COSMOPOLITAN CIVILITY

GLOBAL-LOCAL REFLECTIONS
WITH FRED DALLMAYR

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Chapter 4

Toward a Mega-Humanism
Confucian Triadic Harmony for the Anthropocene

CHENYANG LI

. . . nature is not just an “environment,” but is part of us and penetrates into our being. What this penetration brings into view is the broader web of things, the infinitely rich and varied source of all beings—a source for which we have no definition or agreed upon name but which gratitude impels us to cherish and to venerate.

—Dallmayr 2017: 89

Humanism as a philosophy takes humanity as the foundation of value configuration; it places paramount value on human beings as its point of departure. Humanism in this broad sense hardly needs to be promoted today. As Charles Taylor has famously characterized, we live in a “secular age.” In today’s largely disenchanted world, humanity is already placed at the center of the universe, for better or for worse. Even the vast majority of the religious population openly or tacitly subscribes to some form of humanism. We live in a “new epoch,” however. A new epoch calls for a new form of humanism. In this chapter, I argue first that, as we develop a new humanism that promotes well-being, prosperity, and harmony for

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all, two defining themes must be integrated. The first is that this new humanism must reflect our response to the challenge of the Anthropocene. A new humanism is already outdated if it fails to understand fully and to address effectively today’s environmental challenges (and more). The epoch of the Anthropocene calls for a “mega-humanism.” The second theme is that it must have cultural roots. A humanism, even though with a universal character, is without vitality if it is cut off from cultural traditions. This chapter presents a Confucian perspective on a new humanism that would integrate the two essential themes.

The Anthropocene announces that the human species is now the dominant force in shaping the Earth. As observed by Will Steffen and his colleagues, the “human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system.”¹ They claim, in addition to the carbon cycle as manifested in climate change, that human beings now are:

(1) significantly altering several other biogeochemical, or element cycles, such as nitrogen, phosphorus and sulphur, that are fundamental to life on the Earth;

(2) strongly modifying the terrestrial water cycle by intercepting river flow from uplands to the sea and, through land-cover change, altering the water vapor flow from the land to the atmosphere; and

(3) likely driving the sixth major extinction event in Earth history.² Steffen and his colleagues write that, “[t]aken together, these trends are strong evidence that humankind, our own species, has become so large and active that it now rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system.”³ We should note that the situation is not about merely an expansion of the human impact on nature. It signifies not only a quantitative but a qualitative shift in that impact.

 Scientists have not reached an agreement on the appropriateness of the concept of a new epoch and, if appropriate, on its starting point. The disagreements, however, are about stratigraphy rather than about the fact of amplified human impact on nature.⁴ There is little doubt that human beings have become a global geophysical force and are capable of fundamentally
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transforming the Earth. As 1995 Nobel Laureate Paul J. Crutzen and his coauthor, C. Schwägerl, put it, “It’s no longer us against ‘Nature.’ Instead, it’s we who decide what nature is and what it will be.” The Anthropocene reflects a fundamental fact of our time. We are in an epoch that is profoundly different from previous times. While almost all previous versions of humanism were developed for the Holocene, they are behind us now. In our epoch, any form of meaningful humanism must take into account the decisive impact of human activities on the environment and on ourselves.

The idea of the Anthropocene is not only about environmental issues; it is for a new geologic epoch. Moreover, it is a new worldview, a new philosophy. Morally speaking, increased human impact comes with increased responsibility. Not only are pre-humanistic views that rely exclusively on divine protection no longer viable, but extreme anthropocentric views that take all non-human existents merely in their instrumental values to serve narrowly defined human interests have also become senseless. Conversely, the central idea of the Anthropocene flies in the face of extreme biocentric or deep-ecological views that place humanity at the level of a mere thing among all other things (or a mere species among other species) in the world. A new humanism appropriate for the Anthropocene must guard itself on both fronts. Humanity is not merely an ordinary piece in the puzzle of mapping the universe, nor is it the absolute center. A new humanism needs to find its balance in view of the Anthropocene.

Furthermore, no form of humanism is viable without cultural roots. The report of UNESCO’s 2011 “High Panel on Peace and Dialogue among Cultures” on “Towards a new humanism and reconciled globalization” declared that the purpose of a new humanism is to “create a climate of empathy, belonging and understanding, along with the idea that progress with respect to human rights is never definitive and requires a constant effort of adaptation to the challenges of modernity.” This understanding of the new humanism emphasizes a common humanity beyond particular cultural traditions, with a goal of building “a single human community.” Such a goal is worthwhile and admirable. However, such a vision for a humanism has yet to take into account the new epoch of the Anthropocene. As such, it would have been outdated even before it was constructed.

A single human community at the global level cannot exist without cultural foundations, for at least three reasons. First, the full realization of the individual requires local communities as well as a global human community. We can travel around the world, but ultimately we need a home to return to. Any form of a viable new humanism must have its cultural
roots. Second, a new humanism cannot be developed successfully without using various cultural resources. A viable new philosophy does not appear suddenly in a vacuum. It has to be established on previous explorations, of both success and failure. Third and finally, as we develop a new world philosophy of humanism, we cannot ignore the very fact that, even considering world secularization, the vast majority of the world's population is nevertheless religious. The “disenchanted world” of our “secular age” is not totally disenchanted. Religion is at the center of most world cultural traditions. Western humanism since early on, especially during the Renaissance, has had an intricate relationship with the Christian church. We cannot ask the world population to leave their gods or spiritualities behind to embrace a new humanism. For these and other reasons, a viable and effective new humanism must be rooted deeply in cultural traditions of the world.

Therefore, if successful, we should have a common new humanism that can be articulated and justified from various cultural perspectives. This new humanism does not depend on the hegemony of any single cultural tradition, nor does anyone have to embrace a particular cultural tradition or all cultures to come on board. Yet this new humanism does rely on a foundation provided collectively by world cultures. Perhaps John Rawls's proposal of “overlapping consensus” is relevant here. Rawls is concerned with the issue of how a multicultural society can produce public reason to serve as the foundation for justice for all. He proposes that a multicultural society where people subscribe to fundamentally different “comprehensive doctrines” may nevertheless agree on principles of justice that are justified respectively in the metaphysics of each cultural tradition. He writes, “Comprehensive doctrines of all kinds—religious, philosophical, and moral—belong to what we may call the “background culture” of civil society. This is the culture of the social, not political.” Rawls is concerned with the political in society. For political arrangements, people can collaborate without sharing the same comprehensive doctrine in their background culture.

Our challenge of establishing a new humanism goes deeper than the political. In an important sense, humanism is a cultural tradition. But it is a cultural tradition that does not belong exclusively to any particular historical cultural tradition. It can be shared by people of different comprehensive doctrines. Our new humanism is not only a moral philosophy; it is also a metaphysical theory. Such a metaphysical theory can be a fundamental philosophy to be shared by people of varied cultural traditions. People of Hindu traditions, for example, can subscribe and contribute to such a humanism without having to accept the Confucian philosophy of triadic
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harmony; the rich Vedic cultural traditions can provide adequate resources in shaping and in support of the humanism of the Anthropocene. Therefore, in an important way, my proposal goes one step further than Rawls in that it requires us to tap into the comprehensive doctrines of various cultural traditions.

The new humanism must resonate with various cultural traditions and gather synergy from every direction. Of course, such a new humanism is not yet available in a ready-made, completed form within any cultural tradition. It has to be generated. Its generation involves a two-way process. On the one hand, various cultural traditions provide resources for the construction of a new humanism. On the other hand, this process also provides opportunities for the self-examination of various cultural traditions, for them to adjust, reform, and rearticulate their value configurations. Advocates of the new humanism must engage themselves on both fronts to advance such a noble cause.

I believe, on both accounts of the Anthropocene and cultural roots, Confucian philosophy has important resources to contribute to a new humanism. At the center of Confucian philosophy is the ideal of harmony. Over a long history, this notion has been interpreted and misinterpreted in various ways. Its contemporary encounters in China have added at least as much to its misfortune as to its fortune. It is therefore worthwhile to reiterate that, philosophically, Confucian harmony is not mere agreement, conformity, or even superficial stability. It is instead a dynamic generative process in which the prospect of every party getting its due is optimized. Harmony can be achieved at various levels of existence, in an individual, a group, society, and the entire world.

At its fundamental level is the Confucian holistic philosophy of the triadic harmony of heaven, earth, and humanity. Together these three elements form a unity of grand harmony. In the Confucian scheme of harmony, each of these three has its proper role and function; each promotes, and is promoted by, the others; and each contributes to the overall harmony of the universe. This ideal of the unity of heaven, earth, and humanity can be traced back to the Confucian classic Book of Change. The Xici Commentary of the text states, “There is the way of heaven; there is the way of earth; and there is the way of humanity.” These three ways are not separate, with each on its own path; they work together and provide the framework for cosmic harmony. The idea is to integrate these elements (jian san cai 兼三才) without collapsing them into one single thing. This view is not anthropocentric because it does not hold that only humanity has intrinsic
worth; nor does it claim that all other things in the world exist merely to serve human needs. Confucian harmony philosophy accords everything its own worth and recognizes its legitimate place in the universe. It is not antihumanistic either because it rejects the view that in the biotic community humans merely hold a status equal to nonhuman members. It gives humanity a special place in the universe. The mission of humanity is to work with heaven and earth in achieving harmony in the world. We can label this Confucian notion of harmony “triadic harmony.”

Within this triadic harmony of heaven, earth, and humanity, “earth” stands for Mother Earth, on which we humans depend for our lives; the earth is a living entity with a life of its own. “Humanity” is more than a mere biological species, but the humankind with moral consciousness. In this view, human beings are not just one of numerous species on earth; we are a unique kind of being, endowed not only with superior capacities but also with a special mission to contribute in a unique way toward the harmony of the cosmos. Xunzi, a key Confucian thinker during the classic period, compared human beings with other things in the world and argued for the fundamental distinction of humanity:

Water and fire have vital energy (qi 氣), but not life (sheng 生); plants and trees have life, but no consciousness (zhi 知); birds and beasts have consciousness, but no sense of appropriateness/rightness (yi 義). Humans have vital energy, life, consciousness, and, in addition, a sense of appropriateness/rightness. This is why humans are the most valuable beings under the heaven.

Because only human beings are capable of moral construction and because only through moral construction can the world become harmonious, it follows that humanity is valuable in a unique way.

The meanings of “heaven” are complex. It has both enchanted and disenchanted meanings. The Chinese philosopher Fung Yulan found that the idea of heaven, “tian 天,” has at least five meanings. They are, 1, as the sky; 2, as the personified god; 3, as unavoidable fate; 4, as the natural course of the world; 5, as moral reason. In the context of heaven-earth-humanity, heaven can be taken to mean different things by Confucians of various streams. To philosophers like Tu Weiming, “heaven” means a force that is “omnipresent and omniscient,” or divine, a force that holds the ultimate meaning of the world. Understood in this way, heaven somewhat resembles “God” in monotheist traditions. It is the ultimate source

of morality or legitimacy. The *Zhongyong* states that “what is endowed by heaven is human nature.” Mencius also commented that heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on him (“this man”) heaven is not a personified God as found in monotheist traditions. While heaven is a leading creative force of the universe, it is not the only creative force. In the Confucian conception of the triadic harmony, heaven is a co-creator with earth and humanity.

For secular Confucians, “heaven” can mean the universe beyond earth, though it may be laden with spirituality. The classic Confucian thinker Xunzi took “*tian*” largely to mean the natural course of things. He included the universe beyond earth as part of “*tian*.” For instance, Xunzi wrote, “What is the relation of order and chaos to *tian*? I say: the revolutions of the sun and moon and the stars and celestial points that mark off the divisions of time by which the calendar is calculated were the same in the time of [the sage-king] Yu as in the time of [the despot] Jie.” And “[o]f the things of *tian*, none is brighter than the sun and moon; of the things of the earth, none is as bright as fire and water.” In the sense used above, “*tian*” stands for what is above the earth in the universe. As humans extend our capacity to exert impact into space, and colonization of the space is now a real possibility, this part of the triadic structure should be taken more seriously than ever before. With this conception of triadic harmony, we can allow heaven to be open to different interpretations, accommodating both secular Confucians and Confucians with a religious orientation.

In the Confucian triadic conception of harmony, while humanity is not the center of the world, it is more than just one member of the animal kingdom. Humanity is a member of the biotic community, but it is not a member with equal status to other members because it has the capacity to transform the world. At the risk of being overly simplistic, I would say that in the Confucian view, humanity bears at least a third of the weight in this triadic cosmos. Thus, a Confucian holistic philosophy may assign humanity a status in the universe that is considerably higher than is found in the holistic sustainability philosophies developed in the West, such as Land Ethics and Deep Ecology.

The *Wenyan Commentary* of the *Book of Change* spells out that the unity of humanity, heaven, and earth implies that, when humanity acts prior to heaven, heaven does not go to the contrary. The *Zhongyong* states that heaven and earth “attain” their proper order “when equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree.” Humanity is of course an active force
In realizing equilibrium and harmony. Rather than immersing humanity into heaven, both texts recognize a leading role for humanity in the Triad. In the Confucian system, all three components are required to generate and maintain harmony in the cosmos. Without the thriving earth, human beings cannot survive. Without heaven, either the world would lose its spiritual and moral roots (in an enchanted sense) or the earth could not continue, as it is part of the cosmos (in a disenchanted sense). Finally, without humanity, the world would be hollow in meaning, and there would be no conscious agency to actively engage and promote harmony in the cosmos. Confucians see the fundamental value of humanity in its constructing and promoting the Way (dao), which in Analects (15.15) is a unique human capacity.

The notion of triadic harmony is a metaphysical view in the sense that it presents a foundational framework for the deep relationships between heaven, earth, and humanity. According to this notion, the cosmos is not monopolized by any one party. Nor is humanity the center of the cosmos. Heaven and earth are not there just to provide resources for human consumption. Each has its own purpose and worth. Humanity is not part of heaven or earth; it is their guardian and partner. Humanity as an active and powerful participant in the triadic harmony has a responsibility to do its share in promoting and maintaining such a harmony.

The Confucian philosophy of triadic harmony may be illustrated in terms of three principles. The first principle is the humanity principle, namely that humanity represents the quintessence of the myriad things between earth and heaven and that it bears an inescapable responsibility to play an active role in harmonizing the world. Second, the earth principle, according to which the earth is not merely a source of resources. Earth has its own life and its own place in the cosmos. It retains its own dignity. Third and finally is the heaven principle. In the enchanted Confucian world, heaven serves as the ultimate source of morality. In the disenchanted Confucian world, heaven represents all spheres beyond earth. It refers mainly to all in space beyond earth, and it provides the environment in which earth and humanity exist. The heaven principle in the disenchanted sense requires humanity to respect the dignity of space and not to use it for narrowly defined human or earthly purposes. In the age of the Anthropocene, the heaven principle becomes even more important, as it has implications for what we humans should and should not do with respect to space.

Tu Weiming has called the Confucian view “anthropocosmic.”20 Such a view is not theocentric ("God-centered" or "Heaven-centered") or anthropocentric, but presents an “anthropocosmic unity.” The concept of the Anthropo-
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The Anthropocene has provided us with a powerful idea about a significantly elevated role for humanity in the cosmos. It gives us a pressing reason to revisit and take seriously the Confucian triadic philosophy of heaven-earth-humanity. By giving a significant creative role to humanity, the threefold Confucian principle of heaven-earth-humanity has anticipated a philosophy for the Anthropocene. In the Confucian view, the Anthropocene does not amount to the replacement of an omnipotent God by humanity. In the Anthropocene, rather than monopolizing the rest of the world, humanity still dances with it (or with “heaven and earth”), even though the role of humanity has become more and more active and decisive. This is consistent with the Confucian vision. Given its magnificent status in the triad, humanity is capable of fundamentally transforming the world. We can change the world to serve our narrowly perceived interests or we can transform it toward the ideal of grand harmony. We want the latter. Toward that end, we need a new humanism as a guiding philosophy.

The Anthropocene has made it possible and necessary to develop an entirely new form of humanism, one that is arguably qualitatively different from all previous versions. Following Tu Weiming’s use of “anthropocosmic” in characterizing Confucianism, we can call this new humanism “anthropocosmicism.” As our new humanism is not meant to be confined to any single cultural tradition, Confucian or otherwise, perhaps we should avoid making too close a connection to Confucianism. After all, the rearticulated Confucian triadic harmony of heaven-earth-humanity is meant to contribute to the construction of a new humanism accessible to other cultural traditions, rather than to be the new humanism itself. For this reason and because of the tremendous capacity and potency accorded to humanity in this philosophy, we can call it a “mega-humanism.”

The new humanism is “mega” in the sense that, in it, humanity possesses overwhelming power over nature to either destroy it or protect it. It is without any doubt a strong humanism. The “mega” is not a hyperexaggeration of the unique value of humanity; nor is it an intoxicated obsession with human narcissism. The “mega” stands for a super-vision, a powerful vantage point, from which humanity can reunderstand and reposition itself in such a way that enables it to remake the world. The mega-humanism is therefore an entirely new humanism unlike anything before it. In it, humanity is not the only intrinsic value. In comparison with traditional anthropocentric humanisms, mega-humanism places not only value but also responsibility on humanity. The role of humanity in this mega-humanism, though extremely powerful, must be properly envisioned.
In *Analects* 15.29, Confucius famously said, “it is the capacity of humanity to promote the Dao, it is not for the Dao to promote humanity. 人能弘道，非道弘人.” In such a Confucian view, the super-capacity of humanity places responsibility rather than entitlement on humanity. If the Confucian philosophy of the triadic harmony of heaven-earth-humanity has been a mere vision in the past two millennia, the Anthropocene has made it more real than ever. The Anthropocene brings us to a time to transform this age-old Confucian philosophy into a new humanism with true practical significance. It brings us to the real possibility of a mega-humanism. Under this new humanism, human beings are not only charged with the responsibility but also the power to harmonize with nature. Though this mega-humanism can be supported by and from the Confucian philosophy of triadic harmony, it is not exclusively Confucian. Proponents of the mega-humanism do not have to accept an entire Confucian metaphysic to embrace such a new humanism. A new humanism will be more viable if its proponents can find its philosophical foundations in their respective cultural traditions.

Over many decades, Dallmayr’s philosophical inquiry has been concerned with social justice and cultural diversity. In one of his most recent books, *Return to Nature? An Ecological Counterhistory*, Dallmayr calls for a resurgence of “a chastened humanism” or “a differentiated holism.” Against the dominant strand of modern Western thought in which “nature survived only as an exile or resident alien,” Dallmayr advocates a view of wholeness or a holistic relationship between “humanity” and nature and a complex mode of interdependence among humans, nature, and the world in the direction of the “cosmotheandric” perspective articulated by Raimon Panikkar. Characteristically for Dallmayr, developing such a view requires us to draw on different resources and cultural traditions. This chapter answers Dallmayr’s call by making a contribution to developing such a new humanism from a Confucian perspective.

Notes


2. The Earth has endured five major extinctions. The first major extinction was probably caused by climate change approximately 440 million years ago, and
it wiped out about 25 percent of the families of marine life (there was no or little
other land life-form). The second major extinction was around 370 million years
ago, with 19 percent of families lost. The third major extinction took place about
245 million years ago, and 54 percent of families disappeared. The fourth extinction
was approximately 210 million years ago. It wiped out 23 percent of families. The
fifth major extinction was about 65 million years ago and resulted in the loss of
17 percent of families of life-forms, including the remaining terrestrial dinosaurs.
For more information, see http://www.actionbioscience.org/evolution/eldredge2.html.
For a discussion of the sixth extinction, see Elizabeth Kolbert, The Sixth Extinction

3. See their appendix for more information.
    no. 7542 (2015).
    feature/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos/2363/.
7. John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press,
    1996), 14.
8. For more discussion of value configuration, see my “Cultural Configurations
9. For a detailed account of the Confucian philosophy of harmony, see my
10. Thirteen Classics with Commentaries (“TTC”) 《十三經注疏》 (Beijing:
11. See Chenyang Li (2014).
    (Xunzi 9.16a; Knoblock: 103–4).
13. Fung, Yulan 《中國哲學史》 A History of Chinese Philosophy (Beijing:
    Zhonghua Shuju, 1961), 55.
    of Philosophies, Religions and Civilizations in the Era of Globalization: Chinese Philosophical
    Studies, XXV, ed. Zhao Dunhua (Washington, DC: Council for Research in
    Values and Philosophy, 2007), 147. For more discussion of the concept of “heaven,”
    see my “Is the Confucian Concept of ‘Heaven’ Still Relevant Today?,” in Zhao,
    Dialogue of Philosophies, Religions, and Civilizations, 161–64.
15. Xunzi 17.6; Knoblock 1994, 17; modified.
17. The New York Post reported that more than 100,000 people have applied
to take a one-way trip to Mars to colonize the Red Planet; see “More Than 100,000


21. The term “mega-humanism” has been used by Rudi Roth to describe a universal belief system of a post-theistic era after the end of the Abrahamic religions in which natural humanistic beliefs have replaced traditional religious beliefs *After God??: A New Approach for Secular Humanism* by Alan Gordon. The mega-humanism expounded in this chapter, however, calls for revisiting and reviving the traditional philosophy of Confucian triadic harmony and similar world traditions in contributing to the making of a mega-humanism.

22. I read 能 as capacity rather than merely as “can.”


24. Ibid., 178.