To sum it up, relational harmony allows us to attribute inherent value to nature, which provides a basis for non-instrumental obligations towards the environment. However, it does not sufficiently support ethical obligations to ensure that nature flourishes. To address these problems, I will develop and defend the concept of *reciprocal harmony* in the next section.

## 5. RECIPROCAL HARMONY

As we have seen, instrumental harmony aims to achieve a balance between human desires and the production of natural resources. Conversely, relational harmony provides a basis for recognising and protecting the inherent value of nature. There are two issues raised by our discussion and critique of these concepts. The first is that they both rely implicitly on a naturalistic interpretation of heaven and earth, which creates difficulties in understanding how exemplary people can have partnerships with heaven and earth on Xunzi's account. The second is that both fall short of providing a normative basis for humanity's obligation towards to ensure that nature flourishes.

### *a. A non-naturalistic interpretation of triadic harmony*

I will first address how the triadic partnership can be interpreted. On Xunzi's account, ethical obligations towards nature are generated when exemplary people are partners with heaven and earth, but it is difficult to imagine how we can have a meaningful ethical relationship with weather patterns or laws of nature. Instead, it is important to recognise that, like other Chinese

thinkers, there is a spiritual element to Xunzi's thought. As several interpreters have argued, Xunzi's heaven has two referents. Not only does it refer to natural forces, it also refers to a spiritual deity that performs metaphysical and normative roles (Eno 1990; Machle 1993).

On the one hand, heaven is the metaphysical source of all things. For Xunzi, the defining characteristic of heaven is the regularity of the laws of nature, the constellations and seasonal weather patterns. This regularity sets the cosmic stage leading to the creation of the earth, the myriad life forms, and humans, which are 'heaven's accomplishments' (*Xunzi*: 17/10). However, heaven has no direct influence over its creations, much like an 'absentee god' (Goldin 1999: 51). As Goldin points out, Xunzi shares significant similarities with eighteenth century deists such as Matthew Tindal and David Hume, who also believe that god plays no active role in terrestrial affairs. Instead, heaven bestows the human mind with the faculties needed to fulfil the teleological goal of 'keeping heaven's accomplishments whole' (*Xunzi*: 17/15). By putting in the effort to cultivate their minds, anyone can realise their full potential as sages by attaining 'heaven-like' qualities (Eno 1990: 161).

On the other hand, heaven is also the source of ethical values. According to Xunzi, sage kings would 'observe heaven above, and apply this knowledge to the earth below' (*Xunzi*: 9/81). By understanding heaven, sages and exemplary people gain moral knowledge about the values they should embody and the ethical goals that they ought to achieve. Where values are concerned, the regularity demonstrated by heaven provides a normative ideal to be emulated by exemplary people, who should maintain a similar regularity of virtuous character (Eno 1990, p.164). Heaven's ethical goals, in contrast, are reflected in the design of rituals and directly accord with the Way (Machle 1993: 177). On this reading, rituals are intrinsically valuable practices to Xunzi which are designed by sages using heaven as an ethical model. Properly crafted and

implemented, rituals ‘complete the order by which people are to live together in harmony and unity’ (*Xunzi*: 19/107). In that sense, rituals are the means by which the ethical goal of heaven to harmonise the world can be achieved. Together, these points lend support to my twofold interpretation of Xunzi’s heaven, which is both a natural entity and a spiritual deity that prescribes ethical goals.

This interpretation of heaven allows us to better conceptualise how we can be partners with heaven and earth. On my reading, it is possible to have an ethical partnership with heaven in the spiritual sense, while having a non-moral working partnership with heaven and earth in the naturalistic sense. The former provides us with ethical goals that we are obliged to fulfil, whereas the latter is about regulating, organising and controlling the natural environment to achieve these ethical goals. Hence, this sense of partnership helps to capture the normative dimension of our obligation to ensure that nature flourishes, while also describing the means by which this obligation can be fulfilled.

*b. Existential debt and our obligations to nature*

Next, I will explain how a normative basis can be provided for our ethical obligation to ensure that nature flourishes. In my view, this obligation can be grounded by a principle of reciprocity, which we find in the idea of filial piety.

Filial piety is fundamental to Confucian ethics due to the role that families play in the upbringing of their children. For Confucians, our values, behaviours and characters are shaped by our familial environment; our understanding of social hierarchy, duties and roles are informed by our experiences within the family; our moral beliefs and virtuous dispositions are

also cultivated by parents and other familial figures (Sarkissian 2010). Due to the debt that children owe towards their parents for their upbringing, filial piety is emphasised heavily. Children are expected to reciprocate and repay them as a moral obligation. For example, Mencius claims that if King Shun's father is prosecuted for murder, King Shun should abdicate the throne, abandon his responsibilities towards the people, and go into hiding together with his father to protect him (*Mengzi*: 7A35)<sup>6</sup>. If Mencius is right, the obligations of filial piety appear to override all others, which potentially includes the political responsibilities of a king and the ethical duties imposed by virtues such as benevolence (Liu 2009).

Although Xunzi does acknowledge the importance of filial piety, he does not emphasise it to the extent that Mencius does. To understand why, we must return to his description of exemplary people as mothers and fathers to the people (*Xunzi*: 9/65-6). As a metaphor, this suggests that when society is ruled by exemplary people, society takes on the characteristics of a harmonious family. Just as children owe an *existential debt* to parents for giving birth to them and for nurturing them into the kind of people they are (Sommers 1986), citizens also owe a similar debt towards political leaders for providing security and well-being to the people, for organising them within a social hierarchy, and for cultivating their normative behaviour through rituals, which are all necessary conditions for a good life. In both cases, children and citizens are both expected to reciprocate as part of their obligations towards their parents and superiors respectively. One example of reciprocation can be found in the funeral ritual. Xunzi argues that when people in positions of power pass away, a funeral ritual is a way to honour their contributions – the higher the position, the greater the honour, the more elaborate the ritual. In some cases, funeral rites require that a person treat her superior with more honour than some

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<sup>6</sup> All references to the *Mengzi* in brackets are to the chapter and line numbers found in *A Concordance to the Mengzi* 孟子逐字索引 (1995).

members of her own family. For instance, Xunzi prescribes a period of nine months of mourning for a mother, but insists on three years of mourning for a lord (*Xunzi*: 19/111-2). Hence, filial piety and political loyalty are interchangeable sources of moral duties, which are grounded in the need to reciprocate and repay one's existential debt.

These examples of reciprocity point towards a meaning that is significantly different from the idea of reciprocity that we find within Rawls's political philosophy. For Rawls (1999), a well-ordered society is designed to promote everyone's interests and is characterised by the mutual expectation that every citizen accepts and upholds a shared conception of justice (4). Here, reciprocity is reduced to the act of cooperation between free and equal citizens for the sake of mutual benefit (88). In contrast, Xunzi's understanding of reciprocity is predicated on the idea of existential debt towards heaven. As pointed out during our discussion of relational harmony, we are shaped by our social and natural environment, without which we would not be the kind of people we are. We also owe our existence to our family, without whom we would not even be alive, as well as to capable political leaders, without whom our families would lack the capacity to live a good life. As a matter of principle, we feel morally obligated to reciprocate towards those who made our lives liveable. This is manifested in ways that are dependent on context. Children reciprocate by being caretakers to their elderly parents; citizens reciprocate by honouring political leaders and keeping their legacy intact; soldiers reciprocate by taking a bullet for those who have saved their lives. Generally, then, reciprocal harmony is achieved when we fulfil moral obligations towards those to whom we owe existential debts by contributing to their lives in some meaningful way.

In the context of nature, humanity owes an existential debt towards heaven and earth that we are obligated to repay. This is implicitly expressed within a passage that I earlier quoted, where Xunzi explains the concept of triadic harmony. I now quote a more extensive version of it:

Heaven and earth are the origin of life; ritual and *yi* are the origin of organisation; exemplary people are the origins of rituals and *yi*. Practising them, cultivating oneself through them, and regarding them fondly – these are origins of an exemplary person. Thus, heaven and earth give birth to the exemplary person, and the exemplary person brings order to Heaven and Earth. The exemplary person is a partner to heaven and earth, a supervisor for the myriad things, and the mother and father to the people. Without exemplary people, heaven and earth would not be ordered, and ritual and *yi* would lack unity. Above, there would not be lords or teachers, and below, there would neither be fathers and sons, nor husbands and wives. Such a state is called chaotic. (*Xunzi*: 9/64-6)

Spiritually, heaven provides the metaphysical basis for the universe as we know it, and the ethical basis for rituals that bring about harmony within nature and human society; naturalistically, heaven and earth provide the suitable environmental conditions that allow life to be born. Human and nonhuman life cannot possibly exist without them. In that case, all lifeforms owe existential debt to heaven and earth. Specifically, we owe existential debts to spiritual heaven, which can be extended to naturalistic heaven and earth in a derivative way since natural heaven and earth have their metaphysical origins in spiritual heaven. This allows us to speak coherently of existential debts towards heaven and earth. Where humans are concerned, spiritual heaven also provides us with the ability to make social distinctions, which allows us to organise ourselves according to hierarchy and to thrive as an orderly society. Hence,

not only do we owe our biological existence, but also the abilities that are constitutive of our human condition, as existential debts towards heaven. *Contra* Ivanhoe (1998), the roles that heaven performs within Xunzi's cosmology suggest that Xunzi should not be read as advocating weak anthropocentrism. Instead, Xunzi's non-anthropocentrism focuses on heaven as the source of ethical value that humans should strive to emulate.

How should our existential debts be repaid? Given that we have been endowed with the ability to create order, we should use them to bring order to the universe itself. By enabling the creations of heaven to flourish, we contribute to the fulfilment of heaven's teleological goal in a meaningful way, which is something that heaven is unable to accomplish directly. Through this process, we attain reciprocal harmony with heaven and earth. This requires us to cultivate ourselves to become exemplary people and sages, and to take action to change the world around us for the better. This process is described by Xunzi as follows:

The one called a great sage is one whose understanding comprehends the great Way, who responds to changes appropriately without cease, and who correctly distinguishes among the inborn dispositions and natures of the myriad things. The great Way is that by which he changes, transforms, employs and perfects the myriad things. (Xunzi: 31/17-18)

To become sage-like, there are three conditions that we must fulfilled. Firstly, we need to acquire moral knowledge through the Way and to understand what the ethical goals of heaven are. Secondly, we must also be capable of realising these goals by adapting to the contemporary context. Lastly, we need to have scientific understanding of the world around us. Together, these qualities empower us to enable nature to flourish.

According to Xunzi, this can be achieved through conservation and ecosystem management are crucial. By drawing on our scientific knowledge of the environment, we can protect nature from excessive exploitation by humans, especially during seasonal periods that are important for plant or animal reproduction. For example, he suggests that ‘when the turtles, crocodiles, fishes and eels are pregnant and giving birth, nets and poisons should not be allowed into the marshes, neither to end their lives, nor to stop their growth’ (9/78). However, helping nature to flourish should not come at the expense of human society. As Ivanhoe points out, Xunzi often emphasises the instrumental value that the myriad things have for human society. Clearly, Xunzi does not preclude the use of natural resources to provide for the material needs and desires of people, which is also an ethical obligation of the sage kings. As with contemporary times, the goal of protecting nature and the goal of promoting human well-being seem to contradict each other. It is a conflict that modern society often resolved by ignoring the former and focusing on the latter.

In my view, reciprocal harmony can be used to show how conflicts between these goals might be solved in a way that allows both nature and human society to flourish together. For reciprocal harmony to be achieved, our existential debts to the entities that make our lives liveable must be repaid in a meaningful way. We can have existential debts towards heaven and earth since, in an abstract sense, they are the origin of all life. More concretely, these debts can be extended to the natural environment around us. We depend, for example, on ecosystem services and natural resources that the environment supplies, which enable us to live fulfilling lives. In return, we ought to reciprocate by giving back and benefitting the environment in a significant way.



For the sake of illustration, let us focus on the case of Singapore. Many Singaporeans live on reclaimed land, which is built using sand taken from neighbouring countries such as Indonesia (Jamieson 2017). On my reading, they have existential debts towards islands in Indonesia, which have been destroyed for the sake of sand used in land reclamation efforts. In that case, they ought to find ways of giving back in ways that leverage on their human capabilities within their social context, perhaps by spreading awareness of the problems created by sand mining in other countries, or by campaigning against further land reclamation efforts. This would allow Singaporeans to achieve reciprocal harmony with one aspect of nature. Hence, while it is acceptable to extract natural resources for the sake of human well-being, such actions generate moral obligations to benefit the relevant aspect of the environment that we ought to fulfil in order to achieve reciprocal harmony.

In the remaining space, I will consider an objection to the theory that I have sketched here, which concerns the spiritual interpretation of heaven. The concept of reciprocal harmony presupposes that we can have existential debt towards heaven, which I have interpreted as a spiritual deity. However, if one rejects the existence of spiritual deities, or the Confucian framework in general, does that mean that reciprocal harmony is no longer relevant as an environmental ethic? In my view, that is not the case, since my interpretation of Xunzi's heaven involves few metaphysical claims. The main presupposition that reciprocal harmony is built upon is the idea that we can treat heaven as an entity that we can have an ethical relationship and existential debts to. But this is not particularly outlandish: Aldo Leopold (1989), for example, argued that humans should be considered citizens of the land in which they live, which entails that they respect the soil, plants and animals as fellow members of the same community. Reciprocal harmony can potentially be integrated into Leopold's land ethic as a normative basis for our obligations to the environment. This suggests that even if one rejects the existence of a

spiritual heaven, or the Confucian framework of partnerships with heaven and earth, it is still possible for reciprocal harmony to be integrated coherently into other philosophical frameworks that allow for ethical relationships with the natural world.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Xunzi's philosophy provides a rich resource for conceptualising the relationship between humans and nature using the vocabulary of harmony. In the concepts of instrumental harmony, relational harmony and reciprocal harmony, I have identified three possible ways of interpreting what Xunzi meant by a triadic partnership between heaven, earth and humanity. These approaches demonstrate that Confucian environmental ethics is not restricted to anthropocentrism as some may have assumed. In particular, I have developed the concept of reciprocal harmony through my interpretation of Xunzi. This can be used as a normative basis for an environmental ethic that obliges us to actively benefit the environment as a form of moral reciprocation, in return for natural resources that are used to increase human well-being, thereby enabling humans and nature to flourish together in harmony.

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