

Paul B. Thompson and Kirill O. Thompson (eds)

Agricultural Ethics in East Asian Perspective: A Transpacific Dialogue

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Agricultural Ethics in East Asian Perspective. A transpacific dialogue is the materialisation of the conference of the same name held at the National Taiwan University in 2012, the *raison d'être* of which was to make a dialogue between Western and Eastern perspectives on agricultural ethics in order to create mutually enriching connections and eventually enlarge the scope of environmental philosophy. Co-edited by the influential agrarian philosopher Paul. B. Thompson and the brilliant sinologist Kirill O. Thompson, this publication brings together the work of North American and East Asian environmental ethics specialists. It provides a cross-cultural – transpacific – overview of the existing and the desirable nexuses between cultures, agriculture and the environment when accounting today's sustainability imperatives.

The book is laid out in a series of thirteen chapters, starting with six chapters that explore agricultural ethics through historical outlines of different agrarian traditions, in the U.S., in Japan and in China. This first part of the book identifies the relatively ancient ethical resources whose 'revival' would benefit our contemporary understanding of the role and responsibility of humanity in and towards the Earth. In the introductory chapter, Paul. B. Thompson advocates for a transcultural re-engagement of contemporary philosophers in agrarian thinking by means of both inter-cultural conversations and intra-cultural 'introspection', in an effort to nourish the debate on global environmental ethics. Gleaning from the 'agrarian vision' he developed in a book of the same name (Thompson, 2010), he proposes a refreshing reflection on how 'quotidian patterns of daily life structure largely implicit and pre-reflexive set of normative commitments' (p. 6) and therefore influence ethical behaviours, collective thinking and land governance.

The five following chapters highlight the 'proto-ecological thought' present in pre-modern China and Japan. The authors share the idea that both feudal Japan and ancient China were characterised by a cultural tendency to act ethically towards what we today refer as 'nature'. The reader is drawn into the stories of some major figures of East Asian philosophies such as the two Daoist pioneers, Zhuangzi and Laozi. Their concept of 'nature of heaven and earth' appears central in several contributions, as a possible regulating principle to

‘limit the non-ecological desires of human being’ (p. 87). The idea of a pressing need for *limits* is addressed in different ways. Kirill O. Thompson investigates how Early Chinese relational and contextual thinking constitutes a valuable resource for agrarian ethicists to imagine an *earth-centred ethics*, and for contemporary farmers to tackle complex neighbourhood and pollution-related issues. Thompson’s proposal appears to be close to the *earth-first ethics* advocated by Yamauchi Tomosaburo in his chapter on Ninomiya Sontoku, a Japanese ‘farmer-sage’ that considerably helped the Japanese villages during the famines in the eighteenth century by imposing a very strict resource management. Yamauchi claims that Sontoku’s programme for saving rural areas was supported by a strong belief that ‘the world has its own “shared limit”’ (p. 34) and that human must consequently act within those limits. In another vein, this first part of the book also underlines the substantial influence that pre-modern Chinese and Japanese agrarianism had on traditional culture, values and politics. Figures such as the enigmatic Andō Shōeki (1703–1762) are mobilised to illustrate the intimate relation between one’s experience as a farmer and political and moral values. Shōeki’s exclusive precept was that everyone should experience the ‘tilling of the soil’, to the extent that he considered it a crime to consume produce without cultivating it (!).

The second part of the book brings together seven voices on contemporary agricultural ethics, ranging from proposals of institutional and political tools to the adjustment of Paul Thompson’s virtue-based agrarianism for the East Asian region. They all provide, though each to a different extent, ways to overcome the dichotomies constitutive of today’s agriculture-related issues. Lisa Heldke, for instance, draws upon the image of a ‘parasite’ used by the French theorist Michel Serres to propose a re-articulation of binary oppositions such as food/agriculture, consumption/production, global/local and urban/rural. She qualifies the relation between those pairs as ‘vantage points [currently] organized in genuinely parasitical fashion’ (p. 159). Thinking through the parasite/host relation thus brings to light how radically the shift towards a truly integrated food system will subvert the current food/agriculture relation. The chapter by Raymond Anthony distinguishes itself by providing a comprehensive – and therefore quite disconcerting – panorama of the soaring consumption of meat in East Asia, its current and future consequences. The author builds his arguments by means of Aristotle’s rhetorical devices – *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos*. The narratives he provides are indeed very persuasive and the reader will be easily convinced by his advocacy for a *Public Trust Doctrine* as a possible ‘ethical catalyst to (re)vigorate or (re)seed animal agriculture with fairness and social justice’ (p. 113). The chapter by Kazuhiko Ota, Tomoyoshi Murata, Toshiaki Ohkura and Ryunosuke Hamada focuses on a too-often neglected yet fundamental actor in agricultural ethics debates: the soil. Four Japanese scholars

bring together their findings in the field and suggest on this basis the implementation in Japan of a renewed conception of the relationship between people and soil. They propose what could be named the ‘Soil Conservation Basic Act’, which would help broaden the vision of soil to more than just a substrate for human food production and to overcome sectorialism in soil management.

Although this collection of thirteen very diverse proposals does not cover the full range of worthy issues for debate in the field, it has the merit of opening up prospects on agricultural ethics for the non-specialist reader while providing extremely well detailed analyses likely to enrich the reflections of the expert environmental ethics specialist. Moreover, the East Asian contributions are precious as they offer to non-readers of Chinese or Japanese unique translations and interpretations of some fundamental work. What we might regret in this solely *transpacific* dialogue is the consequent absence of Europe, often agglomerated with North America under the debated concept of ‘the West’. By opposing often too simplistically the Western to the Eastern perspectives, some contributions are on the boundaries of ethnocentrism, idealising their traditional culture and hence making claims such as ‘people were too much brain washed by Western modern anthropocentrism to return to the traditional way of thinking and lifestyle’ (p. 187). A close look at the Chinese, Japanese and Thai histories would offer us a more nuanced image, showing that those cultures always latently contained the ability to destroy nature, precisely because of their incapacity of distancing themselves from Nature (Berque, 1986) and therefore of objectively assessing the disastrous impact human activities were having on the environment. Regardless of this remark, this publication offers a valuable insight of how enriching a cross-cultural dialogue might be. Let us hope that the book will serve as a first step for research into the numerous and diverse proposals it compiles.

References

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