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Towards Gratitude to Nature: Global Environmental Ethics for China and the World

Abstract This paper asks what should be the basis of a global environmental ethics. As Gao Shan has argued, the environmental ethics of Western philosophers such as Holmes Rolston and Paul Taylor is based on extending the notion of intrinsic value to that of objects of nature, and as such it is not very compatible with Chinese ethics. This is related to Gao's rejection of most—if not all—Western “rationalist” environmental ethics, a stance that I grant her for pragmatic reasons (though I remain neutral about it theoretically). Gao argues that the Daoist notion of living in harmony with nature can instead become the basis of a Chinese environmental ethics. However, the involved Daoist conception of living in harmony with nature is, in my view, based on an aesthetic property. The paper argues that despite the appeal of the Daoist view for a Chinese environmental ethics, an aesthetic property cannot provide the basis for a global environmental ethics. The paper also considers another version of Daoist environmental ethics, which does not rely on an aesthetic notion, but I argue that it too fails as such a candidate. As an alternative, the paper considers and applies contemporary Western thinkers on gratitude (such as Robert Emmons and Elizabeth Loder), proposing that gratitude to nature (environmental gratitude) can indeed provide the needed basis.

Keywords global environmental ethics, rationalist, Daoism, aesthetic, subjective properties, gratitude

It is generally agreed that human activity and interaction with nature in recent decades has caused extensive damage to it. It has resulted in a dangerous increase in greenhouse gases, the depletion of the ozone layer, pollution of rivers and lakes, deforestation, the extinction of many species of animals and plants, and so on. It has, in a manner of speaking, caused serious harm to the planet and its present and future inhabitants. The process of modernization of the developing

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world seems only to have worsened the problem on a global scale. Moreover, despite many initiatives to reduce emissions of gases such as CO₂, prognoses for how soon sustainable emission levels will be reached do not seem very positive. Thus, it is clear that the problem of dealing with harm to the environment that humanity faces seems both urgent and global. The ethical foundation for this has to be environmental ethics. I shall often speak of “a global environmental ethics,” as opposed to a “local” one, in order to emphasize its global domain. As China and other Eastern countries are rising economically and technologically, the question is whether, for them, the necessary environmental ethics can be the same as the “traditional” Western one. As we shall see in Sections 1 and 2 of this paper, Gao Shan (2012) argues that, at least in the case of China, it certainly cannot. Instead, she suggests an environmental ethics based on Daoism.¹ I agree with Gao on ruling out the type of Western ethics she has in mind; however, in Section 3 I put forward some objections to environmental ethics based on Daoism. On a weak understanding of these objections, I merely argue that a global environmental ethics cannot be based on Daoism; on a stronger reading, I argue that not even a local environmental ethics can. In any case, however, in the final section of the paper, I shall propose that a global environmental ethics should be based on gratitude, on environmental gratitude (gratitude to nature).² It is not my goal in this section to detail such an environmental ethics—that is a task for future research—but at least to argue that gratitude is suitable as a basis or foundation of it.

Generally speaking, a global environmental ethics should provide and answer to the question of how we should act towards natural objects, including non-human organisms. This of course is entirely analogous to the aim of traditional (non-environmental) ethics when it comes to answering the question of how we should act towards other human beings. And, as we have come to

¹ Note the following terminological point: I shall frequently make use of the expressions “based on__,” “basis of__,” etc., where the placeholder is filled by a theory, a view, a property, or a concept at the center of a candidate for an environmental ethics (close synonyms being “founded on__,” “foundation of__,” etc., though I prefer the less formal ring of the first group). The reason for this choice of words is that I wish to remain as general as possible, focusing on a genus, a type, an unspecified such candidate. For instance, the phrase: “environmental ethics based on Daoism” refers to a genus, or a type, covering several (actual or potential) specific Daoist systems of environmental ethics. Or take the example of my own proposal, an environmental ethics “based on gratitude.” In this case, there are *only* potential, non-specific candidates for such an ethics: to my knowledge, there is, as of yet, no specifically worked out candidate theory. And indeed, my purpose in the paper here is only to lead us *towards* such an ethics and to consider some of its foundational issues.

² It may of course be that a notion of gratitude to nature can be derived from Daoist sources themselves, but this is not suggested by the interpretations of Daoism that I shall consider in the present paper.

expect, it should be “green,” i.e., it should call attention to acts that are good for natural objects and for the environment. Thus, as a first step, one can say that an environmental ethics should meet the following adequacy condition proposed by Jonathan Chan (2009, 136):

Preliminary Adequacy Condition:

If an environmental ethics is adequate, then it must provide a theoretical platform for (1) ruling out environmentally unsustainable practices, policies, and lifestyles and (2) promotion of environmentally sustainable practices, policies, and lifestyles.

However, when criticizing Gao and Chan in Section 3 below, it becomes clear that in my view, this adequacy condition is incomplete—hence my qualification “Preliminary.” But as a way of setting the agenda, this condition functions well as a formulation of the requirement that an environmental ethics should be both about environmental (natural) entities, and that it should be “green.”

1 Intrinsic Value of Nature and Gao’s Criticism

As Gao (2012) points out, due to the influence of Western philosophers like Holmes Rolston and Paul Taylor, the view that an environmental ethics should have as its basis the concept of intrinsic value in nature can be also be found among Chinese ethicists. This view is in line with the general trend of non-anthropocentric ethics in Western environmental ethics: nature and natural objects, whether living organisms, such as plants and animals, or non-living objects (or at least not living organisms), such as fields, forests and mountains, are bearers of value in and of themselves. They are so independently of whatever value they may possess to humans. The classic Western source of inspiration for recent non-anthropocentric environmental ethics that includes non-living natural entities as having intrinsic value is the famous “land ethic” of Aldo Leopold (1949).

According to Rolston, the role that human beings play in regard to the moral status of nature is to register the intrinsic properties of natural objects, and to “translate them into felt values” (Rolston 1998, 10). In other words, the value of natural objects is not something that is conferred on them by human beings; rather, our role is merely to “register” the value already present in the objects. Furthermore, Rolston has general metaphysical views about the nature of natural objects, which he uses to ground their intrinsic value. He maintains, for instance, that all organisms defend their “own kind as a good kind” (Rolston 1998, 10) by which he means that all organisms by their nature defend their lives and strive to

reproduce. In a similar bio-metaphysical way, Taylor defines the good of an organism as “the full development of its biological powers” (Taylor 1981, 199).

Now, according to Gao, the basic idea of considering natural objects as having intrinsic value and associating it with an epistemology and metaphysics in this way is intimately linked to the Western philosophical tradition of attaching great significance to reason or rationality. As she puts it: “The Western belief in reason provides metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical framework for the concept of intrinsic value in nature” (Gao 2012, 114). She adds the plausible claim that the underpinning of the high regard given to reason in the West is the metaphysical view that there is an objective reality to which our concepts apply and the epistemological view that there is a formal theory or method based on logic and observation.

One might object to this assessment of the Western tradition that it cannot be claimed that the notion of intrinsic value in nature is the legacy of the Western philosophical tradition, on the grounds that in it only human beings are viewed as the bearers of intrinsic value (or only “rational beings,” as in Kant, one might add). Gao considers this objection and responds that this tradition (“the Western belief in reason”) provides the very epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical framework for the extrapolation of intrinsic value from human beings to natural objects (Gao 2012, 115). This seems to be a plausible response, which I shall accept.

In any case, Gao gives two related reasons for thinking that this tradition is untenable as a basis for an environmental ethics. Firstly, the Western tradition focuses a lot on “ultimate reality,” and nature, because of its changing character, is not considered as being ultimate reality (she cites Plato’s metaphysics, in which the unchanging Forms are ultimately real, whereas natural objects are merely imperfect “copies” of them). Secondly, this tradition considers nature to be a purely mechanical system.³

What should we think of Gao’s argument here? Strictly speaking, as to her first point, it must be objected that even though a thesis is formulated within a framework with a certain view of nature as not being “ultimately real” (which, for the sake of argument, we can assume is correct), it could still be viable and provide a basis for an environmental ethics. The same response can be made to her second point: just because an idea is formulated in a tradition that tends to consider nature as a mechanical system, this does not necessarily mean it cannot

³ Note that she grants that ecological science coheres well with nature being the ultimate reality and in flux. The implication is that she thinks ecological science, despite originating in the West, is at odds with this philosophical tradition. Presumably, she would say the same of the Western tradition of “deep ecology,” as exemplified by, among others, Naess (1973) and Matthews (1991).

go beyond this. To assume otherwise is to commit the “genetic fallacy” (to hold that a view is false or untenable just because its source is).

However, although it seems to me that Gao is not justified in dismissing particular environmental ethical views on the grounds that their origin lies in the Western philosophical tradition, I think we can learn from her stance. Her position seems to be one of rejecting environmental ethics of the Western tradition due to her insistence that “the basic philosophical traditions in China and in the West are in conflict with each other” (Gao 2012, 116). This suggests to me that it would be most pragmatic, so to speak, not to look at the conventional Western tradition for the basis of a global environmental ethics.

2 A Daoist Alternative

Gao finds the basis for an environmental ethics in Daoism.⁴ In this section, I shall consider her argument for this, while in the following section I shall assess it, along with briefly considering another case for Daoist environmental ethics put forward by Jonathan Chan (2009). Gao stresses the Daoist notion of “living in harmony with nature.” Daoism differs significantly from the Western tradition, both with regard to its conception of human beings and its conception of nature. Gao points out that “emotional abilities, biological powers and intuition” are central to Chinese philosophical tradition in general, and to Daoism in particular. Biological powers are related to our bodies, and our body is made up of *Qi* (Gao 2012, 118). Intuition, in turn, can be contrasted with reason, a notion so central to the Western tradition. If intuition grasps the truth, both one’s mind and one’s body “become one” with the truth. This differs from the situation where reason grasps the truth, since in that case we are separate from the truth.⁵

This Daoist notion of human beings is matched by its view of nature. It has two parts: (i) nature is a continuous process; and (ii) everything in nature is full of vitality and life. These two parts jointly yield the concept of *tian ren he yi* 天人合一 which, Gao maintains, can be translated as the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. This is the “life ideal” that the Chinese people have been pursuing for thousands of years (Gao 2012, 118). In a nutshell, according to Gao’s view, it is *tian ren he yi*, rather than the intrinsic value of natural objects which should form the basis of an environmental ethics.

⁴ It should be noted that she also puts forward some related considerations about Confucianism, but although Confucianism presents another important source for environmental ethics in China, we need not go into them in the present paper. For recent combined use of Confucianism and Daoism in Chinese environmental ethics, see Li (2014).

⁵ She claims this distinction between intuition and reason can be brought out by Zhuang zi’s concept of “Fasting one’s Mind” (Gao 2012, 119).

Furthermore, according to Daoism, our biological powers and intuition are interrelated, such that when we fully develop these biological powers, we will achieve the capacity to attain truth. As Gao puts it, “The *Qi* in our body is always in a process of flowing, which is responsible for birth, bodily growth, and vitality” (Gao 2012, 188). However, the most important part directly relevant to environmental ethics is the view that “when we have a tranquil state of mind, we can be completely concentrated on the things we are doing, which will promote an excellent flow of *Qi*” (118). Excellent circulation of *Qi* can help us establish a relationship with nature. Since in this tradition nature is understood as being made up of *Qi*, it is not surprising that “when we try to cultivate a tranquil state of mind, the *Qi* in our body will circulate in an excellent way, which will unite us with the flow of *Qi* in nature” (118).

This metaphysics of *Qi* is obviously very different from the metaphysical background of Western environmental ethics. It is, Gao explains, intimately linked with an *aesthetic* understanding and appreciation of nature and human beings’ “participation in the beauty of nature” (Gao 2012, 120).⁶ This aesthetic component is associated with the notions of *creativity* and *spontaneity* of *Qi*: “Creative power in *Qi* is beautiful because of its spontaneity in the creative activity in *Qi*” (Gao 2012, 122). She quotes the *Dao De Jing*: “Human beings emulate the earth, the earth emulates the heavens, the heavens emulate way-making [Dao], and way-making emulates what is spontaneously so” (Chan 1963, 153).⁷

The flow of *Qi* is, according to Gao, closely linked to the appreciation of beauty in nature. This, in turn, is related to cultivating a “tranquil state of mind” which enables us to participate in the beauty of *Qi*. The reason is that when “the mind is tranquil, the circulation of *Qi* will be excellent” (Gao 2012, 124). In other words, as I shall put it, there is a mutual implication between:

- (1) cultivating a tranquil state of mind,
 - (2) good circulation of *Qi* and hence also,
 - (3) appreciation of, and participation in, the beauty of nature:
- (1) $\Leftrightarrow$ (2) $\Leftrightarrow$ (3).

However, in Gao’s view, cultivating a tranquil state of mind is not the only way

⁶ A similar aesthetic foundation of a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, also based on Daoism, is proposed by David Cooper (2012). He does not base it on excellent flow of *Qi*, though, but on *reverie* for nature.

⁷ Eugene Hargrove (1985, 195) has a similar, but non-Daoist view of the beauty of nature involving, at its center, spontaneity and creativity (“self-creation”). Gao quotes him at length, though she ultimately rejects him.

of participating in and appreciating the beauty of nature. There is another method: having the “attitude of no action when we perform our daily activities” (Gao 2012, 124), that is, the famous Daoist virtue of *wuwei*.

It is at this point that Gao relates her discussion specifically to Western environmental ethics. A famous Western environmental ethicist, Eugene Hargrove, also considers the beauty of nature to be at the center of his environmental ethics (cf. footnote 7 above). Gao, however, seems to consider him as being too much a part of the Western tradition of construing natural objects as having intrinsic value (their beauty, on this view), and she hence dismisses him.

So it would probably be in Gao’s spirit to say that while a Western philosopher like Hargrove is right to base environmental ethics on beauty in nature, he is still too closely associated with the “rationalist” Western tradition of philosophy to be compatible with an environmental ethics derived from Chinese philosophy.

3 Criticism of Daoist Alternatives

I shall, in any case, grant Gao her stance that Chinese environmental ethics cannot make use of Western aesthetic environmental ethics such as that of Hargrove’s, even when both, as in this example, are ultimately based on the notion of beauty in nature. I remain neutral on whether or not there are any theoretical reasons for sharing Gao’s rejection of “rationalist” Western philosophy—and it is not my job in this paper to consider whether or not there are—but, to repeat, I think it is more pragmatic to avoid searching for a global environmental ethics within traditional Western philosophy. In any case, in this section I shall also put forward an argument to the effect that *no* global environmental ethics should be based on an aesthetic concept. Note that it may be that Daoism is so well integrated with traditional Chinese thought that my argument does not pose a threat to Gao’s proposal for a Chinese environmental ethics. When I speak of a “global environmental ethics,” however, I am assuming that the topic is environmental ethics for the whole world, including China.

Be that as it may, at the end of the section I shall briefly consider another contemporary version of Daoist environmental ethics, one that is explicitly not based on aesthetics. However, I argue that this version is also untenable, though for another reason.

The reason that beauty (or any other aesthetic property, for that matter) should not form the basis of environmental ethics is remarkably simple: beauty is not in the natural objects themselves; it is projected onto them by humans. As the idiom has it, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And I shall assume as obvious that environmental ethics cannot be based on what we merely project onto nature.

It fits in well with this subjectivist understanding of beauty that there are such extensive variations of what is considered beautiful, not only across different cultures and different historical periods of one culture, but also among individuals within the same culture at the same time. True, this great variation need not be an indication that beauty is “subjective” (a metaphysical view): it could, for instance, just be due to us not being good at detecting beauty; that is, it could be merely epistemological. And true, regarding many other properties that are also rightly given a subjectivist treatment (e.g., paradigmatic Lockean secondary qualities like colors, sounds, smells), we do not, I think, find an analogous variation, not even across linguistically very diverse cultures (*pace* the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). But my claim is that the variation in the case of beauty *is* due to the fact that beauty is merely a quality projected onto the world by us.⁸

There seems to be an important objection to this subjectivist view of beauty in nature. One might deny that there is any (deep) variation among what is considered beautiful in nature. For example, whereas many people will consider the giant panda to be a beautiful animal and the vampire bat to be ugly, it may well be that if they were properly informed about, say, the amazing biological make-up of the vampire bat, they would find it beautiful too (though perhaps in a somewhat different way). This is, in essence, Hargrove’s response to one of Rolston’s examples of ugliness in nature. Rolston’s example is striking: “If hikers come upon the rotting carcass of an elk, full of maggots, they find it revolting. Here is a bad example of its kind, disharmony, a putrid elk... Everything is in some degree marred and ragged—a tree with broken limbs, a crushed wildflower, an insect-eaten leaf” (Rolston 1988, 238). Hargrove responds that from another point of view—from the right perspective, as we might say—none of these things are ugly. It may be said, for instance, that they are part of the reuse of materials and resources in nature (Hargrove 2007, 139).

Still, in my opinion, even if this is correct, it does not rule out that beauty is just a feature projected by humans (and possibly higher non-human animals). However, I find this whole debate so intractable that I suggest we try to avoid

⁸ Whether or not I am correct that there is this big variation with regard to beauty, my view is that moral and aesthetic properties are similar to secondary qualities in that both types of property are “response-dependent.” That is, roughly, they are a kind of property that an object instantiates if and only if it has a disposition to yield a specific response in a subject, such as the experience of redness or of beauty. This is a controversial view: see e.g., Cuneo (2001) for the opposite position. Moreover, it may be problematic to speak of “projection” of response-dependent properties onto the world, since a part of them (their dispositional bases) are mind-independent. In any case, I think these properties ultimately would need to be analyzed ontologically in terms of so-called “grounded relations,” which, in my view, are merely supervenient entities (Meinertsen, 2011). However, further consideration of this matter would take us too far afield here. But I shall briefly return to it at a later stage when contrasting the subjectivity of beauty with that of gratitude in Section 4 below.

using an aesthetic property as the basis for an environmental ethics. And obviously, this includes the property put forward by Gao, roughly speaking, of having an excellent flow of *Qi*—since on her reading it is, as we saw, equivalent to participating in the beauty of nature. This idea might be of value to Chinese environmental ethics, but I do, in any case, find that this property cannot serve as the basis for global environmental ethics.

Nonetheless, it may be that Daoism can still provide such a basis. For if Chan (2009) is right, the Daoist basis of environmental ethics is non-aesthetic. Let us briefly consider his proposal. (A full consideration is not possible here since, at its center, Chan's proposal involves the notion of *wuwei*, the interpretation of which falls outside the scope of this paper.) Still, even a brief consideration will enable us to (i) provide a *prima facie* argument against the proposal and (ii) discover that the Preliminary Adequacy Condition from the introductory section above is in need of modification.

Chan argues that Daoism meets criteria (1) and (2) in the Preliminary Adequacy Condition, as follows. In Daoism, the virtuous person is someone who supports the “naturalness” of things—the state which “indicates the condition when a thing is what it is by itself without any external impulse or interruption” (Chan 2009, 142). So supporting the naturalness of all things demands one take a non-interruptive approach to all things, including nature itself. In the *Dao De Jing*, this non-interruptive approach to all things is *wuwei*. Thus, in Daoism, exploitive policies or practices that denigrate the environment are unacceptable. For instance, a consumptive practice leading to environmental degradation is ruled out. In other words, environmental virtue is a simple consequence of the Daoist virtue of *wuwei* (Chan 2009, 142).

Notice that, unlike Gao, who, as we saw in Section 2, considers practicing *wuwei* as equivalent to participating in and appreciating the beauty of nature, Chan's understanding and use of *wuwei* does not employ any aesthetic concept at all.

However, in my view, it still will not do as a foundation for a global environmental ethics. The reason for this can be brought to light by considering that in humanity's current situation, where considerable environmental damage has already been done, the Preliminary Adequacy Condition is incomplete. I think it needs to be supplemented with a criterion of restorative practices, policies, and lifestyles. Examples of such actions include clearing up polluted areas, planting trees on deforested land, breeding members of endangered species before releasing them to their natural habitats, and so on. Accordingly, the Preliminary Adequacy Condition (i.e., Chan's adequacy condition) needs to be modified as follows:

Complete Adequacy Condition:

If an environmental ethics is adequate, then it must provide a theoretical platform for (1) ruling out environmentally unsustainable practices, policies, and lifestyles; (2) promotion of environmentally sustainable practices, policies, and lifestyles; and (3) encouragement of environmentally restorative practices, policies, and lifestyles.

In other words, since it seems that *wuwei* is incompatible with the activities required by (3), Daoism on Chan's interpretation does not seem to meet this Complete Adequacy Condition, and hence *prima facie* cannot provide the basis for a global environmental ethics. Thus, until it is determined whether Daoism, perhaps on a different non-aesthetic interpretation than Chan's, offers the resources to meet the last condition (3), it is, other things being equal, preferable to look for an alternative.

4 Gratitude to Nature

So what is needed at this stage? It is now possible to answer this question concisely in just three points. Firstly, there needs to be a compatibility with Gao's objection to traditional Western "rationalist" ethics (being a pragmatic need, this is more a *desideratum* than a requirement). Secondly, and more theoretically, the Complete Adequacy Condition must be met. Thirdly, and implied by this second point, there needs to be a basis for an environmental ethics that is not a subjective property.

I propose that global environmental ethics should be based on gratitude (gratefulness, thankfulness), and in the following I shall show that it is a satisfactory concept for fulfilling this tripartite requirement. Gratitude has become a prominent notion in recent years in the positive psychology movement in the West, in both scientific (Emmons & McCullough 2004; Watkins 2014) and more popular varieties (Emmons 2007). It can be traced throughout the history of ideas in the West (Harpham 2004). Cicero is often quoted by contemporary authors writing on gratitude as considering this notion to be "not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others" (e.g., in McCullough and Tsang 2004, 123). Importantly, Emmons also finds significant statements on gratitude in the East, especially in Buddhism (Emmons 2007, 101–3). Similarly, Loder (2011) lists numerous sources that evidence the presence of gratitude in many different traditions, including Confucianism, Judaism, Islam, ancient Roman thought, and indigenous worldviews. By implication, it seems attractive to consider gratitude, in the shape of environmental gratitude, as a candidate for the basis of a global environmental ethics. It seems clear that such kind of ethics

could not be rejected on the grounds of it originating in Western “rationalist” philosophy.

Here, I shall first briefly define gratitude and outline some of its basic features, and next, following Loder (2011), I shall describe what “environmental gratitude” is. I shall show that it meets the Complete Adequacy Condition for global environmental ethics. Incidentally, this specific purpose saves me from having to go into the thorny issue of whether or not gratitude can, or should, be construed as a(n) (Aristotelian) moral virtue of importance to virtue ethicists (Carr 2015; Kristjánsson 2015), and the equally difficult question of how my proposal relates to the general area of environmental virtue ethics (Sandler 2007). From the point of view of the present paper, gratitude in gratitude-based environmental ethics is at most a virtue in a rather non-technical sense, perhaps even in a “loose and popular sense,” to use Joseph Butler’s famous expression. Incidentally, a further advantage of this is that since some approaches to virtue ethics are quite “rationalist” (Slote 2013), I do not, I trust, commit myself to a proposal that flies in the face of Gao’s rejection of “rationalist” philosophy. Contrast this with Loder, who sees her work as being a contribution to, or belonging to, the tradition of (Western) virtue ethics (Loder 2011, 384).

What is gratitude? It is the attitude associated with the word “thanks,” of course. But what exactly does this attitude consist in? In my view, it comes in two basic forms: as what I call “general gratitude” and “gift gratitude,” respectively (technically, the latter is a species of the former). General gratitude is gratefulness for a good. Gift gratitude is gratefulness for a gift (a good received) *as* a gift. More specifically, general gratitude includes the three psychological elements of recognition, acknowledgment, and appreciation: it is recognizing a good thing, acknowledging this thing, and appreciating its goodness (Emmons 2007, 5). Gift gratitude is “a knowing awareness that we are recipients of goodness” (Emmons 2007, 6). General and gift gratitude can be conjoined, and their combination is expressed most succinctly by G. K. Chesterton’s famous statement that “All goods look better when they look like gifts” (Chesterton 1957, 78).

If we include the gift type of gratitude, gratitude has four main aspects in total: (i) the gift aspect; (ii) the fact that it is highly positively correlated with individual benefits like happiness, resilience, and purpose in life; (iii) the fact that grateful people are more pro-social and altruistic; and (iv) the fact that gratitude is as it were unconditional (not dependent on external circumstances being favorable). Of these four aspects, the last one might seem odd or surprising. But there is considerable evidence for it. Emmons, for instance, did research with disaster victims and survivors of major loss which showed that even during terrible adversity one can be grateful for benefits (goods) received (Emmons 2007, 156).

In any case, two of the aspects make gratitude particularly attractive as the foundation for an environmental ethics. The second aspect serves as a powerful motivator, since obviously the desire to be happy is universally very strong among human beings. And the third aspect motivates individuals to act for the benefit of others, including future generations.

What, then, is environmental gratitude? This question is rarely if ever addressed, but Loder (2011) is a notable exception (though as a legal scholar, she remains silent on many metaphysical, epistemological, and other important philosophical aspects of gratitude). She defines it as “a finely tuned propensity to notice and feel grateful for one’s surroundings on a regular basis,” and adds that it “generates pervasive attitudes of concern for planetary welfare and commitment to contribute ecological benefits to the extent of one’s ability” (Loder 2011, 384). The first part of this two-pronged statement is in effect saying what environmental gratitude is—a general gratitude for the environment. The second additional part corresponds to the third aspect of our general definition of gratitude, the pro-social aspect (here, it is pro-environment). Thanks to this pro-environmental feature, the environmental ethics of gratitude to nature both promotes sustainable behavior and censures unsustainable behavior (meets (1) and (2) of the Complete Adequacy Condition).

One might object that the very idea of environmental gratitude seems to be incoherent, on the grounds that gratitude requires a benefit to be bestowed on a beneficiary by a benefactor. But the kind of gratitude alluded to by the objector is the simple literal one.⁹ One of the main features of environmental gratitude is that it is not restricted in this way. Firstly, despite popular talk of “Mother Earth,” the environment or nature is not a person, and hence cannot be a benefactor (though on theistic views, of course, ultimately a god might be claimed as the giver of environmental gifts). Secondly, it is “free-floating,” and for that reason it transcends the narrow limits of simple benefactor–beneficiary gratitude. Loder puts this in a remarkable way:

While free-floating gratitude motivates a grateful person to give back, the subjects and nature of reciprocity are not confined to particular recipients or roughly proportionate acts. Unattached gratitude can embrace strangers, groups, institutions, and abstractions like principles, policies, or laws. It can even encompass highly abstract concepts like existence.... Free-floating gratitude seeps into one’s being and shapes all perceptions and dispositions. (Loder 2011, 398)

⁹ In case a benefit is bestowed, the beneficiary owes the benefactor a debt of gratitude. The beneficiary then ought to discharge the debt by reciprocating, and often is motivated to do so. Once the debt of gratitude is discharged, no further action is called for (McConnell 1993).

Thus, importantly, the environmentally grateful person is inclined or disposed to pay back, even if he or she does not have a “debt of gratitude.” Thus, he or she will be motivated to undertake restorative actions, the third criterion in the Complete Adequacy Condition.

Another objection to environmental gratitude, or to gratitude as foundation for global environmental ethics, is that gratitude is highly subjective. Thus, the objection continues, my own proposal is no improvement on my view that environmental ethics founded on beauty is subjective and hence untenable. Indeed, it may be added, gratitude does not even live up to my own standards for environmental ethics.

It is true that gratitude is highly subjective: as an emotion or character trait, it is in a sense essentially subjective. However, this objection rests on overlooking the fact that this is in a radically different way from how beauty is subjective. Gratitude is subjective in the way that a paradigmatic virtue, e.g. courage, is, and its subjectivity is neither more nor less of a problem than the subjectivity of courage is a problem (for virtue ethics). Beauty, by contrast, is subjective in roughly the way that “response-dependent” properties, such as Lockean secondary qualities (color, sound, smell, taste, etc.) are subjective (cf. footnote 8). Consider the example of color. It has a mind-independent and physical basis in the things in themselves, its so-called “categorical base.” This is certain structural properties of surfaces that make them reflect light of particular wavelengths. This is what gives rise to particular responses in us, which we experience as colors. In ordinary thought and talk it might seem to us that colors are possessed by the things themselves; for instance, we might hold that a red rose is red in the dark, with “red” referring to the experiential property. But this is quite mistaken. For although the physical basis of redness is unaffected by the dark, the experiential property—which we call “red”—simply ceases to exist in this situation. We might be confused by the fact that color terms, such as “red,” are ambiguous between their physical bases and the corresponding experiential properties.¹⁰

Similarly with the alleged property of beauty in nature, whether the beauty of a giant panda or of an excellent flow of *Qi*. It, too, has both a structural element in mind-independent reality (its categorical base in nature) and an experiential, subjective element, and the word “beauty” is ambiguous between these two aspects. It is the latter that is projected onto nature, as we have described it above, and it is in that sense that beauty is only “in the eye of the beholder.” Or, to put it more provocatively, the beauty (referring to the experiential quality) attributed to

¹⁰ Generally, the particular physical basis of redness consists in surfaces causing reflections with wavelengths of 620–720nm. Call this basis “red_b” and the corresponding experiential redness “red_e.” Thus, e.g., a red rose in the dark is red_b, but not red_e.

the things in nature is illusory. And it is obviously one thing to base an environmental ethics on something that is subjective in the sense of emotions or character traits (as gratitude is); it is quite another to try to base it on an illusion.

The objector might grant this response, but then carry on with a related objection focusing on the variation and lack of universality among instances of gratitude rather than their subjectivity. He or she might claim the variation among things considered worthy of gratitude is too big for it to function as a basis of a global environmental ethics. To be sure, this variation seems profound. Take variation among individuals in a culture with the same goods: some will be grateful for certain goods, such as acts of kindness from strangers, or flowers in spring on a fine weather day; others will be indifferent; some will be grateful for acts of kindness from strangers but not from relatives. Or take variation across (sub)-cultures: for instance, people in most cultures consider enemies and suffering a burden or an evil, but some strands in Buddhist and Christian thought encourage gratitude towards them. What is more, gratitude seems so “malleable” that it can perfectly well have immoral objects in some of its instances, e.g., when a person is grateful for a present he or she knows has been purchased with money made from crime.

However, these difficulties are in my view no different from the large variation and apparent lack of universality as well as malleability among the virtues of virtue ethics. Firstly, consider, for instance, the hardship of undergoing a typical surgery within a culture of a developing country with the same type of situation in a culture of a developed country. The courage required by the patient is likely to be significantly different in the two cases. It may be the same virtue of courage that is required, but the magnitude is arguably much bigger in the former case. Secondly, courage can also be manifested and called for in immoral situations, e.g. by a robber risking capture and severe punishment, or a soldier in an unjust war, facing enemy fire. True, such difficulties might be used against virtue ethics. However, I concur with Martha Nussbaum (1993) that these are problems, not with the virtues themselves, but with how they are understood locally, as it were. I would argue that the same response is plausible in the case of gratitude.¹¹

Finally, given that gratitude can surmount these problems in the manner suggested, one might wonder how to become (more) environmentally grateful if one is not so inclined? Well, the first step is to become generally grateful. Fortunately, general gratitude can be cultivated. Gratitude studies, e.g. by

¹¹ Besides, there are categories of environmental gratitude that seem quite cross-cultural and global. Loder lists and considers a total of seven such categories, including “Environment as Teacher,” “Environment as Source of Cultural inspiration,” and “Environment as Place” (Loder 2011, 404–14).

Emmons and McCullough, suggest many ways for enhancing and practicing gratitude. Emmons (2007), for instance, details them in a “how to” manner, with keeping a gratitude journal as arguably the most universally convincing method. Similarly, I would maintain, with environmental gratitude. The goods that one should be grateful for in order to be environmentally grateful are the good things offered to us by nature. Environmental gratitude is simply a special case of general gratitude. Accordingly, the next—and final—step is to be grateful for the good things in nature. The particular cultivation of environmental gratitude can be done by becoming more aware of these things, for instance, by keeping what one might call an “environmental gratitude journal” or a “journal of gratitude to nature.” Such a journal would be similar to the non-gratitude journal kept by David Cooper, and described in chapter 8 of his *Convergence with Nature: A Daoist Perspective* (2012).

Loder also talks of “cultivating” gratitude (Loder 2011, 384). Related to this, she holds that social institutions can encourage it. Specifically, she thinks that,

Existing and new law could directly acknowledge human thanks and debts for the varied bounties of the natural world, justifying concomitant legal responsibilities of human beneficiaries. In the evolving law of ecological services, expressing gratitude could heighten public awareness of environmental values and moral responsibility. (Loder 2011, 435)

This emphasis on law, a natural consequence of her being a scholar working in jurisprudence, is encouraging. It seems very plausible that the creation of new and better environmental laws will facilitate more ethical behavior towards nature. Thus, environmental gratitude can be cultivated on both the individual and societal levels.

5 Concluding Note

In short, if what I have argued is correct, gratitude, in the form of environmental gratitude, can serve as a basis of a global environmental ethics. Ironically, although gratitude, being an emotion or character trait, by definition is “subjective,” environmental ethics based on it meets, as we have seen, all three criteria of the Complete Adequacy Condition, unlike Daoism, whether interpreted by Gao or by Chan. Related to this, the subjectivity of gratitude is not problematic, anymore than the subjectivity of the standard virtues of virtue ethics might be. And ironically, an ethics of gratitude seems to me to be so far from the “rationalist” orientation of the “Western philosophical tradition” on Gao’s view that she should consider it to be compatible with her preferred candidate for a

Chinese environmental ethics. Gratitude is just as “non-rationalist” as Daoism. It is, as the French say, the memory of the heart. To coin a phrase, “environmental gratitude is the heart’s memory of nature.”

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