Professor Wu Teh Yao was an original drafter of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. I learnt from him that the idea of human rights is predicated on the respect for the dignity of the person and that Confucian Humanism, with belief in and commitment to the intrinsic worth of being human “among the lives of myriad things between heaven and earth, human beings are the most precious” (tiandi zhixing renweigui) is profoundly meaningful for rights-consciousness as well as the sense of duty. I share his belief that the Confucian tradition offers rich spiritual resources for human rights discourse.

The original conception of human rights under Eleanor Roosevelt’s leadership included economic, social, and cultural rights as well as political rights. This is compatible with group rights as well as individual rights. Human rights are inseparable from human responsibilities. Although

---

*I am grateful to Nancy Hodes and Rosanne Hall-Tu for their thoughtful critique and editorial help. In preparing for this lecture, I have used material from two unpublished essays of mine — a statement prepared for the Panel on Human Rights at the annual meeting of the Committee of 100 (Los Angeles, February 25, 1994) and a paper entitled “Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality — Humanity and Rightness: Exploring Confucian Democracy,” submitted to the Seventh East–West Philosophers’ Conference, East–West Center, Honolulu, January 13, 1995. This chapter is a reproduction of the Wu Teh Yao memorial lecture given by the author in 1995.
Tu Wei-ming

in the Confucian tradition, duty-consciousness is more pronounced than rights-consciousness — to the extent that the Confucian tradition underscores self-cultivation, family cohesiveness, economic well-being, social order, political justice and cultural flourishing — it is a valuable spring of wisdom for an understanding of human rights. The argument that Confucian humanism is incompatible with human rights needs to be carefully examined. Human rights as “the common language of humanity,” to borrow from United Nations Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, is a defining characteristic of the spirit of our time. The foundation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been broadened and strengthened by governments, nongovernmental organizations, and conscientious citizens throughout the world for almost half a century since 1948 when Professor Wu Teh Yao took part in an unprecedented effort to inscribe not only on paper but also on human conscience the bold vision of a new world order rooted in respect for human dignity as the central value for political action.

In an historical and comparative cultural perspective, this vision emerged through a long and arduous process beginning with the Enlightenment movement in the modern West in the 18th century. The Enlightenment mentality underlies the rise of the modern West as the most dynamic and transformative ideology in human history. Virtually all major spheres of interests characteristic of the modern age are indebted to this mentality: science and technology, industrial capitalism, market economy, democratic polity, mass communication, research universities, and professional organizations. So are the values we cherish as definitions of modern consciousness, including: liberty, equality, progress, the dignity of the individual, respect for privacy, government for, by and of the people, and due process of law. We are so seasoned in the Enlightenment mentality that we assume the reasonableness of its general spiritual thrust. We find the values it embodies self-evident. The Enlightenment faith in progress, reason, and individualism may have lost some of its persuasive power in New York, London, and Paris but it has remained a standard of inspiration for intellectual leaders throughout the world. Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Singapore are no exception. A fair understanding of the Enlightenment mentality requires frank discussion of its negative consequences and destructive power as well.
The runaway technology of development may have been a spectacular achievement of human ingenuity in the early phases of the Industrial Revolution, but the Faustian drive to explore, to know, to conquer, and to subdue has been the most destabilizing ideology the world has ever witnessed. As the Western nations assumed the role of innovators, executors, and judges of the international rules of the game defined in terms of competition for wealth and power, the stage was set for growth, development, and unfortunately, exploitation. The unleashed juggernaut blatantly exhibited unbridled aggressiveness toward humanity, nature, and itself. This unprecedented destructive engine has for the first time in human history made it problematic for the viability of the human species. We have been worrying about all kinds of endangered species without knowing that we human beings, mainly due to our own avidya (the Buddhist concept of ignorance), have joined the list of endangered species.

With this cultural background in mind, we must heed the advice of Mr. Boutros-Ghali that our human rights discourse averts a dual danger:

The danger of a cynical approach, according to which the international dimension of human rights is nothing more than an ideological cover for the realpolitik of States; and the danger of a naive approach, according to which human rights would be the expression of universally-shared values toward which all the members of the international community would naturally aspire.

We, as citizens of the global community, maintain the universality of human rights broadly conceived in the 1948 declaration as a source of inspiration for the human community; we defend the moral and legal imperative that any civilized state treat its citizens in accordance with the political rights guaranteed by its own constitution; and we profess the desirability of democracy as providing to this day the most effective framework in which human rights are safeguarded. However, we must acknowledge that the human rights movement is a dynamic process rather than a static structure and that the human rights discourse ought to be dialogical, communicative, and hopefully, mutually beneficial.

The gradual evolution of the human rights agenda in the United States — a country blessed with a very strong tradition of civil society
which immensely impressed the sagely French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville in the middle of the 19th century — illustrates the dynamism of the process. While the framers of the American Constitution were profoundly serious about political rights, they were not particularly concerned about either civil or economic rights. It was not until the late 19th century that Socialists, indeed Communist thinkers, addressed the maldistribution of wealth and income, the concentration of capital, and the exploitation of labor as central political issues. The perception of justice as fairness is as much a Socialist as a Liberal contribution. It was in the late 1960s that the civil rights movement made substantial progress in solving the American dilemma of racism, which to this day remains a serious threat to the vitality of the American body politic. We should also remind ourselves, especially those in the United States, that the whole issue of immigration rights, particularly in reference to the Jewish population in the former Soviet Union, was an important aspect of US official human rights agenda in the 1970s. This clearly indicates that a sophisticated understanding of human rights as evolving enterprise in the West itself requires historical consciousness, geopolitical analysis, and most of all, self-reflexivity. The assumption that some of us are champions of human rights because our exemplary teaching gives us the authority to be considered so is either cynical or naive, or perhaps both.

The Vienna Declaration and program of action resulting from the World Conference on Human Rights in June 1993 directs our attention to women, children, minorities, disabled persons, and indigenous people, groups not included in the original conceptions of human rights. The three key regional meetings in Tunis, San Jose, and Bangkok were an integral part of the preparatory process for the Vienna Conference in which several human rights declarations outlining particular concerns and perspectives of the African, Latin American and the Caribbean, and Asia-Pacific regions were produced. The recognition of interdependence between democracy, development and human rights led to the cooperation of international organizations and national agencies in broadening the concept of human rights to include the right to development. While this confluence of social and economic concerns may have undermined the effectiveness of some national and international instruments focusing on well-defined political rights, it has engendered new mechanisms for the promotion of human rights.
The Social Summit convened in Copenhagen in January 1995 which focused on the critical issues confronting the global community (poverty, unemployment, and social disintegration) is indicative of a new awareness that human rights ought to be broadly defined to include economic, social, and cultural dimensions of the human experience. The idea of human dignity features prominently in the preparatory documents for the Summit. Indeed, the participants of the Seminar on the Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Social Development organized by the preparatory committee strongly endorsed the view that human rights which have more to do with ethics, law, and politics and whose respect can be verified and measured constitute preferred means of putting into practice the concept of human dignity. They also underscored the inseparability of human rights as a political agenda and human dignity as an ethical-religious concern.

Implicit in this new awareness is a critique of the claim that since human rights are understood differently according to culture, history, stage of economic development, and concrete political situation, they cannot be universally appreciated as values and aspirations for the global community. However, this does not call into question the underlying assumptions of Asian “core values”: the perception of the person as a center of relationship rather than simply as an isolated individual, the idea of society as a community of trust rather than merely a system of adversarial relationships, and the belief that human beings are duty-bound to respect their family, society, and nation. Indeed, it may not be far-fetched to insist that these values are not only compatible with the implementation of human rights but also, in a sophisticated way, can enhance the universal appeal of human rights.

Actually there is virtual consensus that since respect for rights and exercise of responsibility are evidence of human nature, individual rights and responsibility are inseparable in all domains of human flourishing: self-cultivation, regulation of family, order in society, governance of state, peace throughout the world, and harmony with nature. In any concrete experience of human encounter, rights and responsibility form an interactive mutual relationship signifying a necessary continuum for human well-being. The Asian values discussion which emerged in the regional meeting in Bangkok in 1993 provides us with an opportunity to develop a truly ecumenical agenda allowing the human rights discourse to become a continuously evolving and edifying conversation. The danger (I must
underscore this) of using Asian values as a cover for authoritarian practices, notwithstanding the authentic possibility of dialogue, communication, and mutually beneficial exchange, must be fully explored. The perceived Asian preference for duty, harmony, consensus, network, ritual, trust, and sympathy need not be a threat to rights-consciousness.

The critique of acquisitive individualism, vicious competitiveness, pernicious relativism, and excessive litigiousness help us to understand that Enlightenment values do not necessarily cohere into an integrated guide for action. The conflict between liberty and equality and the lack of concern for community have significantly undermined the persuasive power of human rights based exclusively on the self-interests of isolated individuals. Asian values, which are richly textured with ideas of human flourishing, can serve as a source of inspiration for representing human rights as the common language of humanity.

Under the leadership of Theodore de Bary of Columbia University, a colleague and friend, students of Chinese Studies in North America and Mainland China are in the process of organizing a conference on Confucianism and Human Rights jointly sponsored by the East-West Center in Honolulu and the Confucius Foundation in Beijing. Our purpose is to ascertain the common ground between Confucianism, the ethical underpinning of China and other East Asian societies, and Western conceptions of human rights, and to explore the possibilities for the enlargement and deepening of human rights concepts and practices through intercultural exchange. Some of the topics to be addressed include:

i. Confucian conceptions of self, person, and individual in relation to state and society;
ii. Confucian conceptions of self-cultivation, self-control, and mutual respect as the key to governance;
iii. Rights protected in Confucian ritual and Chinese law;
iv. The relation between rights, responsibilities, and duties; and
v. Human rights in the perspective of Confucian and Western conceptions of social and economic justice.

We hope that a communal critical self-awareness will emerge so that instruments for promoting human rights, while universally connected, are
firmly grounded in indigenous Asian conditions as well. We hope that through intercultural dialogue, communication in person, and mutually beneficial exchange, the conceptualization of human rights will overcome its narrowly defined instrumental rationality, intellectual naiveté, and self-imposed parochialism. We hope that this is not only a moral basis for the new discourse on world order but also a spiritual joint venture for human coexistence and mutual flourishing.

A key to the success of this spiritual joint venture is to recognize the conspicuous absence of the idea of community, let alone the global community, in the Enlightenment project. Fraternity (remember in the French revolution, the three cardinal virtues of liberty, equality, and fraternity), the functional equivalent of community has received scant attention in modern Western economic, political, and social thought. I am told that some theory-minded political scientists, including Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, have lamented the fact that the category of family, which features so prominently in political order, is absent in virtually all the major classics in modern Western political thought. It seems that Western political theoreticians, either by choice or by default, have abdicated their responsibility to consider family as a critical issue in adjudicating the relationship between the individual and the state, allowing the sociologists and anthropologists to worry about the political implications of the family.

The willingness to tolerate inequality, faith in the salvific power of self-interest, and the unbridled affirmation of aggressive egoism have greatly poisoned the goodwill of progress, reason, and individualism. The need to express a universal ethic for the formation of a global village and to articulate a possible link between the fragmented world we experience in our ordinary daily existence and the imagined community for the human species as a whole is deeply felt by an increasing number of concerned intellectuals. This requires, at the minimum, the replacement of the principle of self-interest no matter how broadly defined, with a new golden rule: “Do not do to others what we would not want others to do to us.”

Since the new golden rule is stated in the negative, it will have to be augmented by a positive principle:

In order to establish ourselves, we must help others to establish themselves; in order to enlarge ourselves, we must help others to enlarge themselves.
A comprehensive sense of community based on the communal critical self-consciousness of the reflective minds is an ethico-religious goal as well as a philosophical ideal. The mobilization of three kinds of spiritual resources is necessary to ensure that this simple vision be grounded in the historicity of the cultural complexes guiding our way of life today.

The first kind involves the ethico-religious traditions of the modern West, notably Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity. The very fact that they have been instrumental in giving birth to the Enlightenment mentality makes a compelling case that they re-examine their relationships to the rise of the modern West in order to create the new public sphere for the transvaluation of typical Western values. The exclusive dichotomy of matter/spirit, body/mind, sacred/profane, man/nature, or even creator/creature, must be transcended to allow supreme values such as the sanctity of the earth, the continuity of being, the beneficiary interaction between the human community and nature, and the mutuality between human-kind and heaven to receive the saliency they deserve in both philosophy and ideology. The Greek philosophical emphasis on rationality, the biblical image of “man having dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and every living thing that moveth around earth,” and the so-called Protestant work ethic provide the necessary, if not sufficient, sources for the Enlightenment mentality. However, the unintended negative consequences of the rise of the modern West have so undermined the sense of community implicit in the Greek, specifically the Hellenistic idea of the citizen, the Judaic idea of covenant, and the Christian idea of fellowship or universal love that it is morally imperative for these great traditions which have maintained highly complex and tension-ridden relationships with the Enlightenment mentality to formulate their critique of the blatant anthropocentrism inherent in the Enlightenment project.

The second kind of spiritual resources are derived from non-Western historical civilizations which include Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia; Confucianism and Taoism in East Asia; and Islam. It is both intriguing and significant to note that Islam ought to have been considered an integral part of Western civilization because Islam in fact contributed to the emergence of the Renaissance and therefore, by implication, the advent of the Enlightenment mentality. Yet in North American and Western European societies, Islam has in
recent years often been stigmatized by the academic community as well as the mass media as radical otherness. These ethico-religious traditions provide very sophisticated and practicable resources in world views, rituals, institutions, styles of education, and patterns of human relatedness. Moreover, they can help to develop new ways of understanding the world and styles of life both as continuation of and as alternative to the Western European and North American exemplification of the Enlightenment mentality.

Having presented a synopsis of the non-Western axial-age civilizations, let us turn our attention to industrial East Asia, which, under the influence of Confucian culture among other traditions, has already developed a less adversarial, less individualistic, and less self-interested modern civilization. The co-existence of market economy with government leadership, democratic polity with meritocracy, and individual initiatives with group orientation has made this region economically and politically the most dynamic area of the world since the Second World War. The cultural implications of the contribution of Confucian ethics to the rise of industrial East Asia for the possible emergence of Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Islamic forms of modernity are far-reaching. The Westernization of Confucian Asia including Japan, the North and South Korea, Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam may have forever altered the spiritual landscape, but its indigenous resources, including Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, Shamanism, Shintoism, and other folk traditions, have the resilience to resurface and make their presence known in the new synthesis.

The caveat, of course, is that having been humiliated and frustrated by the imperialist and colonial domination of the modern West for more than a century, the rise of industrial East Asia symbolizes the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment heritage with a vengeance. Indeed, the mentality of Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons is today characterized by mercantilism, commercialism, and international competitiveness. Surely the possibility of their developing a more humane and sustainable community should not be exaggerated nor should it be undermined. My recent experience in Malaysia taught me that Islamic–Confucian dialogue can offer practicable measures as well as theoretical guidance for the realization of this possibility.
The third kind of spiritual resources involve the “primal” or the indigen-ous traditions such as native American, Hawaiian, Maori, Malaysian, Taiwanese, and numerous other nativistic tribal traditions. They have demonstrated with physical strength and aesthetic elegance that a sustainable human form of life has been possible since the Neolithic age. The ecological implications for our practical living are far-reaching. Their style of human flourishing is not a figment of the mind but an experienced reality in our modern age.

A distinctive feature of primal traditions is a profound sense and experience of rootedness. Each indigenous religious tradition is embedded in a concrete place symbolizing a way of perceiving, a mode of thinking, a form of living, an attitude, and a world view. Can we learn from native Americans, Hawaiians, and others to whom we often refer as “primal” peoples? Can they help us solve our ecological crisis?

Given the unintended disastrous consequences of the Enlightenment mentality, there are obvious lessons that the modern mindset can learn from indigenous religious traditions of primal peoples. A natural outcome of primal peoples’ embeddedness in concrete locality is their intimate and detailed knowledge of their environment; indeed demarcations between their human habitat and nature are often muted. Implicit in this model of existence is the realization that mutuality and reciprocity between the anthropological world and the cosmos at large are both necessary and desirable. We can learn a new way of perceiving, a new mode of thinking, a new form of living, a new attitude, and a new world view from indigenous peoples. A critique of the Enlightenment mentality and its derivative modern mindset from primal consciousness as interpreted by the concerned and reflective citizens of the world could be thought-provoking.

An equally significant aspect of the primal way of living is the ritual of bonding in ordinary daily human interaction. The density of kinship relations, the rich texture of interpersonal communication, the detailed and nuanced appreciation of the surrounding natural and cultural world, and the experienced connectedness with ancestors point to communities grounded in ethnicity, gender, language, land, and faith. The primordial ties are constitutive parts of their being and activity. In Huston Smith’s characterization, what they exemplify is participation rather than control in motivation, empathic understanding rather than empiricist apprehension
in epistemology, respect for the transcendent rather than domination over nature in world view, and fulfilment rather than alienation in human experience. As we begin to question the soundness or even sanity of some of our most cherished ways of thinking such as regarding knowledge rather than wisdom as power, asserting the desirability of material progress despite its corrosive influence on our soul and justifying the anthropocentric manipulation of nature even at the cost of destroying the life-support system, primal consciousness emerges as a source of inspiration.

A scholar of world spirituality, Ewert Cousins, in response to the ecological crisis, poignantly remarks that, as we look toward the 21st century with all the ambiguities and perplexities we experience, earth is our prophet and the indigenous peoples are our teachers. Realistically, however, those of us who are seasoned in the Enlightenment mentality cannot abdicate the hermeneutic responsibility to interpret the meaning of the earth’s prophecy and to bring understanding to the primal peoples’ message. The challenge is immense. For the prophecy and the message to be truly heard in the modern West, we may have to voice them through active and transformative dialogue with non-Western axial-age civilizations. Such a collaborative effort across cultural and other boundaries is necessary to enable primal consciousness to be fully present in our self-reflexivity as we address the issues of globalization.

I, of course, am not proposing any romantic attachment to or nostalgic sentiments for primal consciousness, and I am critically aware that claims of primordiality are often modernist cultural constructions dictated by the politics of recognition. Rather, I suggest that, as both beneficiaries and victims of the Enlightenment mentality, we show our fidelity to our common heritage by enriching, transforming, and restructuring it by using all three kinds of spiritual resources to help us develop a truly ecumenical sense of global community. As previously discussed, “fraternity” seems to have attracted least attention of the three great Enlightenment values in the French Revolution in the subsequent two centuries. The re-presentation of the Problematik of community in recent years is symptomatic of the confluence of two apparently contradictory forces in the late 20th century: the global village as both a virtual reality and an imagined community in our information age and the disintegration and restructuring of human togetherness at all levels, from family to nation.
A critique of the Enlightenment mentality and its derivative modern mindset from primal consciousness as interpreted by the concerned and reflective citizens of the world could be thought-provoking, heuristic, and educational. It may be modest to say that we are beginning to develop a fourth kind of spiritual resource from the core of the Enlightenment project itself: our disciplined reflection, a communal rather than an isolated individual act, is a first step toward a new kind of thinking envisioned by religious leaders and ethical teachers. The feminist critique of tradition (especially the broadly conceived and yet, at the same time, historically and culturally grounded humanistic feminism), the environmental concerns (notably the spiritually informed project of deep ecology) and the persuasion of religious pluralism are obvious examples of this new communal critical self-awareness. These need to go beyond the Enlightenment mentality without either deconstructing or abandoning its commitment to rationality, liberty, equality, human rights, and distributive justice requires a thorough re-examination of modernity as “layered” concept and modernization as a complex process.

Asian intellectuals have been devoted students of Western learning for more than a century. They have been students of Dutch (Rangaku, to use the Japanese expression), British, French, German, and more recently, American learning for industrial East Asia and Westernized Soviet learning for socialist East Asia. Now that Asian intellectuals are well informed by the Enlightenment project of the West without losing sight of their own indigenous resources, the time seems ripe for European and American intellectuals in academia, government, business and the mass media to appreciate what Confucian humanism, among other rich spiritual resources in Asia, has to offer toward the cultivation of a global ethic.

The central Problematik in the Confucian discourse consists of four issues as exemplified in the Book of Mencius. The first one is renqinzhibian — the essential difference between man (humanity) and beast (other members of the animal kingdom). The second one is yixiazhbian — the essential difference between civilization and barbarism. The third one is yilizhibian — the essential difference between rightness and profit. The fourth one is wangbazhibian — the essential difference between kingship (benevolent government) and hegemony (politically powerful and economically efficient but morally inadequate polity).
In the Confucian perspective, human beings are not merely rational beings but political animals, tool-users, or language-manipulators. The Confucians seem to have deliberately rejected simplistic reductionist models. They define human beings in terms of five integrated visions:

- Human beings are a sentient being, capable of internal resonance not only among themselves but also with other animals, plants, trees, mountains, and rivers, indeed nature as a whole.
- Human beings are social beings. As isolated individuals, human beings are weak by comparison with other members of the animal kingdom but if they are organized to form a society, they have inner strength not only for survival but also for flourishing. Human-relatedness as exemplified in a variety of networks of interaction is necessary for human survival and human flourishing. Our sociality defines who we are.
- Human beings are political beings in the sense that human-relatedness is, by biological nature and social necessity, differentiated in terms of hierarchy, status, and authority. While Confucians insist upon the fluidity of these artificially constructed boundaries, they recognize the significance of “difference” in an “organic” as opposed to “mechanic” solidarity. Therefore the centrality of the principle of fairness and the primacy of the practice of distributive justice in a humane society.
- Human beings are also historical beings sharing collective memories, cultural traditions, ritual praxis, and “habits of the heart.”
- Human beings are metaphysical beings with the highest aspirations not simply defined in terms of anthropocentric ideas but characterized by the ultimate concern to be constantly inspired by and continuously responsive to the Mandate of Heaven.

The Confucian way is a way of learning to be human. Learning to be human in the Confucian spirit is to engage oneself in a ceaseless, unending process of creative self-transformation, both as a communal act and as a dialogical response to Heaven. This involves four inseparable dimensions — self, community, nature, and the transcendent. The purpose of learning is always understood as for the sake of the self, but the self is never an isolated individual (an island) but a center of relationships (a flowing stream). The self as a center of relationships is a dynamic open system
rather than a closed static structure. Therefore mutuality between self and community, harmony between human species and nature, and continuous communication with Heaven are defining characteristics and supreme values in the human project.²⁰

Since the Confucians take the concrete living human being at present as their point of departure in the development of their philosophical anthropology, they recognize the embeddedness and rootedness of the human condition. Therefore, the profound significance of what we call primordial ties — ethnicity, gender, language, land, class, and basic spiritual orientation — intrinsic in the Confucian project is a celebration of cultural diversity (this is not to be confused with any form of pernicious relativism). Often, the Confucians understand their own path as learning of the body and mind (shenxinzhi xue) or learning of nature and destiny (xingmingzhixue). There is a recognition that each one of us is fated to be a unique person embedded in a particular condition. By definition, we are unique human beings, but at the same time each individual has the intrinsic possibility for self-cultivation, self-development, and self-realization. Despite fatedness and embeddedness as necessary structural limitations in our conditionality, we are endowed with infinite possibilities for self-transformation in our process of learning to be human. We are, therefore, intrinsically free. Our freedom, embodied in our responsibility for ourselves as center of relationships, creates our worth. That alone deserves and demands respect.

The Confucian way for human survival and human flourishing, then, is predicated on the two basic ethical principles already mentioned: “Do not do unto others what we would not want others to do unto us.” This is a principle of considerateness, a principle of reciprocity. The reason that it is stated in the negative is based on the belief that what is best for me may not be best for my neighbor. I like spicy food (Thai or Szechuanese), but I should not impose that taste upon my children because they may not be ready to appreciate it. So that which is good for me may not be good for my children. This, on the surface, seems to violate the basic requirement of universality in ethical thinking. Yet, the need for this critical self-awareness is not only the recognition of the integrity of the other but also the practical value of “analogical imagination.”²¹ The practice of sympathetic understanding (a form of “embodied knowing”) enhances one’s self-knowledge,
as Confucius notes, “the ability to take that which is near at hand as an analogy is indeed the method of humanity!”

The second principle is duty-consciousness; it is a manifestation of the ethic of responsibility: “In order to establish ourselves, we must help others to establish themselves; in order to enlarge ourselves; we must help others to enlarge themselves.” This is not simply altruism; it is not that because I have a great deal of surplus energy or extra resources available, I might as well share with others. Rather, as I am a center of relationships, my own human flourishing necessitates that I involve myself, in the spirit of empathy to be sure, in the affairs of others. The word “help,” added in the English translation, directs toward not only the others but ourselves as well for, in the literal sense, the Chinese text simply notes “desiring to establish ourselves (myself), we (I) establish others.”

In this process of learning to be human, five basic virtues are to be embodied: humanity, perhaps more appropriately rendered as co-humanity, which entails a feeling of sympathy; uprightness, which is often understood in a nuanced way. For example, when a student presented the Taoist argument: “How nice would it be if we can repay malice with kindness.” Confucius retorted, “How are you going to repay kindness?” His recommendation was then: “repay malice with rightness (uprightness); repay kindness with kindness.” Aside from humanity (co-humanity) and uprightness, there are also the virtues of civility, wisdom, and trust. Civility, an idea that the recently deceased American sociologist, Edward Shils, considered essential for the development of any “civil society.” The Confucian notion of ritual (li), as a civilized mode of conduct, has much richer and complex connotation than civility entails, but, in the present context, it can serve as a functional equivalent of civility. Impressed by the sophisticated discourse on civility in the Analects, Shils, partly in jest, honored Confucius as a forefather of “civil society.” Wisdom, then, is not insights derived from contemplation as the Greeks would have it. Rather, it is closely associated with knowing persons and doing things. Confucian wisdom is the cumulative result of “embodied thinking” on daily practical living. Wisdom grows from conscientious engagement in social praxis instead of speculative meditation on abstract ideas.

So far as trust is concerned, I am reminded of a rather intriguing phenomenon in the vocabulary of modern English: some of the very elegant
traditional words with a kind of “gravity of spirit,” such as trust, fidelity, community, cooperation, and company, have now all become financial institutions. Whether politics should be understood as moral leadership, or is just the distribution or the arrangement of power; whether economics is simply enhancement of profit, or is the management of wealth and resources and, therefore, implicit in it is the idea of justice and fairness; whether we cherish religious pluralism or submit ourselves to religious exclusivism; whether we consider multiculturalism as a value or simply accept our own language and our own way of life as the most and even the only authentic expression of modernity. These are not simply Confucian issues; these are issues we need to address as reflective modern persons, if we are serious in transforming “human rights” into a universal language of humanity.

To return to the Confucian project, we can actually envision the Confucian perception of human self-development, based upon the dignity of the person, in terms of a series of concentric circles: self, family, community, society, nation, world, and cosmos. We begin with a quest for true personal identity, an open and creative self-transformation which, paradoxically, must be predicated on our ability to overcome selfishness and egoism. We cherish family cohesiveness. In order to do that, we have to go beyond nepotism. We embrace communal solidarity, but we have to go beyond parochialism to fully realize its true value. We can be enriched by social integration, provided that we overcome ethnocentrism and chauvinistic culturalism. We are committed to national unity, but we ought to transcend aggressive nationalism so that we can be genuinely patriotic. We are inspired by human flourishing but we must endeavor not to be confined by anthropocentrism, the full meaning of humanity is anthropocosmic rather than anthropocentric. On the occasion of the International Symposium on Islamic–Confucian dialogue organized by the University of Malaya (March, 1995), the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, quoted a statement from Huston Smith’s *The World’s Religions.* It truly captures the Confucian spirit of self-transcendence:

In shifting the center of one’s empathic concern from oneself to one’s family one transcends selfishness. The move from family to community transcends nepotism. The move from community to nation transcends
parochialism and the move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism.  

We can even include the move toward the unity of Heaven and humanity (tianrenheyi) transcends secular humanism, a blatant form of anthropocentrism characteristic of the intellectual ethos of the modern West. Indeed, it is in the anthropocosmic spirit that we find communication between self and community, harmony between human species and nature, and mutuality between humanity and Heaven. This integrated comprehensive vision of learning to be human can very well serve as the core of the so-called Asian values.

The page constraint does not allow me to further explore how the discourse on Asian values can contribute to the international human rights discussion. I am convinced that such a discourse can broaden and deepen the conceptual and practical resources of human rights, both as a culturally and historically embedded modern Western concept and as a potentially universalizable praxis. However, the art of having such a discourse conducted in a sophisticated comparative civilizational context devoid of highly charged political passions is a daunting task. We are not opting for an ideal speech situation. Nor are we ready to defend a new “communicative rationality” based upon abstract principles. In our limited attempt to keep human rights a live issue from a Confucian point of view, we want to make sure that our initial interpretive stance is properly understood. Needless to say, Asian values, as informed by Confucian humanism, have a significant role to play for a sophisticated understanding of human rights in a comparative cultural perspective. Should we understand the self as an isolated individual or as a center of relationships? Should we approach our society as a community based upon trust or simply the result of contractual arrangements of conflicting forces? As we begin to appreciate that we are so much embedded in our linguistic universe, not to mention our historicity, that we cannot escape a de facto parochialism, no matter how open-minded we intend to be and how liberated we think we are, we must respect alternative intelligence and radical otherness.

This is particularly pertinent to the English-speaking community whether it is in London, Sydney, Madras, Kuala Lumpur, or Singapore. As a Chinese-American, I am, of course, most sensitive to the situation
in the United States. Again this strikes home: when you know a few languages you may be considered as multilingual. If you know two languages, you are bilingual. If you know only one language, you are most likely an American. This is not a strength but a limitation, even if the myth that English is the universal language was partially true. I think that the time is ripe for the American general public as well as the academic community to come to the realization that bilingual and multilingual competence is a social capital and cultural asset that a modern civilization cannot afford to lose. Surely, for a number of reasons, Malaysians and Singaporeans are multilingual. However, a full recognition of the value of such social capital and cultural asset requires the active participation of the English-speaking political elites in Asian countries to nurture and cultivate it. After all, languages are not merely tools for communication, they are also depositories of knowledge, wisdom, and values necessary for personal self-understanding and communal solidarity.

East Asian intellectuals are earnestly engaged in probing the Confucian tradition(s) as a spiritual resource for economic development, nation building, social stability, and cultural identity. While they cherish the hope that their appreciation of their own cultural values will provide ethical moorings as they try to locate their niche in the turbulent currents of the modern world, they remain active participants in the Enlightenment project. The revived Confucian values are no longer fundamentalist representation of nativistic ideas; they are, in general, transvaluated traditional values compatible with and commensurate to the main thrust of modern ideology defined in term of Enlightenment ideas. Actually, since East Asian intellectuals have been devoted students of the modern West for several generations, the Enlightenment values, including human rights, have become an integral part of their own cultural heritage. To reiterate an earlier point, East Asian intellectuals in general, not to mention the English-speaking political elite, are more familiar with the life-orientation of the modern West than with any traditional Asian way of living. The recent revival of interest in Confucian ethics in East Asia, whether or not it presages a cultural renaissance, does not indicate an outright rejection of the Enlightenment mentality. On the contrary, as I have already alluded to, the Enlightenment belief in instrumental rationality, material progress, social engineering, empiricism, pragmatism, scientism,
and competitiveness seems to have more persuasive power in Hong Kong, Taipei, and Singapore than in Paris, London, New York, or Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The critical issue, then, is not only Asian values versus modern Western values, but how East Asian intellectuals can be enriched and empowered by their own cultural roots in their critical response to already partially domesticated Enlightenment heritage. The full development of human rights requires their ability to creatively transform the Enlightenment mentality of the modern West into a thoroughly digested cultural tradition of their own; this, in turn, is predicated on their capacity to creatively mobilize indigenous social capital and cultural asset for the task. They must be willing to ask difficult fundamental questions, identify complex real options, and make painful practicable decisions. The conflicts between liberty and equality, economic efficiency and social justice, development and stability, individual interests and the public good, not to mention rights and duty, are harsh realities in practical living. The enhancement of liberty, economic efficiency, development, individual interests, and rights are highly desirable, but to pursue these values exclusively at the expense of equality, social justice, stability, the public good, and duty is ill-advised. As the supposedly exemplification of modernity, North America and Western Europe continues to show ignorance of the cultures of the rest of the world and insouciance about the people who do not speak their languages, East Asia cannot but choose its own way. It is in this sense that a Confucian perspective on human rights is worth exploring.

Paradoxically, the Confucian personality ideals — the authentic person (junzi), the worthy (xianren), or the sage (shengren) — can be realized more fully in the liberal democratic society than either in the traditional imperial dictatorship or a modern authoritarian regime. East Asian Confucian ethics must creatively transform itself in light of Enlightenment values before it can serve as effective critique of the excessive individualism, pernicious competitiveness, and vicious litigiousness of the modern West.28

Notes

2. Professor Wu notes:

Man, in the traditional Confucian concept, is born conscience free with self-respect and
in human dignity. He is not born to a social class from which he cannot divest himself:
nor is he born to a family of position and wealth so that he can enjoy life forever. A man
is judged by his moral character and not by his social position or wealth.

Wu Teh Yao (1988). “The Confucian concept and attributes of man and the modern-
ization of industrial East Asia”. In The Triadic Accord: Confucian Ethics, Industrial East
Philosophies.

3. The statement is attributed to Confucius in a dialogue between the Master and his
disciple, Zheng Zi. See Xiaojing (The Classic of Filial Piety), in the “Shengzhi” (Sagely
governance) chapter (reprint of the original Song edition, 1815), 5: 1a.

A/810 (1948) but also Declaration of Delhi, January 5–10, 1959, and The Rule of Law

statement made in Vienna at the opening of the World Conference on Human
Rights on June 14, 1993. World Conference on Human Rights: The Vienna Declaration
and Programme of Action, June 1993 (New York: the United Nation’s Department of
Public Information), p. 5.

6. Ibid., p. 9.

7. Ibid., p. 3.

Social Development, pp. 11–14. New York: American Association for the International
Commission of Jurists, Inc.


10. Based on the Confucian insight originally presented in the Great Learning, see
Gardner, Daniel K. (1986). Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh: Neo-Confucian Reflection on
University.

11. In addition to the famous Bangkok Governmental declaration endorsed by all the
Asian governments at the April 1993 Asian regional preparatory meeting for the
Vienna World Conference on Human rights, there is also the statement of Asian
NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) issued on March 27, 1993. For an informa-
tive account of the vital issues involved, see Ghai, Yash (1994), “Human rights and
for Asian Pacific Affairs. For a thought-provoking account of a new vision on human
rights from an Islamic perspective, see Muzaffar, Chandra (1993). Human Rights and
the New World Order. Penang: Just World Trust.
12. The meeting, scheduled for August 1995, expects to have attendance from Cultural China (Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities) and North America.


26. Quoted in the address by Anwar Ibrahim at the opening of the International Seminar on Islam and Confucianism: A Civilizational Dialogue, sponsored by University of Malaya, March 13, 1995. It should be noted that Huston Smith, in this particular reference to the Confucian Project, is based on my discussion on the meaning of
Tu Wei-ming


28. This idea was first presented in Chinese at the conclusion of the international conference celebrating the 2545th anniversary of Confucius’ birth and the formation of the International Association of Confucian Studies, sponsored by the Confucius Foundation, Beijing, October 5, 1994.