

2016

Conserving Nature; Preserving Identity

Nicole Hassoun

Binghamton University--SUNY, nhassoun@binghamton.edu

D. Wong

Follow this and additional works at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/philosophy_fac



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hassoun, Nicole and Wong, D., "Conserving Nature; Preserving Identity" (2016). *Philosophy Faculty Scholarship*. 10.
https://orb.binghamton.edu/philosophy_fac/10

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

CONSERVING NATURE; PRESERVING IDENTITY

ABSTRACT

There are two broad approaches to environmental ethics. The “conservationist” approach on which we should conserve the environment when it is in our interest to do so and the “preservationist” approach on which we should preserve the environment even when it is not in our interest to do so. We propose a new “relational” approach that tells us to preserve nature as part of what makes us who we are or could be. Drawing from Confucian and Daoist texts, we argue that human identities are, or should be, so intimately tied to nature that human interests evolve in relationship to nature.

As conscious beings, we exist only in response to other things, and we cannot know ourselves at all without knowing them – Harry Frankfurt¹

INTRODUCTION

There are two broad approaches to environmental ethics: the “conservationist” approach on which we should conserve the environment when it is in our interest to do so and the “preservationist” approach on which we should preserve the environment even when it is not in our interest to do so. For preservationists, the conservationist approach has obvious limitations. It permits damage to the environment whenever required by the balance of

human interests. It does not acknowledge the real reason we must protect nonhuman animals, streams, or forests. Preservationists believe that harm to sentient beings, to teleological centers of life, and even to ecological communities should be prevented independently of whether or not it also harms our interests.² To conservationists, the idea that we should preserve the environment even when it is not in our interest to do so appears inscrutable or flaky. Conservationists believe that nature is a precious resource that we should use wisely but when it is not in our interest to conserve nature they do not believe we must do so. It is unclear what proponents of either perspective can say to change the others' minds on the matter.

In this essay we deploy a third approach to dealing with environmental problems “relationalism.” This approach takes its inspiration from early Confucianism and Daoism and their insights into the connectedness between human beings and nature. Like conservationism, this approach tells us to conserve nature when doing so is necessary to respect people in the right way. Unlike conservationism, relationalism does not so prescribe on the basis of an analysis of what would best satisfy our interests. Like preservationism this approach tells us to preserve nature even when it is not necessary to do so to protect human interests. However, relationalism tells us to preserve nature as part of what makes us who we are or could be. Relationalism starts from a relational conception of human identity. The basic idea is that the nonhuman world may enter into who we are, just as other human beings and communities may enter into who we are. If we, as persons, have value, whatever is bound up with us in positive ways ought also be valued and this gives us reason to conserve or preserve (henceforth “care for”) nature. After setting out the relationalist account, we argue that it can explain key preservationist

and conservationist intuitions, though its policy recommendations, in particular cases, may coincide with neither. Finally, we defend the account against objections.

THE RELATIONAL SELF

A relational approach to environmental ethics starts with a relational conception of the self. The idea that the self is relational is, perhaps, most clearly expressed in Confucianism. One is never simply a moral agent in the *Analects* but a child or parent, student or teacher, one who holds office under the ruler of a Chinese state or one who aspires to such office. One's responsibilities are conceived as responsibilities to particular others standing in a social relationship to the self.

A way to clarify the relational nature of the self is via the notion of a local or situational character trait. Many of a person's constituting traits involve dispositions that are triggered by specific persons in specific social contexts. In *Analects* 10.1, Confucius is described as submissive and seemingly inarticulate in the local community, while fluent in the ancestral temple and at court, though he did not speak lightly. In 10.2, he is described as affable at court with Counselors of lower rank, frank though respectful with Counselors of upper rank, and respectful and composed when with his lord. For a contemporary example of situational-sensitive traits, consider that people might manifest certain traits when with family and close friends, but manifest very different traits when with colleagues. People may be warm-and-generous-with-their-friends-and-family, respectful-and-reserved-with-their-colleagues.

Perhaps, then, other people may be thought to constitute one's identity if these others form part of the context in terms of which one's constituting traits are specified. I

am not warm and generous simpliciter but warm and generous to certain people, and other ways to other people. Who I am partly depends on the situation I am in and on the company I am keeping.

What is important here is that for even some of the best character traits to be expressed, individuals must be in certain contexts. Expressing such character traits can be important to who a person is. Thus, preserving some contexts can be important to preserving individuals' very identity.

Note, however, that we are not claiming that an individual's identity reduces to the sum total of her relationships, nor do we take Confucianism to imply any such reduction. As Kwong-loi Shun has pointed out, the Confucian individual is able to step back from the current social order, criticize various aspects of it and, in the limit case, may renounce all of it (e.g., see *Analects* 18.6).³ These critical and creative powers of the self are related to an inward focusing on the self that seems a crucial part of Confucian self-cultivation. Confucius shows a clear and keen appreciation of his own strengths and weaknesses (e.g., *Analects* 7.34, 9.8, 12.4, 14.28).⁴ This ability to reflect on the self necessarily involves the ability to criticize those aspects of the self that have been formed through one's past and present relationships and to propose revisions of the self and those relationships in the light of one's critique. Such a self-critical capacity requires no Kantian noumenal self. Rather, these critical powers emerge from the complex relationships and internally diverse cultural traditions within which a human self is formed.

Confucianism recognizes that others enter into one's identity and that discharging one's responsibilities to them is not subordination to others but affirmation of the ways in

which one's good is bound up with their goods. When there are conflicts between the interests of self and others, the moral task is to reconcile and balance those interests so as to sustain relationships and their contributions to the well-being of all involved. The story of sage-king Shun's marriage, as told in the Mencius, is a dramatic example of how interests might best be balanced and mutually adjusted. Shun's parents were unfavorably inclined towards him despite his legendary filiality. When the time came for Shun to marry, he knew that his father would refuse permission if asked. So, Shun did not ask.

One of the reasons given for this surprising decision, coming from the ultimate filial son, is that letting his parents prevent his marriage would have prevented him from having the most important of human relationships, and that would have caused bitterness toward his parents (5A2). That is, the satisfaction of one of Shun's most vital interests is crucial for the viability of his relationship to his parents. It would have been foolish for Shun simply to have swallowed his bitterness and submitted to what he knew his parents' wishes to be, foolish in terms of his own interests in marriage, and foolish for his relationship to his parents. Shun's action illustrates that the welfare of the self is bound up with the health of its relationship to others entering into its identity. A self that consistently denies its own interests, even for the sake of those others, cannot maintain the health of its relationships to them. As we shall argue below, a similar idea applies to the human relationship to the nonhuman environment.

The central focus of early Confucian ethics is the human social world, and the relational identity of the Confucian person involves other people. Its human focus is more congenial to the conservationist approach to environmental ethics in the sense that it draws out attention to what is good for human beings as they understand themselves

within the human social world. We think the relational self can, and should, be extended into the natural world.

THE RELATIONAL SELF AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Daoism deflates the importance human beings place on themselves and their social world. It attempts to draw our appreciation to nature as a vast system of deeply interdependent things that are in continuous transformation. In these respects, Daoism is more congenial to preservationist environmental ethics. While this affinity is real, we articulate here another reading of Daoism that seeks to integrate human identity with the natural world. A Daoist self is relational in a way that is different from the Confucian relational self. It invites us to consider the human relationship to a world that is more extensive than the human social world. A view of human identity that connects it to other human beings is easier to grasp, and more salient than the view of human identity which is partly constituted by the natural world (in fact, in a deeper sense, Daoists would view the human as just another part of the natural world and, in distinguishing between the human versus the nonhuman, we are not denying this deeper sense in which the human is part of the natural). Our perceptions are oriented towards other persons, and they speak to us and remind us of their presence and influence. The ways in which nonhuman things, conditions, and places can enter into our identities is less apparent than the way that other people enter into our identities, but can be as real. Susan Hartwick, a professor of geography investigating the relation between identity and place in Galveston, Texas, interviewed one islander who strikingly illustrates this relation:

What's it like to live in Galveston? Well uh, it's all about survival. And I'm not talkin' about survivin' the "Great Storm" now. I mean, it's all about surviving the heat and rain and weird tourists and bugs. I don't really think I could survive one day without all these special things about life here in Galveston.⁵

It is quite clear that this islander subjectively identifies himself with a place and a community. He explicitly and consciously identifies himself with a place. But he is also living in response to relatively extreme environmental conditions (including some extreme people). He has a set of dispositions to act and think and feel in certain ways that are indexed to these conditions that help to make him the person that he is. This is an objective sense of identification. A place can objectively enter into an identity whether or not one "subjectively avows" the place as part of his or her identity.

Some people choose to be much less engaged with the nonhuman than others. It is not so clear that the nonhuman enters into urban-dweller's identities. We hold, however, that the nonhuman may objectively enter into our identities in ways that we do not recognize and hence do not subjectively appropriate. Moreover, there is reason to further engage with the nonhuman environment. Engaging with the non-human world in the right ways can teach us new ways to use, appreciate, and live in greater harmony with nature.

Let us show how nature can enter into one's identity subjectively or objectively and can have value to the person who has them by drawing from the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. The first chapter begins by taking its readers into the ocean to swim with the enormous fish Kun, who then turns into the bird Peng and flies up high in the sky where

it looks down towards the ground. All it sees is blue, just like we human beings see when we look up at the sky. We are then taken into the perspective of a cicada and dove that cannot comprehend the scale of Peng's flight because their idea of the upper limit of flight extends only to a tree branch. After this excursion with nonhuman creatures, we are returned to the world of smug human beings content with our small achievements in a way comparable to the outlooks of the cicada and dove. The title of this chapter 逍遙遊 *xiao yao you* can be translated as "Going Rambling without a Destination," and indeed we are taken rambling beyond the familiar domains of the human social world to absorb the lesson that the perceptions of all creatures are shaped by their size and location in relation to what they perceive in their environments.

Chapter 1, then, immediately inducts the reader into the wider world of nature, not just to point out the way the perceptions of all creatures are conditioned by their constitution, size and time scale, but to open us up to what the rest of nature has to teach if only we attend to it. We are invited to consider the perspectives of other creatures and to enlarge our perspective. Going rambling without a destination suggests that one's course in the world is not pre-determined by a set of goals one adopts before setting out. If our perception of the world is not filtered by a set of pre-determined goals, we are freer to perceive whatever there is to perceive.

The *Daodejing* also invites us to learn from the way that things get accomplished in nature: water wears away harder substances like rock by being soft and flowing around that which it cannot overcome right away. A style of action that is responsive and adaptive can be more effective than a style that is aggressive and unmindful of all except one's pre-determined goal.⁶

Near the end of the first chapter, *Zhuangzi* pokes fun at his logician friend Huizi for being unable to think of a use for some huge gourds he had grown. Failing to find conventional uses for the shells, as water dippers for instance, Huizi ended up smashing them in frustration. This preoccupation with pre-conceived uses, *Zhuangzi* suggests, prevented Huizi from finding unconventional uses for the gourds, such as lashing them together to make a raft with which to go floating down the river. This story suggests the possibility of broadening one's original perspective to take in more of what the world has to offer. Huizi really is missing something when he neglects the possibility of using the gourds for a raft, blinded, as we all tend to be, by calcified ideas of what is valuable and what is not.

Running through the texts of early Daoism, then, are these themes: nature conditions our perceptions and the extent of our knowledge, and we can learn how to expand and enrich our perspectives if we take it as a model and not just a resource. Those who do not consider their identities to be much related to the nonhuman in nature are well advised to consider both themes, the first about the valuable ways that nature enters into our traits and the second about the possibilities for enrichment of perspective and of life. The first shows them that the content of their subjective identifications does not reveal all that goes into their identities, and in particular the environmental conditions that trigger some of their most basic responses to the world. The energizing and uplifting effect of sunlight on mood is often noted, as is the depressing effect of sunlight dimmed or darkened, and both very likely are effects of a biological constitution stemming from our hunter-gatherer origins. There is evidence that contact with animals, plants, landscapes, and wilderness can, under the right conditions, reduce stress, promote feelings of calm

and well-being, facilitate faster healing from physical ailments, and reduce recovery from mental fatigue.⁷ The second theme suggests that those who have isolated themselves from the greater part of nature have something to gain from rambling through it. Even if we may sometimes fail to appreciate it, there is great value in having one's preconceptions of value upset and overturned, because entrenched preconceptions limit the ways we can perceive the world. To see much that could delight us and exhilarate us or suggest new ends and interests to us, we must loosen the grip of the drive to bend things to our wills. We ask confirmed city-folk, who see only their human social worlds and human artifacts as features of the environment that enter into their identities, to reconsider their identities. Just as the Confucian self has the power to step back and reconsider those roles and relationships, we have the power to step back and reconsider our relationships to the natural world which need not be purely instrumental.

To further describe what might be found in the way of new identities upon rambling through nature, consider J.J. Gibson's theory of "affordances." In his seminal "ecological theory of perception," Gibson defined "affordances" as that which the environment provides, furnishes, and invites in relation to a particular kind of perceiving organism; affordances are new sources of value the environment offers us in the form of terrain, shelters, water, fire, tools, other animals and human displays. As organisms of a certain kind, we are on the lookout for those features of the environment that provide, furnish and invite us to further engagement, for good or for ill.⁸ If Gibson is right, we, along with many other animal species, are by nature explorers of our environment.

However, our conceptions of what affordances there are for us to discover can become calcified. When Zhuangzi pointed out the way Huizi could have used the shells

of huge gourds to make a raft, he pointed out an affordance provided by the gourds that his friend could not see; gourds can be much more than water dippers.

In trying further to understand how attention to the natural environment might help one to discover new affordances that do not fit one's preconceptions, it is helpful to keep in mind a distinction made by William James between two kinds of attention.

Directed attention is a willed focus on a particular task and requires blocking out extraneous stimuli. Involuntary attention is attention that arises in response to inherently interesting or unexpected external stimuli. When people use directed attention, neural inhibitory mechanisms allow them to block out potential distractions and focus on a task.⁹ But the efficiency achieved through blocking out potential distractions narrows attention enormously: gourds must be water dippers or quite useless. The narrowing of attention occludes experience that does not fit our preconceptions of affordances in nature for us.

Directed attention requires enormous effort and tends to result in mental fatigue. Such attention is hard to sustain. Periods of involuntary attention can refresh the mind, and it is often observed that the experience of nature, containing as it does inherently interesting and unexpected events, can bring such periods about. In its most intense forms, it results in wonder and awe, as exemplified by the story of Ziqi's meditation on the mystery of the Great Clod of dirt blowing out its breath through the ten thousand hollows:

The Great Clod belches out breath and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly. Can't you hear them, long drawn out? In the

mountain forests that lash and sway, there are huge trees a hundred spans around with hollows and openings like noses, like mouths, like earths, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like rifts, like ruts. They roar like waves, whistle like arrows, screech, gasp, cry, wail, moan, and howl, those in the lead calling out yeee!, those behind calling out yuuu! In a gentle breeze they answer faintly, but in a full gale the chorus is gigantic. And when the fierce wind has passed on, then all the hollows are empty again. Have you never seen the tossing and trembling that goes on?"¹⁰

We read this in wonder and awe engendered by reflection on the whole of nature, its intricate diversity and yet a mysterious unity that cannot be plumbed.

The quality of enhanced receptivity accompanying involuntary attention can eventually be turned to the uses of directed attention, or perhaps more accurately, suggest *new* uses for directed attention. To cease being guided by one's pre-set goals and conceptions of uses is to be open to the perception of new affordances, to new sources of value¹¹ the environment offers us, to which we can then direct our attention. A kind of involuntary attention may also enable us to perceive what really does best fulfill our existing purposes. Having those purposes at the forefront of one's mind can be distracting and ultimately prevent their realization. In chapter 19 of the *Zhuangzi*, one is said to be skillful in an archery contest when playing for tiles; when playing for fancy belt-buckles, one loses confidence; and in playing for gold, one becomes flustered.

When we attend to nature in the right way, open to its influence and what it has to offer we can experience its transformative effects.¹² It is precisely the fact that we open ourselves up to something that is not entirely of our making, something that presents us

with what we do not already conceive and value, that we can have such valuable experiences. This is the idea at the heart of the relational approach to environmental ethics.

RESPECTING OTHERS

Even if one does not see the value of identifying with nature one's self in the way we have suggested one ought to identify with it, one must at least recognize that many others' identities are tied up with nature in the way we have described. One has reason to respect nature in respecting these individuals, if acting on these identities does not require doing wrong to others or violating their rights, and even if we do not desire these ways for ourselves. We are required to respect people and this often requires one to respect what is necessary for others' identities regardless of the nature of one's own identity.¹³

A number of cultures express the theme that both knowledge and personhood grow out of relationships to particular places. Ties between knowledge, place, and identity are prominent in many Native American cultures.

Consider Arizona's Western Apache people who also seem to have a conception of the self that acknowledges the ways in which knowledge and identity are tied to particular places and ecologies. They talk, for example, about using the land to orient themselves morally. Place-names have special significance for the Western Apache, and they figure centrally in apache moral stories. When a person violates a particular custom or tradition, another person will often tell a relevant tale to this person: a not-so-subtle admonishment and reminder of the violation. These stories always begin and end with the name of the place where the story occurred. According to Keith Basso, the Western Apache do not

see the capacity to be moral as residing exclusively within the individual; here, both the social and physical environment provide moral knowledge and support the individual's ability to live rightly. One Western Apache man described his experience of leaving the reservation, losing touch with the land, and consequently, drinking and fighting with his wife: "It was bad. I forget about this country here around Cibecue. I forget all the [place-]names and stories . . . I forget how to live right, forget how to be strong."¹⁴ There is some evidence that indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest also identify with the lands on which their tribes have lived for centuries, with the rivers and the forests that provide context for their lives. For instance, grey owl, a member of the southern Cheyenne tribe living on the Nez Perce reservation described his community as "salmon people."¹⁵ Or as a tribal leader of the confederated tribes of the Umatilla Indian reservation said, "without the rivers and the salmon and the land, we are not cayuse or Umatilla or Walla Walla people. Without the rivers and salmon, we become different people."¹⁶ Of course, some non-indigenous people recognize that the natural world can enter into the identities as well. In the Pacific Northwest many non-indigenous people, too, identify with the salmon and the river ecosystems where they live. Many "recognize the importance of watershed health to community well-being and value salmon as the critical element of Northwestern identity."¹⁷ Of course some loggers also identify as loggers of the Pacific Northwest forests. Fortunately, it is possible to respect these identities without allowing environmentally destructive practices. One might, for instance, allow some wood cutting while maintaining old growth forests.

THE RELATIONAL APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Our relational approach to environmental ethics incorporates Confucian and Daoist conceptions of identity. We believe that we need not choose between the insights of Confucianism into the importance of human social identities and the insights of Daoism into the importance of natural world for valuable human identities, both actual and potential. Human identities, whatever they may consist in, are liable to be complex and incorporate different elements that may enrich human life but often threaten to come into conflict with each other.

Suppose, then, that a case has been made for a conception of identity that is both Confucian and Daoist—as human beings profoundly connected with one another but also with the rest of nature—and that it is possible to base an environmental ethics on such identities. How does this differ from conservationism and preservationism?

The relational approach to environmental ethics differs from the preservationist approach in that it does not entail that we must care for the nonhuman environment independently of human beings and their interests. It starts from the relatively uncontroversial assumption that human beings have value, and asks what must be true for them to have value. Our approach holds that we cannot attach value to human beings or to whatever promotes their (at least subjectively appropriated) interests without attaching value to the constituents of their identities. We are *not* asserting that the nonhuman world has value *only because* it enters into human identities. Rather, we are identifying *a* ground for attributing value to the nonhuman world that we believe to be less controversial than the idea that the nonhuman world has value independently of whatever value human beings have. We do not claim that the relational approach is the only legitimate justification for attributing value to the nonhuman environment, but rather it is

a justification that offers greater common ground for those who take environmental ethics seriously. If one accepts the relational approach to environmental ethics we have reason to care for nature because it is important for valuable human identities.

The relational approach differs from the conservationist in denying that the nonhuman world should be conserved only when doing so is necessary to promote human interests. For one thing, the nonhuman world enters into human identity (or we have good reason to let it enter into our identity) more deeply than at the level of answering to human interests. If the environment can shape who we are, it can shape our very interests, leading us to recognize things, events, and processes that are of genuine value and that we have not previously recognized as such. Our environment, as the story about cicada and dove shows, shapes our of what there is to value. Furthermore, the relational approach questions the very separation between the human and nonhuman that the conservationist approach presupposes. It is not that we should care for the environment simply because it serves human interests, rather, the nonhuman can be so implicated in who we are that caring for nature is a necessary condition of properly respecting human identities.

One might challenge the claim that relationalism is distinct from conservationism. Don't we, like conservationists, derive a way of valuing the nonhuman from the value of the human? Is not relationalism viciously anthropocentric?

We do not derive a way of valuing the nonhuman from an instrumentalist analysis of what would best serve our interests. We are arguing that human identities can, and should, include the nonhuman and that respecting identities means respecting their relation to the nonhuman. To those whose identities do not include the nonhuman, we

have tried to present as appealing the idea of opening oneself up to transformative interaction with the nonhuman. The fact that we distinguish between (what may be short-term, transient) interests and our identities, and the fact that nature can help *constitute* our very identities, helps to explain why relationalism is not viciously anthropocentric. Part of respecting identities is respecting nature *and vice versa*.

Now the conservationist might further object that the answer to the question "When is it important to preserve a context which can shape our identities?" is going to be "When it is in our interest to have such an identity." Conservationism, in taking into account the importance of nature for meeting human interests, accounts for the importance of nature for preserving our identities. We need to say more about what counts as an interest to distinguish our theory from a conservationist theory.

One possible response might be along these lines: Interests can be understood in subjective terms (e.g. as on desire or preference satisfaction accounts) or objective terms (e.g. as on "objective lists" theories). The fact that a valuable identity need not be subjectively appropriated shows that identities can be valuable even when it is not in our subjective interest to have them. Furthermore, even if traditional conservationist views understand interests in an objective sense, conservationists' other commitments may preclude them from assimilating the value of nature's transformative impact on identity to welfare. On many traditional conservationist views, cost benefit analysis is supposed to allow us to figure out what is in our interests.¹⁸ One cannot include the transformative impact of nature on our identities in such an analysis because we cannot know what kind of value the experience will yield. Remember the ecological picture of human beings as explorers of their environment. As we interact with features of the natural world and find

pleasure in such activities, the shape of our interests and what we take pleasure and satisfaction in doing is bound to change. We become different people with different sets of interests and needs that cannot be predicted ahead of time. Moreover, we are bound to transform if we open ourselves up to new possibilities for relating to the natural world in the way that Zhuangzi recommends to Huizi.

A follow-up objection might be that if we cannot know ahead of time what value nature's impact will have, our relational approach cannot properly assess that impact. Hence we cannot claim an advantage over the conservationist approach in this regard.

Properly accommodating the transformative impact of nature on our identities requires, however, that we allow nature to influence our identities, even if we cannot know in any precise terms what the value of doing so will be ahead of time. We often do not know what the value of an activity will be until we try it, and even then, our conception of its value may change over time.

Another objection to our argument might be that we are attributing to conservationism an implausible assumption that human interests do not change. Good versions of conservationism can accommodate the fact that human interests change.

We are not denying that conservationism can accommodate preference change, and that policies should change when they do. The conservationist approach misconstrues the decision to open ourselves up to preference change on the basis of interaction with nature. To do so based on our interests, as the conservationist view would have it, seems suspiciously circular. Some of the very interests that would form the basis for such an analysis might be changed by opening ourselves up to interaction with nature! It is true that we might have a higher-order interest in acquiring new and different interests and in

discovering new things to value, but it is unclear how such an interest might be weighed against whatever interests might be changed and whatever new interests might develop through interaction with nature. Opening ourselves up to fundamental and unpredictable changes in our interests is something that can be presented in an appealing light (as we have tried to do here), but we do not pretend that deciding to do so can be justified on an all-things-considered deliberation on our present interests. It is a decision to take a stance toward life that is prior to such deliberation, based on what might be included within the human that is not included now and to new sources of value in which we might come to take an interest.

IMPLICATIONS OF RELATIONALISM: SIMILAR SUGGESTIONS, DIFFERENT RATIONALE

Preservationists often think that we must keep wild places wild; we must let nature be.¹⁹ They believe that some places should be kept free from human interference.

Conservationists care about conserving the environment for future generations. They think that we should not needlessly destroy the environment but that we can live in harmony with nature; we should use nature wisely.²⁰

Sometimes the recommendations of conservationists and preservationists coincide. They might work together to create national parks like Yellowstone or Yosemite. When the recommendations of conservationists and preservationists diverge, those holding the relational approach will sometimes agree with the recommendations of the preservationists and sometimes with the conservationists. And this is appropriate for an environmental ethic that is both Confucian and Daoist in inspiration. There may be

decisive reasons to let some wild places remain wild. To remake the world entirely in the image of humanity's purposes is to limit the possibilities for our learning from that which has not been bent to our wills. On the other hand, the relational approach does not hold that "letting alone" is necessarily better than intervening and changing nature. We need to show proper respect for humans in developing and promoting an environmental ethic. However, even when the relational approach coincides in its recommendations with conservationism or preservationism, one who accepts the relational theory (the "relationalist") will likely provide a different rationale.

Before considering a few cases, let us return to Daoism. In its notion of *wu wei* 無為, or effortless action, Daoism envisions humans acting in harmony with nature and working within natural constraints, rather than dominating or simply using nature. The *Zhuangzi* illustrates this kind of action in its story of Woodcarver Qing who makes marvelous bellstands. When he goes to make one, he fasts in order to still his mind. As he fasts, the distracting thoughts of congratulation and reward, honors and salary, blame and praise, skill and clumsiness, even his awareness of having a body and limbs melt away. It is only then that he has a complete vision of the bellstand when he looks at the wood. The woodcarver says that he joins "what is *Tian*'s to what is *Tian*'s."²¹ "*Tian* 天" in this context is perhaps best translated as "natura naturata," nature in its active and productive aspect. Note that though the woodcarver's fasting is guided by steadfast purpose, it also puts him in a state of receptiveness to what he will find in the forest. The goal-oriented thoughts that might normally crowd his mind are gone.

Michael LaFargue suggests that, *wu wei* is something human beings can do to *create* “organic harmony”. He says:

Organic harmony refers to a stable, homeostatic order that arises out of the mutual adjustment of parts, in contrast to a random, disorderly, and unstable situation that might also sometimes be produced when different parts develop according to their own spontaneous (competitive and individualistic) impulses.²²

For instance, it is possible to create gardens that form an organic homeostatic part of the larger environment with plants appropriate to the water, soil, and climate conditions. Indigenous species generally need less maintenance by the gardener. Identification with nature, then, can lead to a kind of action that blends the human with the nonhuman; that not only conserves human resources and energy but creates the kinds of value that exemplifies human harmony with the larger world.

We will return to this point in the next section but, first, consider an example of how the relationalist may come to the same conclusion as a conservationist or preservationist about a particular case but for different reasons.

Raymond Bonner tells a story about a program called CAMPFIRE in the area around Kruger National Park in South Africa. Before the program was implemented, the farmers who lived near the park often came into conflict with the wildlife from the preserve. The animals would destroy crops, homes, and occasionally people. Because the animals were protected, the farmers could not get rid of them. If they shot the animals, they were jailed.

CAMPFIRE gave the people the power to decide how wildlife would be used. Instead of raising cattle on marginal land (a major contributor to deforestation) many of the farmers were able to live off of the money generated from protecting and utilizing the wild animals.²³ They could sell hunting licenses and create revenue via tourism. They were also able to supplement their diets by occasionally culling the herds of Impala for meat.²⁴ The program let them keep 80% of the money they were able to collect from managing the wildlife.²⁵ The remaining money was used to hire wardens and create a compensation program for any destruction the animals caused to the farmers' property.²⁶ CAMPFIRE compensated farmers for their losses, gave people jobs and decision making power, and provided them with the incentive to protect the wildlife.²⁷

Conservationists argue that CAMPFIRE is an important program.²⁸ It created the right incentives for villagers to conserve wildlife. Deadly conflict between people and the wildlife was averted. The program enhanced the well-being of people and encouraged wise use.

We agree that CAMPFIRE served human interests but also hold that the creation of harmony between the villagers and wildlife was itself a good and expressed the valuable relation to the nonhuman that exists and/or should exist in human identities.

Preservationists want us to respect the environment even if it does not serve human practical uses and relationalists agree with this for their own reasons. The environment enters into our identities, or can and should, in ways that can transcend or transform our practical uses for it. The relational approach allows us to give this kind of respect to nature while also making it possible for us to use it wisely. We should respect nature the way we should respect ourselves.²⁹

When the relationalist agrees with preservationists about how we should care for nature, the rationale also differs. Consider a situation in which it is in human interests to develop a natural area, but development would exact the cost of severely reducing the biological diversity of that area. The relational approach assigns value independently of human interests (a threatened species is not necessarily pretty or dramatic in human eyes), and it recognizes the potential value of such diversity precisely because it does not conform to human ideas of “beautiful” or “impressive” diversity. Wetlands may not be beautiful or impressive enough according to our standards to preserve. Still, we should preserve some areas that we have not transformed according to our ideas of what has value. This is the relationalist equivalent to Zhuangzi asking Huizi not to smash the gourds to pieces but to use his imagination in finding new uses for them. Of course, human interests in development should be weighed in the balance. Wetlands, for instance, can provide breeding grounds for mosquitoes bringing deadly diseases.³⁰ Still, the fact that a potential course of action seems to be in our interest is not the end of the story on the relational approach. The relationalist approach might prompt us to look for other areas to develop that do not have the threatened biological diversity, or suggest introducing some mosquito-eating fish into restored areas.³¹

OBJECTIONS TO THE RELATIONAL APPROACH

A preservationist might grant that it is better to have a program like CAMPFIRE than to allow the villagers and wildlife to compete for survival. However, she might not believe that this is the only option. Perhaps the villagers could be relocated to a different area and the wildlife around Kruger preserved. Perhaps there is some way the villagers could live

with the wildlife without having to kill it or let others kill it. Preservationists might argue that CAMPFIRE, though better than the status quo, does not appropriately respect wildlife.

However, given the conditions around Kruger this response may not be sufficient. Some argue that without human intervention, elephants will overpopulate in Kruger threatening biodiversity. There may eventually be so many elephants that many will be unable to survive droughts. Thus, one might argue that any feasible solution to the environmental problems around Kruger must include human intervention. The general lesson to draw is that for good or for ill, we are already deeply implicated in the fate of the earth's environment. "Letting alone" in many cases may simply not be a viable option.

Another objection to the CAMPFIRE example is that people can sometimes contribute to environmental destruction that can threaten their very existence. Consider the conflict between the Jewelmer Corporation and the indigenous people on the island of Balbac in the Southern Philippines. This island contains some the world's last living coral reefs. The Palawan and Molbog tribes' people say that the pearl farming corporation has unjustly had the reef declared a protected area to deprive the people of their ancestral fishing grounds. The corporation responds that the reef should be protected from the tribes' destructive fishing practices since the cyanide and dynamite the tribe's people use will harm the reef on which both fish and oysters survive.

We believe, however, that it is often impermissible to force people off their lands. In the Palawan case, for instance, ~~there are many factors to take into consideration.~~ Had Marcos not given the pearl farm to the corporation, the people might have had more room

to fish. Without Marcos and a long history of corruption, population pressure on the island might also be less. Had the rules of trade and investment been different, Marcos and his cronies wouldn't have been able to sustain power for so long. Moreover, the tribes' people would have had to get the dynamite and cyanide from somewhere.³²

We are certainly not claiming that all external influence is bad; the trade that brought cyanide also brought medicine and building materials. Nor are we claiming that indigenous people are never responsible for destroying the environment. ~~Sometimes, indigenous peoples are as greedy, short-sighted, and destructive as the rest of us.~~ It is not clear that many Native American peoples needed to hunt by driving herds of bison off of cliffs, but they did.³³ ~~When indigenous peoples seem to be using nature in a wasteful and destructive way, their sense of self may not be appropriately connected with their context.~~ But appearances can be deceiving. Native Americans may have played an important ecological role by hunting bison in the same way that hunters in Southern Africa may play an important ecological role by hunting elephants today.

The point we hope to stress is not a new one for environmentalists. We need to be humble in our dealings with other cultures just as we need to be humble in our dealings with the environment. When settlers hunted bison, they did so almost to extinction. We need to ask ourselves if we have the right to interfere with others' interaction with nature. Even when we are sure that destruction is occurring, intervention may still not be acceptable, all things considered. The relational approach to environmental ethics implies that we should respect people as well as nature. Sometimes "preservationism doesn't preserve."³⁴ Sometimes conserving isn't all that matters.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF RELATIONALISM: NEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, the relationalist may sometimes give different recommendations than either a preservationist or conservationist would give for dealing with environmental problems. For instance, restoring a degraded area that has been put to agricultural or industrial use might not be justified in terms of existing human interests, but neither does preservation directly address the need for restoration of degraded areas (letting alone does not help an area that has already been degraded by human use).³⁵ The relational approach might prompt us to restore the area to achieve the kind of organic harmony LaFargue describes. The right action might be the analogue of creating a “low maintenance garden.” For example, a plant species might be introduced by encouraging the migration of seed-carrying birds to the area.³⁶

Consider another case—the Mossyrock dam built on the Cowlitz river--where the relationalist might give a different recommendation than either a preservationist or conservationist. In 1968 the city of Tacoma built the Mossyrock Dam over the objections of the State of Washington, which wanted to protect the Cowlitz as a salmon sanctuary.³⁷ Because the dam is very large, it changes the course of the river, the ecology of the river, and the surrounding habitats. In fact, the dam is *so* large that the salmon cannot swim over it and migrate up the river without help. The Cowlitz used to produce more than 90,000 Chinook, as well as steelhead, Coho, and sea-run cutthroat trout. Now relatively few wild salmon remain. This impacts many species besides fish. Salmon provide food and nutrients for a variety of organisms in multiple ecosystems. The water in the Cowlitz river system comes from Mt. Rainier glaciers and runs 133 miles. Many species rely on

this habitat including deer, Roosevelt elk, northern spotted owl, bald eagle, harlequin duck, river otter, mink, osprey, porcupine, and beaver.³⁸

To ameliorate these problems, abide by environmental regulations, and protect human interests, Tacoma Power created a reservoir buffer zone and a wildlife management plan. For instance, they now operate the Cowlitz Salmon Hatchery to reintroduce salmon and steelhead in the upper Cowlitz River basin. Tacoma power then transports the fish by truck to the upper Cowlitz from the hatcheries. When both hatchery and naturally spawned juveniles head downstream, they are collected at the Cowlitz Falls Dam (the uppermost dam on the river). The company then transports the fish (again by truck) to the hatchery where they are placed in holding ponds.

Tacoma power is making a great effort to make sure the project is in the interests of the human population in Lewis County. When the Cowlitz Salmon Hatchery opened (in 1968) it was the largest salmon hatchery in the world. Because of Tacoma Power's efforts, anglers have a chance to catch fish; the reservoir provides many recreational opportunities; and communities displaced by the dam were compensated.³⁹

It seems that the conservationist should be satisfied with the project. After all, most alternative energy sources have negative impacts on humans and the environment as well.⁴⁰ The conservationist may argue that it is not wise to create more hydropower dams in general but objecting to this project independently would be hard.

Preservationists can object to the project more easily. Preservationists can argue that the fish, wildlife, and river ecosystem have been harmed by the project. Farmed salmon are not as healthy as wild salmon. They have to be inoculated against a variety of diseases to survive and the brood stock is so polluted by anesthetics that it cannot even be

used as dog food and must be buried rather than allowed to fertilize the river banks. Because the fish populations have been reduced there is also less food for bears and other predators. Other species are harmed by the dam too. Perhaps preservationists would argue that we should not use such brute force technology at all.

One who accepts the relational theory might disagree with both the preservationist and conservationist here. The relationalist might argue that we should not maximize energy production by using such large hydropower dams on the Cowlitz. Rather, she might point out that doing so is incompatible with respecting the identities of people in the Pacific Northwest. Relationalists would argue that better options are available in this case. She might say hydropower dams are acceptable if they blend with the ecosystem in a natural way. If we can harness energy from natural waterfalls with minor modifications that might be a good option. Smaller dams might also be worth considering. Finally, wind, geothermal, and solar energy are better ways to generate energy and sometimes these options are cost competitive with traditional energy resources.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The conservationist and preservationist approaches have one thing in common: they take human interests as exogenous relative to their preferred environmental ethic. In the one case, the preferred ethics is based on the idea that actions toward the environment should ultimately serve those exogenous interests. In the other, ethics is declared independent of exogenous interests. The relational approach claims that human identities are so intimately tied to nature that human interests evolve in relationship to nature. It claims that human beings have good reason to engage with nature so as to form such relational

identities and therefore to be open to the evolution of human interests. We believe relationalism presents a distinctive approach to the problems of environmental ethics and highlights considerations that neither the conservationism nor preservationism brings to the forefront.

The conservationist approach, by pushing human interests to the foreground of attention, truncates the possibilities of being human (here we agree that early Confucianism's overwhelming focus on the human social world needs to be broadened in a Zhuangist way); The preservationist approach pushes the human part of nature too far into the background (like Xunzi, we agree that Zhuangzi focused too much on *Tian*); the relational approach is an attempt to bring humanity and nature into a viable balance, for the sake both of humanity and nature.

ENDNOTES

Acknowledgment of intellectual credits and rights: omitted for blind review.

¹ Harry G. Frankfurt. *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 66.

² See Peter Singer, "All Animals Are Equal," *Philosophical Exchange* 1 (1974): 103-116; Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 197-218; Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 237-265. Some preservationists argue that we should let ecosystems or species evolve according to their own dynamics, as free from human interference as possible because it merits that kind of respect. For further characterization

of preservationism, see David Schmidtz, “Natural Enemies: An Anatomy of Environmental Conflict,” in *Environmental Ethics What Really Matters, What Really Works*, ed. David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willott (New York: Oxford University Press: 2002).

³ Kwong-loi Shu, “Conception of the Person in Early Chinese Thought,” in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study in Self, Autonomy, and Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 190-191.

⁴ Chung-ying Cheng has pointed out to us that the Confucian notion of the self involves the “*shendu* 慎独” (cautiousness in one’s solitude) and “*neizisong* 内自讼” (disputing within one’s own self), which are aspects not covered by its relations with others.

⁵ Susan W. Hartwick, “Identity, Place, and Locale in Galveston,” *Geographical Review* 91 (2001): 338.

⁶ See chapters 8 and 78 of the Wang Bi version of the *Daodejing*.

⁷ J.H. Heerwagen and G.H. Orians, “Humans, Habitats, and Aesthetics,” in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, ed. S.R. Kellert and E.O. Wilson (Washington, D.C.: Shearwater Books/Island Press, 1993), 138-72.

⁸ James Jerome Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 127.

⁹ William James, 1962. *Psychology: The Briefer Course*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press: 1962), 87-94.

¹⁰ Chapter 2, translation by Burton Watson, *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964): 31-32. We use Watson's translation here because it much better conveys the sense of wonder in this passage.

¹¹ This points to something of ethical cum aesthetic value – a world view with both ethical and aesthetic aspects. See [omitted for blind review]

¹² Omitted for blind review.

¹⁸ David Schmitz, "A Place for Cost-Benefit Analysis," in *Environmental Ethics What Really Matters, What Really Works*, ed. David Schmitz and Elizabeth Willott (New York: Oxford University Press: New York, 2002).

¹⁹ Freya Mathews, "Letting the World Grow Old: An Ethos of Countermodernity," in *Environmental Ethics What Really Matters, What Really Works*.

²⁰ See Bryan G. Norton, "The Environmentalists' Dilemma: Dollars and Sand Dollars," in *Environmental Ethics What Really Matters, What Really Works*; and Bryan G. Norton, *Searching For Sustainability* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²¹ Adapted from the translation by A. C. Graham, 135.

²² Michael LaFargue, “‘Nature’ as Part of Human Culture in Daoism,” in *Daoism and Ecology*, ed. N.J. Girardot, James Miller, and Liu Xiaogan (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2001), 52.

²³ David Schmitz, “When Preservationism Doesn’t Preserve,” in *Environmental Ethics What Really Matters, What Really Works*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Freya Mathews, “Letting the World Grow Old: An Ethos of Countermodernity.”

³⁰ Elizabeth Willott, “Restoring Nature, Without Mosquitoes,” in *Restoration Ecology* 12, no. 2 (2004): 147-153.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Walden Bello, Mary Lou Malig, Herbert Docena, and Marissa de Guzman, *The Anti-Development State: The Political Economy of Permanent Crisis in the Philippines*

(Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2004).

³³ Shepard Krech III, “Buffalo Tales: The Near-Extermination of the American Bison,” talked given at the National Humanities Center, 2006.

³⁴ David Schmitz, “When Preservationism Doesn’t Preserve,” in *Environmental Ethics What Really Matters, What Really Works*.

³⁵ Andy P. Dobson, A.D. Bradshaw and A.J.M. Baker, “Hopes for the Future: Restoration Ecology and Conservation Biology,” *Science* 277 (1997): 515–522.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See American Rivers, *River restoration case study: Hydropower Reform Cowlitz River Project, Lewis County, Washington* (2006).

³⁸ See American Rivers, *River restoration case study: Hydropower Reform Cowlitz River Project, Lewis County, Washington* (2006).

³⁹ City of Tacoma, “Hydro Power: Cowlitz River Project.”

⁴⁰ Omitted for blind review.

⁴¹ Omitted for blind review.