

TOWARD A NEW RELATION BETWEEN HUMANITY AND NATURE: RECONSTRUCTING *T' IEN-JEN-HO-I*

by *Shu-hsien Liu*

Abstract. The traditional Chinese idea of *t'ien-jen-ho-i* (Heaven and humanity in union) implies that humanity has to live in harmony with nature. As science and technology progress, however, the idea appears increasingly outmoded, and it becomes fashionable to talk about overcoming nature. Ironically, though, the further science reaches the more clearly are its limitations exposed. The exploitation of nature not only endangers many life forms on earth but threatens the very existence of the human species. I propose that a reconstruction of the traditional Chinese idea of *T'ien-jen-ho-i* will help us envisage a new and salutary relation between humanity and nature.

Keywords: functional unity; *li-i-fen-shu* (the one and the many); methodological pluralism; organism; regulative principle; *t'ien-jen-ho-i* (Heaven and humanity in union).

T'ien-jen-ho-i (Heaven and humanity in union)¹ has long been honored as the guiding principle of traditional Chinese culture. The idea has rich implications, among them the message that humanity has to live in harmony with nature. In the context of modern science, however, the idea appears outmoded, and it has become fashionable even for the Chinese to talk about the overcoming of nature. Unfortunately modern science is not omnipotent: not only has it failed to solve all of our problems and build a paradise on earth, it has created new challenges to the survival of human civilization. The unlimited exploitation of

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nature not only endangers many life forms on earth but threatens the very existence of the human species. I believe that a reconstruction of the traditional idea of *T'ien-jen-ho-i* will help us envisage a new relation between humanity and nature. And I propose to link this project to a reinterpretation of the messages derived from the Chinese classic the *Book of Changes*.

THE FUNCTIONAL UNITY OF THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF
THOUGHT IN THE *BOOK OF CHANGES*

Elsewhere² I have pointed out that four layers of meaning can be identified in the *Book of Changes*, each succeeding the other and yet each also interpenetrating the other. They are: (1) a system of mystical symbolism; (2) a system of rational/natural symbolism; (3) a system of cosmological symbolism; and (4) a system of ethical/metaphysical symbolism. It is my belief that unless we take a developmental point of view it would be impossible for us to work out a comprehensive understanding of the implications of this classic. I find that from a historical perspective mystical symbolism comes first, followed by rational/natural symbolism, cosmological symbolism, and ethical/metaphysical symbolism. The genetic order of these systems cannot be reversed. But once the symbolisms have been developed they exist side by side, and there could be backsliding; we must not presume that they develop according to a linear progressive sequence. Each symbolism has distinct characteristics, of which we can give a phenomenological description, and no symbol system can be reduced to another. Hence the structural, phenomenological approach must be employed to complement and supplement the genetic, historical approach.

As different symbolisms refer to different subject matters, it seems impossible to find a common denominator for all of them. But Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of culture points our thinking in a new direction:

Here we are under no obligation to prove the substantial unity of man. Man is no longer considered as a simple substance which exists in itself and is to be known by itself. His unity is conceived as a functional unity. Such a unity does not presuppose a homogeneity of the various elements of which it consists. Not merely does it admit of, even it requires a multiplicity and mutiformity of its constituent parts. For this is a dialectical unity, a coexistence of contraries.

"Men do not understand," said Heraclitus, "how that which is torn in different directions comes into accord with itself—harmony in contrariety, as in the case of the bow and the lyre." In order to demonstrate such a harmony we need not prove the identity or similarity of the different forces by which it is produced. The various forms of human culture are not held together by an identity in their nature but by a conformity in their fundamental task. If there is an equipoise in human culture it can be described as a dynamic, not as a static equilibrium; it is the result of a struggle between opposing forces. This struggle

does not exclude that “hidden harmony” which, according to Heraclitus, “is better than that which is obvious” (Cassirer 1944, 22-23).

Since the *Book of Changes* addresses the whole realm of human culture, Cassirer’s reflection is significant for our understanding of the classic. I find that the Neo-Confucian dictum *li-i-fen-shu*—principle is one, but manifestations are many—can provide us an important clue by moving in the same direction Cassirer takes.³ The *Book of Changes* originated as a book of divination, but in its present form it gives expression to a profound philosophy of creativity which embodies some of the best insights the Chinese culture has to offer to the world. Its central theme—Heaven and humanity in union—has found its various forms of expression in the four different kinds of symbolism whose functional unity (Cassirer) harmonizes like the music of a symphony. I will give a brief sketch of the problems involved in interpreting the *Book of Changes* and then proceed to discuss the issues in greater detail.

In mystical symbolism we find a mystical union between humanity and Heaven. Human affairs and natural affairs seem to parallel one another, and there is no gap between the natural and the supernatural. Divination provides the guidance for important decisions that affect the fortunes of the tribe or even the nation. Although such primordial unity has long been broken, the process of demystification or demythologization cannot be carried to the extreme without harmful consequences (Tillich 1957, 152; 1963, 142). Modern humanity is threatened by meaninglessness, we are isolated from nature to the extent that we become strangers in the universe. Anxiety—amply described by contemporary existentialist writers—is the inescapable result. As Immanuel Kant points out, we can never prove that there is purpose in the world of nature, but we are still awed by the stars in heaven and by human moral sensibility. There is still something sacred about our life on earth; it is in this sense that some myth is needed even for a civilized people.

In rational/natural symbolism we find that “Heaven and humanity in union” is expressed in a very different fashion. We must assume that the human mind understands to some extent how nature operates, otherwise the whole edifice of science would collapse. Even though today we may have lost the confidence to say that we can grasp the so-called laws of nature, we still believe we can make general statements about nature and give reasonable predictions of how nature will behave. We formulate hypotheses and design experiments in search of verification by empirical evidence. Today we fully realize that what is established is not final; it will soon be replaced by something that offers greater explanatory power or produces a better result. Although we may not be able to penetrate the mystery of science, at the very least we

find it untenable to maintain a strict dualism between formal and empirical sciences as was claimed by the logical positivists (see Dewey 1938, 519-20). Otherwise the ample role of mathematics in the empirical sciences would be without explanation—unless there is a kind of isomorphism between the mathematical order and the physical order. Regarding the relation between these two, F. S. C. Northrop's idea of epistemic correlation may appear outmoded, but it points in the right direction (Northrop [1947] 1959, 119-32). An epistemic correlation is a relation between an unobserved component of anything designated by a postulated concept and its directly experienced component also denoted by a concept.

In cosmological symbolism we find that "Heaven and humanity in union" is expressed in a philosophy of comprehensive harmony formulated by Chinese philosophers throughout the ages, and the *Book of Changes* remains a source of inspiration for giving new expression to this philosophy (Fang 1981, 83-112). Admittedly, cosmological speculation is not in vogue today, but it is not impossible—as S. C. Pepper (1942) has suggested—for us to form world hypotheses. The adventure of ideas is beyond the scope of normal science as portrayed by Thomas Kuhn (1962), but it may serve as the driving force to break out of today's paradigms. One insight offered by Chinese philosophers is that value must have an ontological basis; it cannot adequately be explained by or reduced to emotive responses or subjective preferences. True, *is* and *ought* pertain to two different realms and should be kept distinct, but neither must they be separated from each other. The Chinese view is somewhat congruent with Alfred North Whitehead's attempt (1929) to find values in the structure of being. Future explorations along this line must be encouraged.

In ethical/metaphysical symbolism we find that "Heaven and humanity in union" refers to the realization of a depth dimension within the self through the establishment of an ultimate concern. Humanity has a great endowment, and creative manifestations must find their root in a source of creativity within everybody.⁴ By our endowment we are able to be united with Heaven, which is not just the totality of nature but a transcendent creative ontological principle that works incessantly in the universe. Quests for the realization of such a union do not pertain to the realm of science but to the realm of moral metaphysics: only those who make their ultimate commitment to the Way and undertake a proper discipline may find union with this source (Liu 1971, 19-40).

LI-I-FEN-SHU (THE ONE AND THE MANY)

Certainly these symbolisms do not address themselves to the same subject matter, but they are different manifestations of the same prin-

ciple, Heaven and humanity in union, each in its own way—mystical, rational/natural, cosmological, and ethical/metaphysical—and each has undergone a long developmental process. As the modern mind has evolved it has demonstrated an unmistakably open, liberal, and pluralistic tendency. This is all to the good. But the cognitive pendulum has inadvertently swung too far, totally ignoring the underlying unity among the various manifestations of the same principle. Northrop (1946) is right to point out that the Western emphasis on differentiation is not enough; it must be complemented by the Eastern emphasis on undifferentiated continuum. Northrop over-simplifies the issues, and the perspective he represents has failed to win the support of scholars. “Undifferentiated continuum” does not adequately characterize Eastern thought. It cannot be said that traditional Chinese thinking attends only to undifferentiated continuum. True, the Taoists emphasized the undifferentiated unity of the Way, but Neo-Confucian philosophers opted to pay equal attention to unity and differentiation—indeed the dictum that principle is one while manifestations are many is inherited from them. Clearly, the creativeness of the Way must manifest itself in differentiations; the famous metaphor (Chu Hsi, 1130-1200) illustrating the point is “The same moon shines on different rivers” (Fung 1953, 541-42).

Of course, the kinds of differentiation experienced in modern society were not envisaged by traditional Chinese philosophers. Without radical reconstruction traditional Chinese thought is ill-equipped to cope with the modern situation. We must seek existential manifestations of the principle in our own way; the paradox is that only by breaking traditional confines will we be able to recover the profound insight that we have inherited from our own tradition.

Even we moderns need a little myth. As science is an integral part of human culture, it is presupposed that scientific inquiries are valuable for the development of human civilization. However, no scientific theory can prove or disprove that there is meaning and value in life. Thus the source of value cannot be sought in science; on the contrary it is this source of value which makes scientific inquiries meaningful for us. If it is a myth to believe life is meaningful and valuable, then it is a myth we cannot afford not to have. But this myth is a broken myth, subject to the critical examination of reason. It is not to be confused with superstitions that cannot be supported by empirical evidence. It is by way of a rational faith that we can draw from this mysterious source of value, which is inherent in ourselves, and in a way be united with it. But there is not much to be said in this regard. If life is indeed a mystery, it is of paramount importance that we commit ourselves to expanding this mystery by doing creative work to develop our culture so as to increase the richness and fullness of this life.

CHINESE VIEWS OF NATURE, NATURALNESS, AND THE
UNDERSTANDING OF NATURE

One area in which we can be most creative is in working out our relationship with nature. It is a truism to say that *Homo sapiens* has always lived in nature and is totally dependent on it. But when human culture has developed to a certain extent it can also stand out of nature and develop myriad options for relating itself to nature. Elsewhere I have summarized the Chinese view of nature, naturalness, and our understanding of nature as follows:

First, in major Chinese traditions, there is simply an absence of a sharp distinction between naturalism and humanism. Therefore, when these two terms are used to characterize Chinese thought, they should never be understood in their conventional sense, so that naturalism [the argument that things human can be adequately explained in terms of so-called natural causes] should never be pitted against humanism or vice versa.

Second, nature, for Chinese philosophers, is always understood in dynamic terms, as the Chinese have developed only the understanding of Tao, not the concept of Being. A Taoist like Lao Tzu would understand the Way through the process of reversion [going back to the root], and the Confucian philosophers through the process of creativity [working out the great potentiality of humanity].

Third, a person requires great insight and strict discipline to become one with the Way and to become "natural." Accordingly, "naturalness" should never be understood in terms of one's natural instincts or impulses. It means instead the realization of certain great potentialities within oneself.

Fourth, it follows that an understanding of nature depends on how one can develop insight into one's own nature and the creative origin of things. External nature is never understood on its own terms; it is always intimately related with human life. Since the Chinese refuse to see nature in the abstract, they fail to develop a thoroughgoing mechanical explanation of the universe. This may have hindered scientific progress in China. But ontologically the Chinese have been able to avoid what Whitehead called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Whitehead [1925] 1950, 75).

And finally, since we require a cultured sensibility to understand our own nature as well as the creative origin of things, culture and nature are mutually complementary terms. It is through a combination of the two that human life will attain its highest fulfillment and satisfaction (Liu 1982, 247-48).

Since the Chinese simply refuse to separate form from content, they have failed to develop a purely deductive logic and the mechanical explanation of the universe. Thus, even though China has contributed a great deal to the development of science and civilization in the world—as has been amply demonstrated by Joseph Needham (1954—)—it has failed to achieve the kind of breakthrough which enabled the West to enter the modern industrial era. But the mechanical model has been shown to have serious limitations. Ironically Needham sees the future of science in reviving the organic Chinese model which finds its classical expression in Chu Hsi's philosophy.

Whether Needham's prophecy will be fulfilled remains to be seen, and it will be confirmed or falsified by the actual course taken by the future development of science. What we can do at the present time is briefly to devote some philosophical reflection to the nature of science and its place in human culture.

SCIENTIFIC LAWS AND PRINCIPLES

In science we are trying to establish certain constant relationships among natural phenomena. The mechanical model works to the extent that human factors are ignored and we can reproduce the same effect in controlled laboratory experiments. But Albert Einstein's relativity theory has shown that the observer's position must not be ignored; his discovery has revolutionized our concept of science. Thomas Kuhn's study of scientific history shows that our scientific inquiries are theory-laden; observation and experimentation are conducted from particular perspectives, and paradigm-change is required when "normal" science cannot achieve its ends. But Kuhn seems to have overemphasized the discontinuity of the development of science. The reason scientists favor Einstein's relativity theory over Isaac Newton's classical theory can be acceptably demonstrated to any rational person, as it shows greater explanatory power and produces better results. The choice is never arbitrary, and it cannot be denied that there is continuity between the two theories.

Actually it is for similar reasons that we have adopted the Copernican heliocentric view over the medieval geocentric view. But the contemporary trend seems to favor a relativistic view, to which I cannot subscribe. I believe Cassirer is on the right track when he makes the all-important distinction between scientific laws and what he calls principles. He says

Principles do not stand on the same level as laws, for the latter are statements concerning specific concrete phenomena. Principles are not themselves laws, but rules for seeking and finding laws. This heuristic point of view applies to all principles. They set out from the presupposition of certain common determinations valid for all natural phenomena and ask whether in the specialized disciplines one finds something corresponding to these determinations, and how this "something" is to be defined in particular cases. . . . They refer not directly to phenomena but to the form of the laws according to which we order these phenomena. A genuine principle, therefore, is not equivalent to a natural law. It is rather the birthplace of natural laws, a matrix as it were, out of which new natural laws may be born again and again. We can now see why a principle is not to be understood as a mere collection of laws. The relation between principles and laws is the same as that between laws and results of measurements, as laws ("statements of the second level") do not arise simply through the summation of individual statements of the results of measurements, but possess as classes an independent significance, a logical being *sui generis*, so also

principles as “classes of classes” have a characteristic nature of their own. With them we enter once again a new “dimension” (Cassirer 1956, 52-53).

Cassirer further elaborates on his understanding of principles, including the so-called causal law, as follows:

Every rightly framed hypothesis in keeping with its factual meaning sets up a law concerning phenomena more general than what has till then been directly observed; it is an attempt to ascend to an orderliness ever more general and comprehensive. How far this attempt will succeed cannot be predetermined; in each particular case we must leave the decision to experience. But the search after ever more general laws is a basic feature, a regulative principle of our thought. It is precisely this regulative principle, and nothing else, that we call the causal law. In this sense it is given *a priori*, it is a transcendental law: for a proof of it from experience is not possible. It is true on the other hand, however, that we have no other warrant for its applicability than its success. We could live in a world in which every atom differed from every other and no regularity was perceivable. In such a world our intellectual activity would necessarily come to rest. But the investigator does not reckon with such a world. He trusts in the intelligibility of natural phenomena; and every particular inductive inference would be untenable for him, if this universal trust did not form its basis. “Here only one counsel is valid: Trust the inadequate and act on it; then it will become a fact” (Cassirer 1956, 62-63).

The key concept is that the so-called causal law must not be regarded as a law in the ordinary sense, that is, a statement of the second level. It is rather a regulative principle, not a constitutive one. Hence we cannot produce a proof of it from experience—it is something all scientific enterprises must presuppose. Here we find the functional unity underlying all our scientific activities. Unfortunately such a unity is largely overlooked at the present time. Cassirer’s view, however, echoes the traditional Chinese insight that principle is one, while its manifestations are many. Holding to this insight prevents us from falling into the untenable pluralism and relativism endorsed by a number of contemporary thinkers.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE COSMOLOGY

Methodological pluralism is very useful on the level of science, but when it is made into something absolute, insurmountable difficulties ensue. Traditional Chinese thought, on the other hand, has never been hampered by any kind of schism caused by hypostatization of abstract entities. Thomé Fang has characterized the traditional Chinese cosmology as follows: “The Universe, in our regard, is not merely a mechanical field of physical actions and reactions, but also a magnificent realm of concrescence of Universal Life. Such a theory may be called Organicism as applied to the world at large” (Fang 1957, 50). Fang notes the stark contrast between this view and that held by the

majority of modern European intellectuals: "They, much influenced by physical science, cannot but assume that the universe consists of a system of inert matter. The universe, in their opinion, is made up of the ultimate units of matter and energy, distributed and redistributed in all sorts of ways in observance of rigid mechanical laws. It is true that this habit of thought, as exhibited in the procedure of scientific investigations, has worked successfully, giving rise to a system of laws which are abstract and accurate" (Fang 1957, 51). The Chinese have paid a dear price for refusing to make such abstractions by lagging behind in modern science, but Westerners have a different price to pay. Fang says,

If the scientific materialism of this type is made use of in the very attempt to account for human life, then it will be overwhelmed with insurmountable difficulties. And, therefore, modern European philosophers, for the sake of formulating tenable theories concerning the meaning and value of human life, must start anew with different sets of assumptions. The trouble is that they are always making a great divide between matter and spirit. It is rather hard for them to bring things together which have been rashly severed. All through history they have been imposing on themselves an arduous task of developing a system of philosophy in which *Weltanschauung* and *Lebensanschauung* will work harmoniously together. But this effort of theirs, I am afraid, will eventually result in contradiction, if not in failure (Fang 1957, 51-52).

Professor Fang feels that this is where Chinese philosophy can contribute to world philosophy:

With regard to this problem, the Chinese philosophers have worked out a theory which is quite satisfactory. The universe, considered from our viewpoint, is fundamentally the confluence and concrescence of Universal Life in which the material conditions and the spiritual phenomena are so coalesced and interpenetrated that there can be no breach between them. And, therefore, as we live in the world, we find no difficulty in infusing the spirit into matter and immersing the matter in spirit. Matter manifests the significance of what is spiritual and spirit permeates the core of what is material. In a word, matter and spirit ooze together in a state of osmosis concurrently sustaining life, cosmic as well as human (Fang 1957, 52).

Traditional Chinese philosophy has given expression to a holistic view in which the relation between humanity and nature is an organic one. Modern humanity has learned that for practical purposes it is necessary to break up the primordial unity, to think in abstractions so that science and technology may be developed. But we must not forget that abstractions are still only abstractions; they cannot be made a substitute for real life. We need science and technology to expand the horizon of our life, but we must not let them dominate our life so as to forget the real purpose and meaning of life. Hence we must rediscover our organic understanding of life. Methodologically we can easily abstract parts from a whole, but we cannot make real organic wholes out of the

parts. Thus, it is not surprising that we cannot find any decisive proof in science to show that the world is organic in nature. We must revert to a simple faith which cannot be proved by science but which is also not contradicted by science.

RATIONAL FAITH FOR MODERN HUMANITY

Here we must encounter the problem of how to establish a rational faith for modern humanity. If we look at the external world only, it is hard to determine whether this world is benign or inimical to man. But to take the world as the external world only shows a rather superficial understanding of the world. Since Martin Heidegger (1962) our understanding of the world has grown much more sophisticated. For the sake of simplicity, let us say that the "world" is a meaningful structure resulting from the interaction between the subjective and the objective—these must not be seen as merely opposite to but as complementary to one another. Surprisingly, some four hundred years ago Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529) acquired insight into this matter:

In a single day a person experiences the entire course of history. Only he does not realize it. At night when the air is pure and clear, with nothing to be seen or heard, and without any thought or activity, one's spirit is calm and his heart at peace. This is the *world* of Fu-hsi. At dawn one's spirit is bright and his vital power clear, and he is in harmony and at peace. This is the *world* of Emperors Yao and Shun. In the morning one meets people according to ceremonies, and one's disposition is in proper order. This is the *world* of the Three Dynasties. In the afternoon one's spirit and power gradually become dull and one is confused and troubled by things coming and going. This is the *world* of the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods. As it gradually gets dark, all things go to rest and sleep. The atmosphere becomes silent and desolate. This is the *world* in which all people disappear and all things come to an end. If a student has confidence in his innate knowledge and is not disturbed by the vital force, he can always remain a person in the *world* of Fu-hsi or even better (Wang 1963, 238; italics added).

The "world" for Wang Yang-ming is a meaningful structure constantly in the making, and it has to do with the human disposition, which has always been what Heidegger calls being-in-the-world. While Heidegger merely gives a phenomenological description of the structure of Dasein, the Chinese philosophers put emphasis on commitment and discipline of the self in order to choose the world one cares to live in and to develop the great potential endowed in one's life. It is here one finds the metaphysical depth in one's being. As the *Doctrine of the Mean* says, "What Heaven (*T'ien*) imparts to man is called human nature. To follow our nature is called the Way (Tao). Cultivating the Way is called education" (Chan 1963, 98).

Now that we have gone full circle, I would like to summarize the following points. Humanity must start with a little myth—but the

primordial unity has to be broken. In the process, abstractions of humanity and nature must be (and have been) developed in order to expand the horizon of our understanding of our life in the world. However, such abstractions must not be regarded as a substitute for our real life. We must rediscover the holistic view of humanity and nature and reestablish a rational faith by realizing the metaphysical depth in our being. The situation is not unlike what has been expounded by the Ch'an (Zen) masters: in the first stage, one sees mountains as mountains, and waters as waters, in the second stage, one sees mountains not as mountains, and waters not as waters, and in the final stage, one sees mountains as mountains, and waters as waters (Ross 1960, 258). As we move from the modern to the post-modern era, we need to restore our senses and to see humanity and nature in a new light, again to see the mountains and waters for what they are.

NOTES

1. In the Chinese original *jen* means the whole human race without any qualifications. In view of this, my rendering differs slightly from the commonly accepted English translation of *Tien-jen-ho-i* as "Heaven and Man in union."

2. See my presidential address delivered at the Fifth Biannual International Conference of Chinese Philosophy, organized by the International Society for Chinese Philosophy and held in San Diego, California July 12-17, 1987: "On the Functional Unity of the Four Dimensions of Thought in the *Book of Changes*" (Liu 1987).

3. I have presented a paper, "A New Interpretation of *li-i-fen-shu*," at the Sixth East-West Philosophers' Conference held in Honolulu, July 30-August 12, 1989, which may open a way toward the meeting of East and West. For an understanding of the historical background of the dictum, see Chan 1963, 499-500.

4. See Henry Nelson Wieman's (1946, 58-66) discussion of the creative good. I was the last Ph.D. student Wieman directed before he retired from Southern Illinois University in 1966. Some of his ideas are very similar to Chinese philosophical ideas.

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