

The Confucian Self and our Duties to Animals

I. Introduction

In an intriguing passage of the *Analects*, Confucius states that filial piety demands more than attending to the immediate physical needs of our parents. After all, he remarks, “even dogs and horses are given that much care. (*Analects* 2.7)”¹ A similar sentiment about how we treat others more generally is expressed in a passage in the *Mencius*: “To feed a man without showing him love is to treat him like a pig; to love him without showing him respect is to keep him like a domesticated animal.” (VIIA37).² The rhetorical force of both passages depends on our agreeing that treating humans, our parents in particular, like animals is unacceptable. That we do in fact owe our parents and other people in our lives more than we owe dogs or horses or other animals is not at issue. Indeed, the idea that we owe more to our parents and other humans than to our pets or beasts of burden would have appeared unremarkable, I would guess, to most humans throughout history.

Times change, however, and in recent years such a simple presumption can no longer be taken for granted. Driven by a utilitarianism that begins with an insistent impartiality not just between all humans but between all sentient beings, moral philosophers such as Peter Singer and James Rachels³ insist we resist the temptation to focus our moral concerns so exclusively on humans. While Singer and Rachels might allow that in *most* circumstances we should concern ourselves more with the care of

¹ *Analects of Confucius*, trans. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.

² *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau, London: Penguin Books, 1970.

³ Singer argues this most famously in *Animal Liberation*; for Rachels, see his *Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*. Not all philosophers who argue for greater moral concern for animals are utilitarians; Thomas Regan employs deontological arguments to much the same effect. See his...

humans than dogs or horses, this focus should not stem from a presumption that human welfare, or even the welfare of our own parents, is inherently more important than that of animals. To morally privilege humans in a general way, these thinkers claim, is to be guilty of speciesism, a moral failing on par with the by now nearly universally condemned sins of racism and sexism.

The idea that a prejudicial attitude towards animals is a serious wrong entered Western philosophy as part of a pointed attack on both the mistreatment of animals and the attitudes that many believe lead to and sanction this mistreatment. Philosophers like Singer and Rachels argue that the privileging of humans as unique and special—a facet of Western religion and philosophy from *Genesis* through St. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, and modern apologists for animal experimentation in the sciences—encourages a callous disregard for the welfare of other animals. Accordingly, animal welfare advocates frequently make this philosophical and religious prejudice one of their primary targets. Only by overcoming the philosophical and religious assumptions that license our mistreatment of other animals, they frequently argue, can we come to see them as beings worthy of full moral consideration.

A common assumption in this by now voluminous literature is that the Western schools of thought have been particularly pernicious and destructive in their attitudes and practices regarding other animals as compared to other religious and philosophic traditions. According to Singer, for example, [quote]. What is uncommon is any attempt to evaluate such claims through careful cross cultural comparisons beyond a handful of carefully culled quotes. A welcomed exception is Paul Waldan's *The Specter of Speciesism*, which argues for and provides copious documentation of the pronounced

tendency of Buddhist thought to morally privilege humans at the expense of other animals. Cutting flatly against the easy assumption of many animal rights minded philosophers, ...states [quote].

Waldan's project is an important one for both comparative and moral philosophy. Acknowledging that morally favoring humans or mistreating animals is not a Western invention raises important questions about the actual relationship between prevailing philosophical and religious beliefs and real world practices. More pertinent here, a careful examination of the moral thinking that diverse cultures have brought to bear on our treatment of each other and of animals could also do much to move the current discussion of animal rights and our duties to non-human animals beyond the narrow constraints of Western modern moral theory, where it is almost invariably cast in deontological or consequentialist terms. In particular, an appreciation of the philosophical understandings of humans and their place in the natural world prevalent in other cultures can provide us with additional resources for both defending and critiquing our moral attitudes towards other animals. It is in this spirit that the following, very exploratory, treatment of speciesism in Confucianism is offered.

II. Speciesism

Before we can evaluate the speciesist tendencies of the Confucian tradition, we need to get a bit clearer on just what speciesism is actually supposed to be, which is more complicated than might be expected. As it is usually explained, one is a speciesist if one gives moral preference to members of one's own species, and this is said to be immoral in just the same way sexism and racism are. These are believed to be immoral because we've come to realize that neither sex nor race provides valid grounds for moral

distinctions. To suppose men as such are more deserving of certain privileges or consideration than women is to draw a moral line on spurious grounds. Critics argue that species membership is just as illegitimate. [quote?] To a first approximation then, to treat A as morally less important than B on the basis of species membership alone is to be guilty of speciesism.

While this seems clear enough, there's an important ambiguity in this formulation that needs to be brought to light. We need to distinguish between what we might call a *de jure* and a *de facto* interpretation of speciesism. It is one thing to adopt beliefs or policy that make species membership *itself* a criterion for differential treatment or consideration. This would be the *de jure* reading. It is another to adopt criteria of moral relevance that results in and is *believed to justify* the systematic and presumptive favoring of members of one species over members of others. I'll call that *de facto* speciesism. If I say A is morally less important than B for no other reason than A is of a different species, I am engaging in *de jure* speciesism. On the other hand, if I think having X is necessary for full moral consideration, and only Bs have X, then I will again discriminate against As, but not simply because they are As. In this case I am *justifying* the discriminatory behavior against an entire species, rather than supposing that species membership alone is sufficient grounds for differential treatment.

Discussions of speciesism are unfortunately prone to ignoring this difference, but it's important to what follows to be clear. Few defend an outright *de jure* speciesism, and at the very least the philosophical and religious traditions most often directly targeted by critics typically offer reasons for their moral privileging of humans. Grounds for asserting human uniqueness vary, but tend to cluster around some claim to the effect that

humans are uniquely rational, and so possess a special kind of moral dignity. Denying equal moral concern to non-human animals is defended on their supposed lack of this trait. The moral slighting of non-human animals is, then, typically of the *de facto* sort. But once it is made clear that *de facto* speciesism is the issue, the comparisons to sexism and racism obscure as much as they elucidate. We can make the same *de jure/de facto* distinction with racism, for example, but importantly it seems as though it makes little moral difference: both are bad. Because there *are no* morally significant differences between the races, *de facto* racism is just as pernicious as *de jure* racism. Any grouping that puts all members of one race in one moral category and members of other races in another can only be based on spurious criteria. The stock comparisons of speciesism to racism and sexism, then, would lead us to expect a blanket rejection of *de facto* speciesism as well. In fact, however, no one uniformly condemns *de facto* speciesism, and for good reason: typically there *are* numerous morally relevant differences between humans and other animals, and so there are legitimate grounds for discriminatory treatment. While both reject the “traditional” grounds for drawing moral distinctions between humans and other animals, neither Singer or Rachels deny that we very often have morally good reasons to systematically treat humans differently than other animals, and even to value humans lives more than non-human lives as a general rule.⁴ [quotes?]

⁴ Rachels and Singer try to minimize this apparent failure of the analogy with sexism and racism by insisting that the common element is the slighting of ‘interests’ rather than discriminatory behavior per se. Though this isn’t the place to pursue the matter, this deserves a comment. The problem with this strategy is that it isn’t true to the historical facts of sexism and racism, both of which were historically defended in the very same way Rachels and Singer defend *de facto* speciesism: on the basis of perceived morally relevant differences between the races and sexes. Rachels and Singer would insist that it doesn’t slight the interests of chimpanzees to deny them the right to vote. Once upon a time the exact same thing was said of women. In short, racists and sexists could and often did justify their behavior by insisting that the discriminatory behavior didn’t amount to the slighting of interests given the (supposed) morally relevant differences between races and genders. In the case of race and sex these perceived differences have proved erroneous

What all this suggests is that debates about the moral permissibility of speciesism are really about questions of degree: *to what extent* and *for what kinds of reasons* are we justified in giving preferential treatment to humans? What Rachels and Singer won't allow is that we have morally sufficient reason to treat *all* humans as morally different—and morally more important—than *all* non-human animals in any and all contexts. That is, as Rachels puts it, it is morally wrong to put all human beings in one “moral category”—beings with a special dignity, or having a life with special value or intrinsic worth, or being otherwise universally worthy of special or unique moral consideration—and all other animals into another. It is common ground, however, that we can have some reasons to sometimes privilege humans in our actions and attitudes. Accordingly, if we are to evaluate the attitudes and practices of other cultures when it comes to morally privileging humans over other animals, we will be considering the extent to which those attitudes and practices can be defended and on what grounds.

III. Defending Speciesism: A Confucian Argument

With this in place, we can turn to the question of speciesism in Confucianism. That there is a marked tendency toward a sweeping *de facto* speciesism in Confucianism seems clear enough. Classic works, such as the *Analects* and *Mencius*, are full of passages that make uncritical reference to the routine eating, sacrificing, and instrumental use of non-human animals, and only rarely do other animals feature as objects of direct moral concern. [Footnote: examples] This is not to suggest that there aren't exceptions, or that they are not important. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the Confucian moral

and perniciously self-serving; but, again that there are such differences between humans and other animals, in a huge range of instances is not in dispute.

world is an essentially human world: the main moral focus of Confucian ethics is on humans and human interactions, and that it is fundamentally permissible for humans to make use of other animals at their expense is rarely challenged. The question I will address is whether this preference can be defended in Confucian terms: can the tradition provide plausible reasons for its relative slighting of non-human animals? It seems to me the tradition can offer such reasons, and that an examination of them reveals morally salient facts about humans and their relations to other animals that tend to be ignored in discussions of animal rights and welfare dominated by modern western moral philosophy.

Typical philosophical discussions of our moral duties to animals focus on the question of human uniqueness: is there some special thing about humans that make them morally more valuable than non-humans? In answering this I will focus mostly on the *Mencius*' account of what makes humans unique, an account that focuses on our capacity for moral development. For reasons that will emerge, pursuing the question of our moral uniqueness in the context of Confucianism highlights aspects of humanity that more typically remain hidden in typical debates about our duties to animals. What is shown to be most important in this tradition is not that humans enjoy a special cognitive faculty or capacity, such as reason or language. Rather, what matters most is the social and cultural environment that is believed to be essential to our moral and psychological development. My basic claim is that the moral focus on specific types of relationships that is so distinctive of Confucianism lends itself to a defensibly speciesist outlook and is independently plausible. We will begin by considering the sense in which Confucianism is willing to assert human uniqueness.

Ren Xing: What is it to be Human?

As Tu Wieming has put it, a governing ideal of Confucian ethics is the process by which we “learn to be human”. A recurrent motif of classical Confucian texts is a scale of moral accomplishment used to measure progress in reaching an inherently praiseworthy mode of living. A life well lived takes us beyond a kind of minimally existent of the small man or petty man (*xiaoren*) to the accomplishments of the morally exemplary person, a *junzi*, or, the person who is most exalted and worthy of emulation, the sage (*shengren*). Against this scale of moral achievement we measure our humanity: the sage, in a literal sense, is more truly or more perfectly human than the small man. What is meant by this?

As a normative ideal, a conception of what it is to be truly human trades on a possible gap between what a person might do with her life, and what is actually achieved or brought to fruition. That bridging this gap is said to be a way of achieving one’s humanity suggests further that the potential to be realized is inherent in, or typical of, humans as such, and that it is a distinctly, and a distinctly desirable, human trait. Going back at least to Plato and Aristotle, attempts to ground thinking in such ideals continue to have considerable influence in Western moral thought. A contemporary example in Western philosophy is Martha C. Nussbaum’s recent attempts to ground a conception of human dignity in the potential to develop specific cognitive, emotional, and social ‘capacities’ in distinctly human ways. Invoking Aristotle and Marx, Nussbaum argues that there are distinctly human ways of using our senses and cognitive abilities, and that a life in which opportunities to develop and use these capacities is denied is for that very reason compromised. A life in which we not only eat, but do so in ways deeply meaningful to humans, ways imbued, for example, with the significance meals shared

with family and friends, is richer as a result. Conversely, a life lived on the constant brink of starvation deprive meals of any significance beyond mere survival, and is to that extent impoverished. In short, according to Nussbaum, a life in which the human capacity for speech, knowledge and cultural expression are allowed to be expressed is richer, more distinctly human, than one limited to mere, isolated subsistence such as the “brutish” life Hobbes, for example, imagines we would live in a state of nature.

Mencius’ persistent appealing to what he calls *ren xing*—typically translated as ‘human nature’—can be read as suggesting something similar though still distinctly Confucian.⁵ For Mencius the nature (*xing*) of a person (*ren*) is not a matter of possessing a budget of distinct capacities so much as it being embarked on a social and cultural process of nurturing, refining, and expressing certain capacities, specifically those that make up the basic endowments (*cai*) of the human mind and heart (*xin*). While the Confucian emphasis on *li*, or ritual propriety, can be understood to include much of what Nussbaum emphasizes, there is in Mencius an initial focus on some more central human

⁵The translation of *ren xing* as “human nature” is not without controversy. Roger Ames in particular has argued that such a rendering cannot but evoke essentialist presuppositions that are alien to the classical Chinese view of things. In particular, he argues that such a translation will suggest that Mencius sees human development in strongly teleological terms, as if humans properly develop in the direction of an invariant, universally shared goal or endpoint. Such an idea would elide entirely the open ended, creative implications of *xing* as something that is defined only in the context of specific, individual, and concretely situated human lives. [quote] For Ames, that humans share some manner of a common physiology and/or psychology is much less important than what each of us can create uniquely through a life well lived. As Irene Bloom has argued, however, it is not easy to square this reading with Mencius’ repeated and purposeful use of botanical and organic metaphors, all of which seem strongly to suggest something like a folk understanding of the differences between natural kinds that includes a kind of natural teleology. I put this debate aside here—Ames and Bloom are in agreement in what matters to my purposes. Both would agree that the kind of moral psychological development Mencius stresses is both uniquely human and dependent upon the proper cultivation of specific kinds of relationships.

traits that underlies the significance of many of her listed capacities. The term *xin*, typically translated as ‘mind’ or ‘heart-and-mind’, is particularly important here. Mencius sees *xin* as providing all humans with a set of cognitive and effective capacities the proper employment of which is a requisite for a successful life as a human. Of particular importance here is Mencius’ insistence that the cultivation of this endowment, if it is not thwarted or distorted, is an inherently *moral* enterprise, a process involving both the cultivation of moral sentiments and a morally informed understanding of the world. Human development, to use the language of modern psychology, *just is* moral development—the latter is not in anyway seen as a mere portion or aspect of the former. To develop and grow as a human, to put it another way, is to grow as a moral person. Mencius explicates all this in the following way.

In A7? Mencius famously introduces the four “sprouts” of moral virtue (*siduan*) that both mark the line between humans and other animals, and provide a kind of ethical ideal of what humans can and should become. These innate sentiments or affective tendencies represent the capacity, typical of and unique to humans to develop the four Confucian virtues of wisdom (*zhi*), righteousness (*yi*), benevolence (*ren*), and propriety (*li*). Each of these, for Mencius, is connected intimately with a specific emotion or sentiment (*qing*) found in the heart-and-mind (*xin*). In an arresting and often quoted passage, Mencius makes plain the centrality of our capacity for moral development and the sentiments involved by insisting that anyone who saw a small child close to falling to a well would respond with a feeling of compassion. A failure to so respond, Mencius continues, would evince a lack of humanity, and could only represent some kind of failure to develop as humans should. According to Mencius, finally, it is the potential for

the growth of the four sprouts and a life lived by the moral values attached to each that distinguishes humans from animals.

At the heart of the Mencian moral picture, then, lies an entwining of human psychological and moral development. What needs to be shown next is that this picture holds some plausibility, and that it can underwrite the Confucian tendency to morally privilege humans. To do both, we will turn to another well studied feature of Confucian moral psychology, namely the emphasis on what is often called the relational self. The controlling idea here is that human psychological development can only occur in the context of developing intra human relationships, and that this development itself requires the moral sensibilities discussed above.

The Relational Self

Different understandings of personhood or the self are routinely invoked as an example of the ways in which Eastern and Western thought diverge. The contrast is usually made between a relational conception of the self, which is said to be more typical of Asian thought, and an individualistic or ‘atomic’ conception of the self, which is said to be more paradigmatically Western. The contrast can be understood in terms of difference conceptions of identity conditions: what makes a person the particular person she is?

To a first approximation, a relational conception of the self would individuate persons (‘selves’) by reference to relationships, rather than intrinsic psychological and cognitive features of individuals. That is, each person can be identified in reference to the intersection of relationships they enter into. As Henry Rosemont Jr. puts it, according to the relational concept, “there can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I

am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others.”⁶ To be the author of this paper, for example, is to be the person who is son to a particular couple, brother to two other people, husband to a particular woman, father to two particular children, colleague to a set of further individuals, and so on. What makes me *me* is *not* my particular personality, character traits, interests, continuities of memories, or an intrinsic essence or soul.

By contrast, an atomic conception of the self begins with features of the individual, and treats some combination of them as constitutive of persons. Focusing on intrinsic psychological traits might allow that relationships can be the locus of formative experiences, but would still identify the person with the *possessor* of these traits, an individual who exists independently of and conceptually prior to social contexts and relationships. Rather than seeing the individual as a product of a inherently social life lived in a specific time and place, the atomic conception sees the individual as existing prior to all attachments. On this view, our relationships are (at least conceptually) secondary, things we enter into rather than part of what constitutes us as persons.

This set of distinctions is fine as far as it goes, but I would like to press a certain line of thought that in some ways diminishes the differences between them in important ways. The atomic conception of the self seems plausible if we focus on certain aspects of our psychology: my thoughts, feelings, memories, and personality *are* my own, and are easily distinguished from those of others. Furthermore, despite the real life centrality of the social and familial roles I play, it seems odd to suppose I *wouldn't exist* without them, however different I would be. The subject of those thoughts, feelings, and the like do

⁶ Quote in David B Wong, “Relational and Autonomous Selves”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31:4 (2004).

seem to be *conceptually* prior to all such attachments. There is, I think it has to be granted, a certain plausibility to the atomic conception of the self at the conceptual level.

However, if we focus less on abstract identity conditions and our private inner lives, and more on our *actual experiences* as individuals, however, thinking in terms of a relational self provides insights not available from the atomic perspective. One advantage of thinking in terms of relational self is the relief into which it puts the psychological interconnectedness of human beings. The relational conception of the self has its own plausibility precisely because relationships are themselves psychologically salient: much of our mental lives that we most value would be impossible without them. The particular relationships in which we find ourselves define in great measure our opportunities to feel and express our emotions, passions, and desires, and to have defining experiences, create memories, and find opportunities for self-expression. As David B. Wong puts it, “at least many of our constituting traits involve dispositions that are triggered by specific persons in specific social contexts.”⁷ While our emotional lives are ours as individuals—my anger is no one else’s—the precise contours of our emotional vulnerabilities and patterns of intimacies, the conditions under which certain emotions can be elicited from us, are very much tied to our specific relationships with particular people and the circumstances those relationships allow or create. As we all know, some people are able to anger us with words or deeds which would be far less upsetting coming from another; as parents can discover to their horror, an impatient or critical word from them can have a devastating effect on a child when the same comment coming from a sibling or friend would have been shrugged off. To go the other direction, our capacity to find joy in the achievements of our children or friends, or pride in the

⁷ Wong (2002), pg. 422.

accomplishments of our colleagues, expands our opportunities for experiencing those feelings as well. The general point, then, is simply that even if we take psychological and cognitive traits, our interior mental lives, as constitutive of a self, the simple fact of what might be called psychological interpenetration would give us reason to think of that self relationally as well.

If this is right, then the moral development that was identified with human development above can only occur within a thoroughly human world, a shared social and cultural world in which opportunities to develop human relationships is paramount. Simple facts of biology give us *prima facie* reason to think that our relationships with *other humans* will be overwhelmingly more important and substantial—more constitutive of who we are—than any relationships we might form with other animals. Our degree of psychological interpretation will surely be greater among other humans, and our need to be able to forge relationships that are mutually beneficial and productive will likewise point to our common humanity. As Confucius himself said, “We cannot run with the birds and beasts. Am I not among the people of this world? If not them with whom should I associate (18.6)?” Together these claims provide a *prima facie* reason for us to see humans beings in a unique moral light *vis-à-vis* other animals. The specificity of the kinds of relationships in question, and the extent to which they are plausibly tied to some basic biological and psychological facts is worth emphasizing.

Confucianism and the Five Relations

The Confucian moral tradition is distinctive in its understanding of the relational concept of the self in emphasizing particular *kinds* relationships, and attaching particular moral importance to them. While the Confucian emphasis on *ren* makes the point that is

only through the cultivation of productive and genuine relationships with others that an individual truly achieves her humanity, the tradition details *which* relationships in particular are essential. Relationships are not fungible, so to speak, and some are more important than and take precedence over others. The traditional emphasis on the *wu lun*, or Five Relations of fathers/son, ruler/subject, husband/wife, elder/younger brother and friend/friend is particularly important here. Of these five, the three familial relations take precedence: other social and political relationships are understood to be modeled on and built upon the foundation of these more basic familial relationships. The great emphasis on filial piety (*xiao*) as the ‘root’ of virtuous character more broadly makes the point most vividly. Evoking the image of expanding or concentric circles, the view throughout Confucian thought is that only by first cultivating the most basic family relationships that we prepare ourselves for broader human interaction.

Much can and has been made of this focus on family relationships, and the use of filial piety as a kind of model or foundational relationship in particular. The point to be made here is that the privileging of some human relationships, and the privileging of the particular relationships chosen by Confucianism as most important, can be offered a *prima facie* defense. Specifically, the choice of the Five Relations does not seem *arbitrary*, whatever else may be said about it. There do seem to be certain constraints on the kinds of relationships most of us will enter into most readily and in what order, and on the kinds of emotional attachments we naturally expect them to involve.

We come into this world as sons or daughters, and the identification of some of the many humans around us as ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘sister’, ‘brother’ is largely inevitable. “Largely” because there are exceptions, but of course the exceptions are notable for that

very reason. Asking someone you've come to know well enough what their parents were like seems reasonable, and if the reply indicates the person never knew their mother or father we naturally think there must be a story that would explain why. Asking someone about their great aunt's cousin's son is another matter. Much of what seems "natural" here indeed stems from biological constraints; until recently, at least, there is only one way any of us entered into the world, and it guaranteed that each of us would have two biological parents. Again, this does not guarantee in turn that these two individuals will play the *role* of parents, or will play that role for any particular period of time, but it does tend towards a world in which having two parents to whom one is biologically related is more typical than being adopted or raised by an aunt or in an orphanage. In a similar way, it seems the other relations in the *wu-lun* also reflect a certain naturalness based on typical social and political realities.

If it can be argued that the Confucian emphasis on the particular relationships it highlights can be given a *prima facie* defense, in that they are at least not arbitrarily chosen but rather represent naturally salient relationships, the same can I think be said about the underlying importance attached to them. The importance of these relationships is two-fold. First, it is within the family that an individual first begins to acquire the social knowledge that will enable her to navigate her social world. Mastering the ways of *li*, or ritual propriety, is emphasized in this regard, as it only by first learning how to *behave* as a son or a daughter, an older or younger sibling, that we can take on other social roles and master the attendant behaviors. Hence the pervasive theme in Confucianism that if things are not right between parents and children we can expect

trouble in society at large. More important here is the sense in which moral and social development are as inseparable in Confucian thought as moral and human development.

To expand on this point, the moral centrality of humans stems from the simple fact of collective need. For one person to achieve their humanity requires their being embedded in a human community, beginning with the family. This is essential, it must be stressed, to their psychological development; absent this, they will literally not develop as a human. As we've seen, such development is also tied intimately to the expression of distinctly moral capabilities. When it comes to the expression of distinct moral obligations—questions of how we should act—it is essential to remember that such questions, in the Confucian world, can only be raised within this distinctly communal context. To abstract away from one's social world and one's links to other to whom one is variously related, is to lose the context that makes morality possible.

The same point can be made in a slightly different way by attending to the importance attached to the mastery of *li*. Displaying the outward behavior demanded by ritual propriety is not sufficient for truly fulfilling familial and social roles; also necessary are the attitudes and feelings that produce genuine respect and piety. Recall Mencius' claim that merely to feed a person without love is to treat her like a pig. With the development of the *knowledge* of how to behave must come the inner dispositions that allow us to act with the appropriate *feelings*. This too happens only in the cultivation of the core relationships that lie at the heart of our humanity, because it is within those core relationships that the requisite feelings are most naturally found and most easily developed. [quote] In IIIA4, Mencius makes the point another way. Affluence, he warns, can cause the common people to “degenerate to the level of animals”; the remedy

is “education and discipline”, meaning in particular and education in “human relationships: love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and faith between friends.”

In sum, the Confucian emphasis on the relational self, particularly when combined with the focus on specific kinds of relationship, lends itself to a distinctly human centered moral vision. The cultivation of these relationships, where that includes the cultivation of the emotional and psychological dispositions and feelings that sustain them, is seen as a necessary condition of our truly living as human. This picture both reflects and reinforces a tendency to see humans in one way and all other animals in another, since throughout the primary relationships are between humans, and reflect basic, fundamentally biological, psychological and sociological tendencies of humans. Only humans can be party to the Five Relations with other humans, and in general the kind of psychological and emotional resonance that Confucians are counting on will be felt most readily, and most strongly, between humans. As emphasized, the centrality of the basic, natural feelings that underlie these relations are taken as foundational, and in the Confucian tradition our ability to extend our moral concern beyond the Five Relations, so that we can recognize moral duties to non-kin, depends on our ability to analogize these feelings in our interactions outside the family. A general sense that others are *much like us* in important ways is an critical basis for extending our moral concern to them, and no doubt helps to explain just *why* we would respond to the endangered child with compassion, and why would be deeply suspicious of anyone who failed to so respond. As Mencius says in another context, we excuse the moral

insensitivity of animals, and we would not typically expect a similar compassion for wayward children on the part of a dog or horse.

V. The Moral Priority of Humans

If successful, this Confucian defense of a human centered moral world would justify the tradition's preoccupation with inter-human relations. It would also, I will argue shortly, provide grounds for preferring substantial human interests when they clash with those of animals. It is important to note, however, that though this is 'speciesist' in the sense of marking a moral distinction along species lines, it does not entail morally disregarding animal welfare entirely. Indeed, as Waldon notes, such a position is consistent with allowing that substantial non-human animal interests can trump trivial human interests. So, for all I've said, it might still be wrong even on Confucian grounds to treat animals in certain ways—I'll return to this. Still, the result arrived at is not trivial. To get a clearer sense of just what it does entail we can use an example provided by Peter Singer.

In *Animal Liberation*, Singer tries to sharpen the idea of speciesism by having us consider the infliction of comparable amounts of gratuitous pain on a horse and on a human baby. There presumably is some common amount of pain that we can inflict on each, and Singer supposes this might be accomplished by slapping the baby while whacking the horse with a stick. Singer's point is that *all else being equal* it is wrong to think the pain caused the baby by slapping it is morally worse than the pain caused to the horse by whacking it, simply because the baby is human. Hence, to morally prefer causing pain to the horse, simply because it is not human, is to be guilty of speciesism.

Such a preference, according to Singer, is morally on par with preferring to cause pain to a woman rather a man, simply because she is a woman.

We can begin a Confucian analysis of this peculiar argument by noting an awkward move Singer is forced to make at the outset. As a utilitarian, Singer cannot dismiss the prevalent human preference to feel much more protective of (human) babies than of horses—surely it will cause me more distress to slap the baby. All else being equal then, it seems we have good reason on utilitarian grounds alone to opt for whacking the horse. Singer can answer, however, that this preference itself is an expression of speciesism, and so should not figure in to our more considered moral reasoning. A morally preferable state of affairs would have us rising above our normal tendency to feel more protective of human babies than horses. [quote?] It is just this slighting of a basic psychological reality that a Confucian would challenge from the outset.

The reason why it makes little sense to deny our psychology in such a case emerges when we ask another question whose salience Singer's utilitarianism doesn't allow him to recognize. Facing such a choice, I would surely have to take into account the matter of *whose baby this is*. Is it mine? If so, surely we should give *some* moral weight to that fact. Indeed, one might plausibly think this fact alone would be decisive: a father who would favor a horse over his own son or daughter would commonly be thought to be committing a grave moral failure, considering the special duties parents have towards their children, and the feeling we expect parents to have for their children. Similar considerations would seemingly hold if the baby is a niece, a neighbor or friend's child, a child I regularly baby-sit. All these roles would put me in a particular kind of relationship with the child which brings with it special kinds of responsibilities, and all

would seemingly require a certain kind of psychological response that could generate the appropriate levels of concern and compassion. Even if the baby were a foundling with no known living relatives, the fact that *I* had found it first, would obligate me to care for it at least provisionally. Anyone who comes across an abandoned baby plausibly acquires a duty to care for it, a duty that others don't share. Norms governing human interactions are, in fact, highly sensitive to relationships and it's hard to imagine any scenario in which the facts that this is a human baby would not have any bearing on my recognized duties towards it. The very fact that it's a *baby* would entail my standing in *some* kind of morally significant relationship to it.

Now, of course, the same can be true of the horse. If faced, somehow, with the prospect of having to hit a horse with a stick it would matter just whose horse it is, and how I stand towards it. If it's *my* horse, one I've taken on the responsibility to care for, hitting it takes on a special moral salience, and if I have no good or excusing reason for treating it this way, my failure is especially acute. But arguably, and this is the point I've been working towards, the simple fact that it is a *horse* and not a baby will guarantee that it will always stand in *different* kinds of relationships with me: no horse will be a son, or niece, or neighbor's child, or orphan in need of inclusion in a human family. As things stand, moreover, it's the human relationships that will most often be seen as morally more important. From a Confucian perspective it is hard to see how a relationship with a horse could ever be as morally salient as those with other humans.

In response to this Singer could either bite a sizable bullet and argue that putting moral weight on human relationships as such is itself an indefensible bit of speciesism. Or, more plausibly perhaps, he can argue for such a preference on utilitarian grounds.

Perhaps human psychologically being what it is, an innate and ineliminable preference for humans much itself be entered into the utilitarian calculus. In either case, it is clear that asking the question of whom to harm with an eye to obvious facts of human psychology and inter-human relationships introduces numerous considerations obscured by Singer's more straightforward preference utilitarianism. The Confucian account outlined above, by way of very sharp contrast, moves those facts to the forefront. The baby's inclusion in my social if not familial world would be both ineliminable and morally paramount: to even ask whether I should slap the baby instead of hitting the horse would betray a lamentable lack of compassion of a sort necessary for my full humanity (recall the baby crawling towards the well). A failure to so respond both emotionally and in my behavior would suffice to raise serious doubts about my suitability as a parent, neighbor, and so on. My relationships with horse, whatever we end up saying about them (again, see below) will be of a secondary importance.

In short, the Confucian world is overwhelmingly one in which humans must focus on their relationships and interactions with other humans. It is a world where moral failing almost always takes the form of failings in our duties to other humans. In such a world, the death of a human being would invariably carry more moral weight than the death of an animal: a human being will always be someone's son or daughter, and very likely someone's sister or brother, husband or wife, father or mother, colleague, friend, neighbor, and so on. Even if a perfect stranger, we should have a sense that had things turned out differently, the deceased could have been *our* son or daughter, sister or brother, and so on. The Confucian insistence that our duties to our parents and others continue even after their deaths, an insistence doubtless rooted in part in the recognition

that our emotional attachments to the deceased can persist throughout the remainder of our own lives, suggests a generally pious attitude towards human life in general. In such a moral world, other animals will surely strike us as less important and often outside the circle of moral concern.

VI: The Argument Reconsidered

Having argued that the Confucian tradition tends towards and offers a way of defending a strongly human centered—speciesist—moral vision, I will conclude by offering some ways in which that very argument might be challenged in Confucian terms. We can begin with a point that should have been clear throughout: much of what has been said about the moral importance of certain kinds of relationships between humans can be said about at least some relationships we might have with some animals. People can have, after all, deep feelings for their pets, and the keeping of pets can at least arguably be morally salient in defining duties and providing opportunities to develop many of the dispositions—compassion, love, a sense of right and wrong—prized by Confucians. As Nora Diamond has noted, when they become pets, animals take on many of the trappings of persons, and begin to play roles in our lives that can approximate those played by our human intimates. [Footnote Diamond and passage from Confucius about burying your pet dog]. Still, it's not clear how far this point can be pressed, for the simple reason that in so many ways pets are exceptions: very few of the world's animals make good pets, and even among those that do there are important limits to just how deeply they can penetrate our emotional and social worlds. The lack in other animals of language, and the broader fact that humans share so much less of their psychology with other animals, suggests that such limits may be ultimately insurmountable.

A perhaps better route to diminishing the speciesist tendencies of Confucianism may be found in considering our capacity for concern for animals, pets or otherwise, and what our behavior towards them says about us. This is a matter which the tradition itself on occasion appreciates, and passages can be found that make it clear that the *junzi* would certainly not be completely indifferent to the mistreatment of animals. Confucius apparently felt the strictures of *li* carried over into activities such as fishing and hunting, and avoided at least methods that seem less sporting (*An.7.27*). More impressive from a modern perspective would be Mencius' praise for King who felt such compassion for an ox that he spared its life rather than see it sacrificed.⁸ Indeed, a *junzi* is to feel such compassion for animals, according to Mencius, that the kitchen should be avoided. Perhaps the point can be most clearly if we return to the famed case of the child crawling towards the well. Mencius argues that we should doubt the humanity of anyone who could witness such a thing without the stirrings of compassion. But shouldn't we wonder about the humanity of someone who is indifferent to the suffering of animals, and for much the same reason? Distress at an animal's suffering surely expresses the capacity for compassion as distress at a human's suffering, and often seems just as natural. The neo-Confucian Wang Yangming makes exactly this point, and broadens the very idea of what it is to be *ren* to include such feelings for animals:

When we see a child about to fall into the well, we cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that our humanity (*ren*) forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when we observe the pitiful cries and frightened appearances of birds and animals about

⁸IA7. It should be noted that the king orders a lamb to be used instead, and is chided by Mencius for showing such compassion for animals while not always treating his subjects well.

to be slaughtered, we cannot help feeling an “inability to bear” their suffering.

This shows that our humanity forms one body with birds and animals.⁹

Though to date such a sense of a broader moral and psychological connection between humans and animals has not been a dominant theme of Confucian thought, it is certainly suggestive and perhaps points to a way towards a less human centered world view.

Whether or not it would suffice to overcome all vestiges of speciesism in Confucianism, it does seem to me to suggest a morally and psychologically plausible starting point for rethinking our duties to animals.

As far as it what is genuinely within him is concerned, a man is capable of becoming good...As for becoming bad, that is not the fault of his native endowment. The heart of compassion is possessed by all men alike; likewise the heart of shame, the heart of respect, and the heart of right and wrong. The heart of compassion pertains to benevolence, the heart of shame to dutifulness, the heart of respect to the observance of the rites, and the heart of right and wrong to wisdom. (*Mencius*, VIA6)

⁹ Wang Yangming “Inquiry on the Great Learning, “ Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*, quoted in Tu Weiming, “The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implication for China and the World” in *Daedalus (Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Fall 2001)*. Wang Yangming takes things even further: “it may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as we are. By when we see plants broken and destroyed, we cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows that our humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as we are. Yet even when we see tiles and stones shattered and crushed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows that our humanity forms one body with tiles and stones.