
**Anthropocosmic Thinking on the Problem of Nuclear Harm:
A Reply to Seth D. Clippard and a Plea to Mary Evelyn Tucker
and Tu Weiming**

N.A.J. Taylor

The New School for Public Engagement, The New School, USA

Law School, La Trobe University, Australia

Hannah Arendt Centre for Politics and Humanities, Bard College, USA

School of Political Science and International Studies,

The University of Queensland, Australia

hi@najtaylor.com

Seth D. Clippard's recent contribution to the broader discussion surrounding the ecological credentials (or pitfalls) of the world's religious and secular worldviews has much to commend it. In particular, his attempt to further develop a 'practicable' way forward for the ecological turn within the Neo-Confucianism thought of Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker is both timely and necessary. As Tu (2001: 243) remarked elsewhere, such a Neo-Confucianism may offer a path for China to 'reorient the human developmental trajectory of the modern world in light of the growing environmental crisis'. As do a number of commentators, Tu spoke of the developmental trajectory of China as an economy and state, to which he added a spiritual and intellectual dimension whereby China would also be tasked with the greater problem of global ecosystem collapse as a culture and people. For Tu, these twin observations required 'cultural China', as he called it, to offer an alternative vision to the world.¹

1. It is worth noting here how Tu has recently relocated to China to take forward 'China's New Confucianism', and that he sees his role as enabling the 'transmission' of these ideas both internally within China as well as externally to other states and peoples.

Clippard's intention appears to ground what he sees as a noble though impractical form of Confucian thinking. Indeed, as Clippard rightly points out, at the heart of Tu's and Tucker's Neo-Confucian environmental ethics is a 'cosmological vision of ontological unity' that permeates and interweaves Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. Tucker (2009: 52) neatly connected this approach to the task of environmental ethics as a 'transformative ethics and a naturalist cosmology'. For Tu (1989: 116), it was a form of 'inclusive humanism', in which the entire spectrum of the nonhuman world is brought into dialogue with a humanity that is at the same time 'learning to be human'.

For this reason, Tu has begun refining and operationalizing Raimon Panniker's idea of an 'anthropocosmic' perspective, whereby humanity remains central as a constituent part of a wider constellation that encompasses not only the life zone of Earth but also the greater cosmos. Tu's Neo-Confucian take on Panniker's anthropocosmic perspective therefore requires an ontological shift in how most people conceive of the scholarly inquiry into environmental ethics.

Clippard's intervention appears to be principally motivated by his assertion that 'cosmological ideas alone cannot...be a sufficient basis for responsible environmental action' (p. 20). Or as Clippard again states in more precise terms, '[T]he crucial issue for Confucian environmental ethics is not simply that of identifying a cosmological vision, but how the process of self-cultivation seeks to transform that vision into practice' (p. 21). My response challenges Clippard on his core assertion that cosmological understandings and insights cannot possibly be practical. I do so by intruding into the discussion between Clippard, Tu, and Tucker a heretofore neglected variable: the emergence of nuclear harms beginning in 1945 with the nuclear weapon attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and proceeding to the present day with the related problems of civilian and military nuclear accidents and waste. More specifically, I raise two possibilities in which Clippard's intervention may have erred: (1) the characterisation of Neo-Confucianism as nonanthropocentric along the traditional anthropocentric/nonanthropocentric continuum; and (2) the perceived impracticality of alternative cosmological visions. I do so not as a Confucian scholar, but rather as someone who is curious about how such alternative cosmologies may be rendered visible—or material—in the nuclear age.

Before I proceed I wish to say a word in defence of my introducing a seemingly irrelevant variable—the problem of nuclear harms—into the

field of religion and ecology.² My nuclear intervention is predicated on Clippard's claim to have constructed a 'values-based program of environmental education for the Chinese cultural sphere' out of the thought of Zhu Xi (p. 15). My intention here is not to assess the veracity of Clippard's claims against the alternative paths of Tucker and Tu, or any other 'new approaches to Western environmental ethics' (p. 15), but rather to call for Clippard, Tu, and Tucker to confront more directly an empirical problem that not only has arisen, but which arguably can no longer be ignored. Whilst this confrontation is especially needed for Tu and Tucker, whose cosmological beliefs emphasised the mutual implication and interconnections of 'the myriad things' in the universe, it is also necessary for Clippard, who seeks to 'transform that vision into practice' (p. 21). Although my nuclear intervention does not speak directly to the Neo-Confucian process of self-cultivation that is so crucial to actualising the accompanying grand cosmology, it does prompt the idea about whether thinking about nuclear harms might actually build a bridge between the cosmological path of Tu and Tucker and the social practices that are advocated by Clippard. This requires clarifying the meaning of anthropocosmic environmental ethics before turning to evaluate critically Clippard's damning assessment of its practicality.

What Is Central to Anthropocosmic Environmental Ethics?

According to Raimon Panikkar (1993: 24), whose contributions to civilizational dialogue and the construction of an anthropocosmic environmental ethics is known to have greatly influenced Tu, the term 'anthropocosmic' (or 'cosmotheandric') is designed to capture the 'three irreducible dimensions which constitute the real'. In similar terms to Tu, the anthropocosmic trinity included the divine/Heaven, the human/Humanity, and the Earthly/Earth in such a way as to implicate humanity in the boundless totality of the nonhuman world.³

This is at least my understanding of what Tu meant when he referred to an anthropocosmic environmental ethics. However, Clippard chooses instead to characterise Neo-Confucian environmental ethics such as Tu's

2. There are notably only a handful of contributions to this journal that even make mention of the nuclear age since its inception nearly ten years ago. This is surprising given the central role played by Catholic bishops in the nuclear ethics debates of the 1980s in particular.

3. Sam Mickey (2007) convincingly traced the term back further still, to the journals of Mircea Eliade beginning in the 1940s, although the idea that Tu borrowed the term from Panniker directly and completely is taken to be more common.

as occupying a place along the anthropocentric/nonanthropocentric continuum to which Western environmental philosophy remains so beholden. For Clippard, anthropocentrism does not refer to the privileging of human development at the expense of the nonhuman world or, in other words, conceiving of humans as the centre of all moral concern, as is more common in different formulations of ‘the ethical circle’. Rather, for Clippard, anthropocentrism refers to the more fundamental need for a ‘human basis’ to any conceivable moral code, such that ‘the argument for taking a nonanthropocentric...point of view can only be made in an anthropocentric context’ (p. 31).

As I understand it, however, Tu’s anthropocosmic perspective may be classified as neither anthropocentric nor nonanthropocentric. Rather, an anthropocosmic worldview offers not only an alternative vision based on a radically different cosmology from Western environmental ethics, but also a platform for thinking beyond human attachments in such binary terms. Whilst Tu’s is a humanistic environmental ethics, because of his cosmological assertions and their related ontological implications, it need not necessarily adhere to our existing either/or categories.

This idea that worldviews may circumvent the anthropocosmic/nonanthropocentric binary is not altogether unfamiliar in the English-speaking world. For instance, Anthony Weston (2006) sought to extend the possibility of the ‘multiverse’ (that itself is so fashionable within Western cosmology) into the applied realm of Western environmental ethics, which has been otherwise preoccupied by debates over the contours of various ‘concentric circles’ of moral concern. For Weston (2006: 69), what is practicably possible—and preferable—is ‘not one single circle, of whatever size or growth rate, but many circles, partially overlapping, each with its own center’. Earlier, Val Plumwood (2002: 8-9) spoke eloquently of ‘two historic tasks’ for those intent on ‘adding ecology’ from within the confines of a distinctly Western moral and political philosophy. Plumwood’s tasks were: (1) ‘(re)situating humans in ecological terms’ and (2) ‘(re)situating nonhumans in ethical terms’. Crucially, Plumwood (2002: 6-12) implored that these ‘two tasks’ be taken together—as *twin* tasks—if we are to redress effectively what she called the ‘rationalist hyper-separation’ of humans from ‘nature’.

One can see how Tu’s anthropocosmic environmental ethics, whilst not discussed by Weston or Plumwood, might well be accommodated within this Western ‘multi-centrism’ formulation. Both emphasise mutual co-constitution and interrelations, while at the same time neither decentring the human or relegating Earth or the cosmos proper to its periphery. But how these notions may each be made practicable, as Clippard demands, is yet to be fully realised. However, I can foresee a

path—itself only a possible way forward—whereby Tu’s anthropocosmic thinking can satisfy Clippard’s demands for it to address practicably problems that actually arise.

An Anthropocosmic Approach to the Problem of Nuclear Harm

Although Clippard regards anthropocosmic worldviews as ‘rhetorical’ and ‘speculative’, his reticence seems principally based on the perceived need for practicable environmental ethics, not merely seductive, cosmological ones. Indeed, for Clippard, ‘depending on a sea-change in worldviews as a remedy for impending environmental disasters raises the question of the practicality of implementing changes that will precipitate this change’ (p. 31).

But what might such a practicable environmental ethics look like? Clippard suggests that it requires building a bridge between the philosophical acceptance of the ontological unity of the triad (as presented by Tu and Tucker) and the ‘ordinary human being’ who, for Clippard, ‘generally holds an anthropocentric and instrumental value of nature’ (p. 35). By ‘practicable’ Clippard therefore means not only an ethic that can be readily put into practice, but one that adheres to his diagnosis of those who will be tasked with the prescribed practices.

My response to Clippard’s article seeks to posit an answer to the call for a practicable environmental ethics. I do so not by disputing Clippard’s reading of Confucian texts, but rather by suggesting something altogether more radical as a future research agenda for those—such as Clippard, Tu, and Tucker—who are intent on either constructing or explicating a Neo-Confucian environmental ethics. What if we were to consider, as I have elsewhere (Taylor 2014, 2015), that the nuclear harms that stem from nuclear weapons, accidents, and waste serve to reaffirm the material and ontological connection between humanity, the Earth, and the greater cosmos? That is to say, nuclear harms violate not only the human body, but also the global biosphere on which all life depends. That such nuclear harms variously occur on greater-than-human spatio-temporal scales (i.e., both inter-planetary and over more than 100,000 years) casts doubt on the continued distinction between the so-called human and natural worlds and relatedly, the utility of conceiving of ethics within an anthropocentric vs. nonanthropocentric binary. Such an ecological understanding of nuclear harms therefore serves to connect nuclear ethics and ecological ethics in a very tangible and practical way—but it may also provide a fruitful site for developing Neo-Confucian anthropocosmic environmental ethics in the practical way for which Clippard has called.

To say that nuclear harm is at a remove from Clippard's 'ordinary' Chinese would be to forget that, historically, individuals have had a discernible impact in relation to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Now is not the time to rehearse the history of nuclear politics; suffice to say that much of the Southern Hemisphere, as well as the contested territories of Antarctica, the seabed, the Moon, and the atmosphere are protected by legally binding nuclear weapon-free zones largely because of the actions of small groups of individuals. A single Mexican diplomat, Alfonso Robles, devised the nuclear weapon-free zone in the 1970s in order to 'achieve a gradual broadening of the zones of the world from which nuclear weapons are prohibited to a point where the territories of Powers which possess those terrible tools of mass destruction will become something like contaminated islets subjected to quarantine' (General Assembly 1974: 32). Elsewhere I have pointed to the role that grassroots anti-nuclear groups in Fiji, Australia, and New Zealand played in the establishment of the South Pacific zone (Taylor, Camilleri, and Hamel-Green 2013: 82).

Despite the global significance of the nuclear dilemma, Mark Elvin's (2006) *The Retreat of the Elephants* (which Clippard cites) made no mention of the series of nuclear tests that China conducted from the mid-1960s or of its civilian nuclear power industry that began in the early 1970s. Earlier, Julia Ching (2004: 260) explored the Confucian perspective on the broader matter of weapons of mass destruction (e.g., biological, nuclear, and chemical weapons), and she noted not only the Confucian 'distaste for war' but also the importance of the process of self-cultivation so prevalent in Clippard's, Tu's, and Tucker's Neo-Confucian accounts.

For those seeking to advance an anthropocentric worldview, my response has undoubtedly created more questions than it has delivered answers. But the key contribution of doing so is to claim that these same unresolved questions will require answering before Neo-Confucians may justifiably claim to have a practicable environmental ethics suitable for ordinary Chinese or policy elites.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

My reply constitutes the first attempt to my knowledge to intrude the problem of nuclear harm into Neo-Confucian, anthropocosmic thinking. I did so in the form of a corrective in response to two aspects of Clippard's article with which I most disagreed: namely, that neo-Confucian environmental ethics does not adhere to the Western anthropocentric/nonanthropocentric binary as Clippard had sought to classify it. I then contested Clippard's belief that cosmological assertions

about the unwavering unity of all beings and things throughout the cosmos could not be practicable. Doing so required inviting Clippard—as well as Tu, Tucker, and others—to engage in collective reflection on the emergence of the nuclear age in the hope that it may clear a realistic and realisable path towards the fulfilment of their shared Neo-Confucian environmental values.

There may be those who resist any move to introduce the universal problem of nuclear harm into the pages of this journal in general or the discussion between Clippard, Tu, and Tucker on Neo-Confucian environmental ethics in particular. To each of these sorts of responses my view would radically differ. The problem of nuclear harms that variously arises out of nuclear weapons, accidents, and waste goes to the very heart of the Neo-Confucian idea of the cosmic unity of all beings and things. The emergence of the nuclear age is known to have awakened a range of scholars to our mutual co-constitution and relation to the Earth within a greater cosmos. For instance, Hannah Arendt drew attention to the emergence of ‘explosions’ in human affairs, whereby ‘supernatural’ and ‘natural processes’, such as the release of atomic energy (whether peaceful or not), have ruptured the traditional ‘proposition that the ability to destroy and the ability to produce’ is no longer ‘unconditional’ because ‘the first atomic bomb was a horror of an energy that came from the universe’ (Arendt 2007: 158).⁴ Robert J. Oppenheimer additionally recalled the *Bhagavad Gita* in referring to himself as ‘the destroyer of worlds’ (quoted in Hijiya 2000: 123).

If cultural China does have something to say to the world, as Tu reasoned, and if Neo-Confucian thinking can and must be practicable, as Clippard demands, then surely the more focused task of navigating humanity safely through the nuclear age must soon be addressed, along with many pressing dilemmas. Whether that dialogical process will bring us closer to actualising the Neo-Confucian vision, as I have argued, may only be established once that process is underway.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. 2007. *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books).
- Ching, Julia. 2004. ‘Confucianism and Weapons of Mass Destruction’, in Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee (eds.), *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 246-69.
- Elvin, Mark. 2006. *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

4. For a more elaborate discussion of this point, see Taylor 2014 and 2016.

- General Assembly. 1974. 'First Committee Provisional Verbatim Record of the Two Thousand and Eighteenth Meeting', UN document A/C.1/PV.2018, 13 November.
- Hijiya, James A. 2000. 'The Gita of Robert Oppenheimer', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144.2: 123-67.
- Mickey, Sam. 2007. 'Contributions to Anthropocosmic Environmental Ethics', *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 11.2: 226-47.
- Panikkar, Raimon. 1993. *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (New York: Orbis Books).
- Plumwood, Val. 2002. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (Abingdon: Routledge).
- Taylor, Nicholas A.J. 2014. 'Rethinking Cosmopolitan Solidarity: Nuclear Harm from a Cosmic Point of View'. Paper presented at the annual meeting for the International Society for Environmental Ethics and the International Association of Environmental Philosophy, Allenspark, CO, 17–20 June 2014.
- . 2015. 'The Biosphere and Me', *Journal of Narrative Politics* 1.2: 153-66.
- . 2016. 'On the Possibility of an Arendtian Nuclear Theory', Bard College Hannah Arendt Centre for Politics and Humanities, 31 January 2016. Online: <http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=17360>.
- Taylor, Nicholas A.J., Joseph A. Camilleri, and Michael Hamel-Green. 2013. 'Dialogue on Middle East Biological, Nuclear, and Chemical Weapons Disarmament Constraints and Opportunities', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 38.1: 78-98.
- Tu, Weiming. 1989. *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay of Confucian Religiousness. A Revised and Enlarged Edition of Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Chung-Yung* (Albany: State University of New York Press).
- . 2001. 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World', *Daedalus* 130.4: 243-64.
- Tucker, Mary Evelyn. 2009. 'Touching the Depths of Things: Cultivating Nature in East Asia', in Donald K. Swearer and Susan Lloyd McGarry (eds.), *Ecology and the Environment: Perspectives from the Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School): 49-64.
- Weston, Anthony. 2006. 'Multicentrism', *Trumpeter* 22.1: 69-88.