

“Moral Friends” in the Zone of Disaster

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ABSTRACT

Zones of disaster tear open the everyday fabric of life, revealing both the arbitrariness of the everyday and some of the manifold alternatives. This paper draws on the bushfires in Canberra, Australia, as a case study against which to develop a comparative analysis of ethics as conceptualised by the New Confucian scholars and by a western mainstream philosophy of intersubjectivity.

KEY WORDS

moral friends, bushfires, Mencius, human-animal relationships, modernity, New Confucianism, globalization, moral mind, Levinas, dualisms, intersubjectivity.



Catastrophe tears apart the everyday fabric of life, exposing all that really matters: the existential questions of life and death, and the unpredictability of survival; the love and compassion, as well as the cruelty; and the spontaneous actions of living things as they seek to save themselves and each other. My paper is concerned with what we learn about human-animal relationships and about love and compassion in these zones of extremity. It is tempting to talk about the recent Tsunami, but I have decided to confine myself to a much, much smaller crisis event: the bushfires in my own home city Canberra, Australia. My main reason for working with this lesser event is that I was involved with it, and can therefore speak from within the zone of extremity rather than having to confine myself to an outside view. The other reason is that while the issues I analyse are widespread, they are in some ways more open to analysis where the loss of life is not an extreme factor. I believe that the analysis I present here is widely applicable because in this era of rapid global change catastrophes are increasing in both frequency and effect.

My focus on animal-human relationships goes to the heart of western philosophy as it has been thought for millennia. Agamben (2004), for example, argues that our metaphysics have been predicated on sustaining the meaning of humanity through an oppositional contrast between humans and animals. In this paper I consider human relationships with animals in two ways: first in the context of specific animals and events, and second using the term 'animal' as a signifier for nature more broadly, and thus as a way of breaching the west's humanity/nature dualism.

My own position, I am happy to state at the outset, is passionately

to defend continuities and connectivities between humans and the rest of the living world. In this paper I work between two poles: one of modernity (its discourses, practices, and elisions) and one of ecology (it's real-world context of continuities and connectivities). My method is to tell the story of the fires first, and then to develop an analysis that brings critical theory into productive conversation with the New Confucianism. I am proposing that catastrophes offer the equivalent of the child on the edge of a well, Mencius' example of crisis that engenders compassionate action. From that convergence I develop the thesis that catastrophes offer unique opportunities for the creation of new transnational and transpecies communities of moral friends.

Tearing the Fabric: The Canberra Fires

January 2003: The south-east sector of Australia was in the grip of serious and long-standing drought. The previous year's bushfires had been wild, but contained. This year the conditions were prime for extremity. The temperatures were running in the 30s, the humidity was so low that it almost did not exist, and then the hot winds came. These westerly winds arrived with ferocity, blazing out of the inland deserts, hot, dry, and loaded with dust.

It had been a terrible summer. Hardly any rain had fallen in Canberra for three months. Trees, shrubs and lawns were dying. The city's domestic water reserves were running low. . . . During the month of December dust storms had choked Canberra twice. (Aitchison 2003: 11)

All it would take is one strike of lightning, and the whole country would go up in a blaze. This is what happened in many parts of south-east Australia as large portions of the states of Victoria and New South Wales were engulfed in bushfires. In my area lightning triggered fires in the Snowy Mountains of the Kosciusko National Park. The fires burnt out of control in rugged inaccessible country, and then they raced out into other National Parks and toward the open grasslands. On 18

January the fires got to Canberra. Between Canberra and the Parks there are not only grasslands, but also pine tree plantations. The trees are imported from North America; they are adapted to temperate well-watered country. Unlike Australian trees which are adapted to fire, the pines are gigantic tinder boxes. The plantations grow right up to the central western edge of the city, while grasslands abut the north western edge of the city. I live in the north western section; there it was possible, although at times difficult, to control the fire. But once the fire got into the pine plantations it burnt with such extreme heat that it created its own micro-climate, transforming itself into a firestorm. Fiery tornadoes and cyclone force winds carried burning debris, setting fires in advance of the approaching wall of flames.

My husband and I had been indoors getting ready to go to a lunchtime party. When we stepped out of the house and looked at the sky we realised that we were not going to a party that day. Like many Canberrans, we hopped into the car and drove in the direction of the smoke to see what it was all about. We saw grasslands on fire, we saw smoke and heat waves; we felt the first tremors of fear. At about one o'clock the Chief Minister declared a state of emergency, and the local radio started broadcasting messages telling people in all the western suburbs to return to their homes and start to prepare for the worst.

And then the fire jumped into the city, burning houses in the suburbs closest to the pine plantations. These suburban fires were extinguished that day and did not return. In one sense, the crisis was over and done with in one day. This is how it was reported in the Emergency Management Australia Disasters Database (Attorney General's Department, Australian Government), but that is not how it was experienced. Because we were in a declared state of emergency for ten days, and because we did not know and could not know when the wind might pick up and start to carry the flames ahead of the fires and across the fire breaks and into our homes, and because we did not know how stretched the fire services might become and how capable they might be if the fire again became out of control, we felt ourselves to be part of an on-going event. We knew we had experienced the beginning, but we could not know for days whether we had experienced the end of

it. We were very conscious not only of what had happened but of what could still happen.

My family lives in a suburb that was on high alert; we stayed home from work for ten days to protect our home. The sky was dusky this whole time, and smoking or charred leaves and sticks fell from the sky. The sirens wailed, and the helicopters carrying water buzzed overhead. In all, 530 houses were destroyed, 4 people were killed, 52,500 people were affected. Over 2,500 people were evacuated, and many thousands more were on high alert. Electricity went down in many areas, telephones were cut off, gas was turned off, water pressure was lost, water treatment plants lost power, and so on.¹

Animals were part of the bushfire story at every moment. Australian animals, like Australian plants, are well adapted to fire, and where the fires burnt through native bush, enough native animals survived to re-establish their populations. Nevertheless, the losses were enormous; birds simply fell dead from the sky, and many animals died of smoke inhalation while many more were burnt to death. Soon bush animals started coming to the city. Those whose homes had been completely burnt out came to the golf courses, school ovals, and parks in search of food, water, and safety. They were welcome visitors; there was a strong sense that we had all been affected by the fire, and all owed each other some extra consideration.

The most heart wrenching situations are those in which animals were confined by humans and thus were unable even to try to save their lives by running or hiding. One such situation occurred at the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve near Canberra where a wide variety of native animals are kept in large enclosures, and a few endangered species were in specially constructed shelters. About 90% of the animals died.² Five days after the fire raced through, however, one koala was found to have survived. Nicknamed "Lucky," she now has her own website.³

The situation in relation to domestic animals was similar. I have been unable to find a figure for how many sheep and cattle died, but it must surely have been in the thousands (There are reports of mass graves for sheep and cattle⁴). Animals that were kept as pets are much

better documented. The horses that people kept in stables at the edges of the city along the grasslands are a good example. At a time when people were ordered to stay home and protect their properties, some of them went out into areas immediately threatened by fire to save their horses and ponies. One man who was struggling to save his horse was actually kicked by the horse and knocked unconscious. He was saved by his daughters.⁵

One family, later interviewed on radio, saved their horses but lost their home. On the night of the fire the Lowe family decided to leave their home and try to save the horses at the National Equestrian Centre. "When they got there, two separate fire fronts had joined and were destroying everything in their path. While thousands of their sheep and cattle perished, the family and staff spent hours herding horses inside this arena." According to one member of the family, the most upsetting thing about losing their home was that she had locked the cats inside before she left: "Yeah, we sacrificed the houses . . . and no, I'm not upset about . . . losing the house. I'm really upset about losing my cats, and I suppose the memories too—photos, those things that you can't ever get back." Losing the cats was "the worst because I locked them in the house."⁶

In the days and weeks to come the donations poured in: a golf course offered its greens as a horse paddock, local children delivered bags of apples, shopkeepers sent vegetables, and people from other states sent truckloads of fodder for the horses whose stables and food had burnt.⁷

Perhaps the most vivid case was that of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. This Society—RSPCA—takes in lost, injured or abandoned animals and shelters them for a period of time while trying to find homes for them. Dogs and cats are the main residents. If RSPCA personnel are unable to find new homes, the animals are eventually killed. Whilst being sheltered, the animals were kept in cages. The site is at the edge of the city closest to the pine plantations, and thus was extremely vulnerable. As the fire approached, a few animals were taken to the National Zoo for protection. RSPCA staff did what they could to protect the rest of the animals, but they

were forced by the police to leave the site. The police said that “they almost had to physically remove some of the staff members”, so great was their desire to stay and protect the animals.⁸ According to the RSPCA, some of the staff had been “dragged away screaming . . . clutching armloads of dogs.”⁹

In an extraordinary twist of fate, two people stopped by after the staff had been forcibly evacuated and set to work successfully to save the remaining animals. Ruth Williams was an RSPCA volunteer, and she and her husband Clive had been out helping friends and family in their fire-fighting work, and decided to stop by the RSPCA. They found that “everything was burning and there was nobody there . . . We didn’t realise they’d been evacuated.” The Williams’s got the hoses out and started wetting down the protective cloth and putting out fires. They remained for three hours, fighting the fires until the shelter manager returned.¹⁰ According to the RSPCA’s chief executive: “Without them we would have had absolutely nothing left. We owe a great deal.”¹¹ Only three kittens died, and two dogs were euthanised because of smoke inhalation.

A less happy story concerns an animal hospital where 47 dogs and cats died from the fire. A few days later a funeral or memorial service was held at the site, attended by 250 people, many of whom brought their pets, some decorated with black ribbons. Conducted by an Anglican priest, the service allowed the community to grieve for the suffering and deaths of animals.¹²

I will not be suggesting that this story negates the west’s history of hyper-separation between people and animals. Many of us who were empathetically responding to animals were also still eating meat, thus confirming, but also complicating, Derrida’s point that animals constitute a category of beings that can be killed with impunity (Derrida 2002). The bushfire stories ambiguate the boundary enormously, deeply negating the idea that humans and animals do not, indeed cannot, share a moral domain. I will return to this point, but first let us examine another side of the story: that of wrestling the discourse back into modernity.

Reasserting Modernity

I am using the term modernity in an extreme sense, following most particularly the work of Australian philosophers Freya Mathews and Val Plumwood. In her book *Reinhabiting Reality* (2005) Mathews discusses modernity as a progressive amplification of mind-matter dualism. This dualism rests in the first instance on the proposition that mind is a property of humans only, and that the rest of the world is empty of its own desires to live, to communicate, to be in connection. With the emptying of the world outside the human subject, there is the correlative emptying of the capacity for connectivity between inside and outside, because the disjunction is so great that there is no point of continuity.¹³ She concludes that modernity is creating a crisis in human culture as well as a crisis in the world, noting in particular how the idea that the world is pure object informs both scientific practice and commodity economics.

Val Plumwood, makes the case that this emptying is part of the west's long history of seeking to control nature. As she puts it: "the story of the control of the chaotic and deficient realm of 'nature' by mastering and ordering 'reason' has been the master story of Western culture" (Plumwood 1993: 74).

Even as we in Canberra were creatively coping with threat, loss, damage, and care, we saw a counter-effort to bring it all back into the domain of modernity. We saw intense and still today on-going efforts to restore the big story of human control over nature. We saw the paradoxical context: that firestorms develop according to a logic that is best understood through chaos theory, and yet modernity demands that nature be predictable and controllable. Nature, in this story, does not have its own capacity for communication, for revealing itself to us in its complexity. And yet, for a brief while, the real world asserted its reality, its unpredictability, its turbulence and its power.

Given that I have been focussing on all the positive responses to disaster, I should also mention that there were a few reports of looting.¹⁴ Overall, however, the looting was minimal and here too the

responses were immediate. We were lucky that the deaths were relatively few, and we were lucky that we had the radio station and the local broadcasters to sustain our communicative matrix. But what really stands out is that the hegemony of modernity was banished for a moment, and other ways of being in the world had a brief opportunity to flourish. Not only did nature prove the limits of the modernity's story, so too did people.

One response to all this destabilisation of certainty and control was a huge discursive effort to reclaim the basic elements of modernity: anthropocentrism, mastery and control, predictability, and quantification. We saw the labelling: the fire became the "ACT Bushfire Disaster." In this discourse the story concerned loss of life, of property, of control, of planning, of response. The fires became a more and more anthropocentric story in this labelling: it was about what *we* had lost. We were told again and again that the loss was all about human utility as expressed in numbers. The disaster was measured, and estimates made of its total cost. All of those affected by the fires were brought into this logic, from the people who lost loved ones to those who lost homes, to the animals that were kept as economic stock, even to the wild animals kept at Tidbinbilla, where, we learned, it would take many years and many dollars to reestablish the breeding populations that had been lost.

Normative modernity was reclaimed in this process in two ways: all that could not be measured was excised from the story—either left out completely or classed as "human interest."¹⁵ What remained was "the mechanical unfolding of positivist calculation" (Wolfe 69). The linear logic of modernity, with its determination to fragment and quantify, and thus to break continuity into isolated and containable parts, was expressed to perfection in these calculations.

We saw the process of assigning blame. This process is part of grief, and must be accepted as such, but there were numerous other factors. Assigning blame became part of the accountancy of disaster: who was responsible for loss, and thus who was responsible for compensation? In other words, who was going to pay for all of this? Another aspect of blame concerned how it could have been allowed to

happen in the first place. This issue is still being debated. The Bush Fire Inquest has become entangled in local politics and in legal issues, and in spite of a stated policy of “learning, not blaming”, the blame goes on. Setting aside politics and law, there is this on-going question: how could this have been allowed (by us) to happen? Why was the planning not good enough, the responses inadequate? How could nature have overwhelmed *us*?

I hope that an investigation of these issues will lead to better planning in some areas. Perhaps pine plantations won't be replanted close to the city; perhaps they won't be replanted around one of the finest observatories in the southern hemisphere. Perhaps the people who manage our water supply will talk to the people who take care of fires, and our catchment won't be so prone to being burnt out. Perhaps National Parks will be provided with the funds they need to take better care of the Parks in their control. Perhaps. . . .

None of modernity's anthropocentric and quantitative discourse of disaster tells us anything about what we experienced so vividly, and in some ways so joyously, while we inhabited that disaster zone in which our everyday world was torn apart and another reality sprang into our experience. Modernity depends on a concept of the human self that is disconnected, bounded, autonomous, and rational. For a brief while, rational man was not in control, and a much richer human experience became, and was recognised as, part of our human capacity.

I have constructed the story of the fires to focus on animals, and so I have had to excise other stories. One excised story concerns the outpouring of generosity among people. There was a great deal of assistance from outside Canberra, and within Canberra there was huge and immediate generosity. The local radio station dispensed with its usual programming, and we listened to the radio regularly to receive up-dates on the fires. Calls for assistance would come in, be broadcast, and be responded to almost immediately. There was, for example, a call saying that a young boy had lost his brand new red BMX bike in the fires. Within minutes someone rang in donating exactly such a bike to the young boy, and within hours it was delivered. Responses were interactive and specific.

In commodity economies, including the commodity economy of international aid, giving is done in the anonymous medium of money, and needs and responses are assessed by aid experts; the money is channeled in ways that (in principle, at least) respond to an aggregated rationality that is beyond the reach of any individual donor. In contrast, our Canberra gift exchanges were specific, personal, immediate, and face-to-face. They were embedded in, and became constitutive of, our temporarily flourishing and expanding personhood.

The discourse of modernity cannot tell us these things: how empathy filled us and spilled over into action. Why people had to be dragged screaming from the animal shelter, still clutching armloads of dogs; why people lost their homes but saved their animals, or grieved more for their cats than for their lifetime's possessions, why the injured koala, Lucky, receives emails from around the world.

These are huge issues, and I am not proposing quick answers, but at this point it seems to me that the west's critique of modernity finds a limit. We can analyse the problems very well, and can propose many profound changes, but we struggle at a theoretical level to answer these most basic ethical questions. We know that there is much in the world, in the western world and elsewhere, that falls outside modernity's globalising reach, that modernity's ideology of total hegemony, like that of capitalism, is just that: ideology (see Gibson-Graham 1996). But how may we enhance the fissures in modernity, and how might we negotiate convergences between that which appears to be universal and that which can only be local? With these questions in mind that I turn to moral philosophy in the domain of the New Confucianism.

Dialogue in Globalisation

Globalisation enmeshes us all. Like catastrophe it brings damage and loss, and like catastrophe it makes a space for alternatives. In a recent article on globalisation, Tony Judt writes:

Globalization isn't primarily about trade or communications, economic monopolies or even empire. If it were it would hardly be

new: those aspects of life were already 'globalizing' a hundred years ago. Globalization is about the disappearance of boundaries—cultural and economic boundaries, physical boundaries, linguistic boundaries—and the challenge of organizing our world in their absence. In the words of Jean-Marie Guehenno, the UN's director of peacekeeping operations: "Having lost the comfort of our geographical boundaries, we must in effect rediscover what creates the bond between humans that constitute a community." (Judt 18).

I will of course argue that these new communities need not be confined to humans, but I want to approach the issue through dialogue within another emerging community: that formed by the intellectual exchanges now being established between Asian and 'western' scholars.

There is in the western world today a profound shift taking place as we seek critically to analyse, and in practical ways to overcome, the binaries that have driven our societies and the world to the brink of disaster, as well as offering many enticing comforts and quality of life opportunities. There is no guarantee of success, but many scholars look to worldviews of the great eastern civilizations because we have learned that they do not depend on the binaries that we know are so damaging. The logic is that the "East Asian traditions of Confucianism and Taoism remain in certain ways, some of the most life-affirming in the spectrum of world religions" (Tucker and Grim xxvii).

Many voices of caution surround this project; some point out the obvious pitfalls of appropriation and romanticisation. A less obvious dead end is articulated very clearly by Ruiping Fan (1997) who criticizes the western attempt to sustain its own universal ethics by picking and choosing amongst other world traditions, taking only what suits the west (see also Berthrong 1998).

The most interesting position is in the dialogue that seeks challenging work within both traditions. I turn with great interest to an article by Professor Lee of the National Central University, Taiwan, entitled "The Reappraisal of the Foundations of Bioethics: A

Confucian Perspective" (2002). Given Lee's interest in bioethics, which is at this time almost wholly concerned with the human, Lee's analysis is particularly directed toward human issues. I will follow through on his analysis before considering its wider applicability, which I believe to be significant.

Lee's particular project in this paper is to show how a Confucian perspective can resolve some of the problems of universalism and relativism that beset Enlightenment and Postmodern thought. He draws on the Confucian concept of the "moral mind" (186), and writes: "the moral mind is an expression of our unbearable concern with others' suffering". Lee intends the moral mind to respond to all suffering, not just human, and in a more recent essay (n. d.) he considers the moral mind in relation to future generations. He takes the argument back to Mencius, and the example of a person seeing a young child about to fall into a well and responding with concern and commiseration.

There are several key points in Lee's analysis. The first is the expression of the universal: 'this original unbearable consciousness of another's suffering' (186). The second is that this consciousness expresses itself in relation to actions and events: it particularises itself in context (187). The third key point takes up the position articulated by Engelhardt (1996) concerning moral friends and moral strangers. In Engelhardt's analysis moral friends are those who share enough cultural information to be able to understand each other's moral positions without difficulty. In contrast, moral strangers are those with whom moral positions must be negotiated. Lee argues to the contrary that from a Confucian perspective all humans are moral friends in the first instance because all share this foundational moral mind which empathetically responds to the suffering of others (190). He thus resolves the discomfort between Enlightenment universals and postmodern relativism in this interestingly Confucian way: the universal foundation of our being is that as humans we are possessed of a "moral mind" and are always already alert to the sufferings of others. The relativistic dimension of this is that as individuals we make our own responses to the moral issues we confront, and as members of social and cultural groups we do so in ways that are appropriate to our

situatedness in history and culture.

The question of whether the moral mind is mindful only of human others was discussed at length in the Neo-Confucian tradition. Wang Yang-ming writes (*Inquiry on the Great Learning*): “The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person” (Tu 18). In this passage, Wang discusses first the case with respect to another human, then with birds and animals, then with plants, then with tiles and stones. Empathetic response to the whole of Heaven and Earth, he asserts, is in-built in humans because we are all part each of the other.

The Canberra bush fire experience exemplifies Lee’s arguments to perfection, and confirms in a very different time and place the salience of both Mencius and Wang. This is what we experienced: an anguish for others, a desire to help, a search for meaningful ways to help, and a sense of our shared community in the face of disaster.

Mencius and the Call of the Other

The proposition that Confucianism can resolve some dilemmas in western thought opens a large dialogical arena in which we might consider analytically why it is able to do so. I make an initial foray into this arena by considering comparatively the work of Emmanuel Levinas and that of Mencius (allowing Mencius to signify the longer tradition).

Levinas was the greatest philosopher of intersubjectivity in the last century, and his work has been enormously influential. The basic point is that ethics precedes subjectivity. In practical terms this means that we humans are brought into being already called into ethics by others. The radical turn in western philosophy that Levinas articulates is an intersubjectivity in which each of us is always, already, responsible for others. “Self is not a substance but a relation”, Levinas writes (*Proper* 20). There is no self without other. Life with others is inherently entangled in responsibility. Levinas thus claims the primacy of ethics as an inherent and inalienable aspect of the human condition. He teaches an ethic of human connectivity: “consciousness and even

subjectivity follow from, are legitimated by, the ethical summons which proceeds from the intersubjective encounter. Subjectivity arrives, so to speak, in the form of a responsibility towards an other . . . " (Newton 12).

I have been working with a minority reading of Levinas (for example, Casper 1988; Grob 1999; Rose 2004) that tries to pull ethics away from abstractions. Levinas does not do this, but in saying that ethics precedes self, that ethics is that which calls us into relationship, he opens the door to an understanding of personhood based on becoming-within-continuity. On this reading there is no reason to exclude animals, and in fact there is every good ecological and phenomenological reason to include the whole of Heaven and Earth.

Sadly, one of the great failures of 20th century philosophy in the west is Levinas's determination to exclude animals from the realm of intersubjective ethics (Levinas 1990; see also Llewelyn 1991, Clark 1999, Steeves in press, Rose n. d.). In specifically excluding animals he implicitly excludes all of the universe, with the exception of humanity (and God). It is tempting to override Levinas and extend his work beyond the realm of the human, but Luce Irigaray shows us the ultimate sterility of such a project.

Levinas works with tropes—face, caress, call—that are embodied and tactile, of the flesh and of the world. And yet, he plucks them from contact with material referents, reworking them into abstractions, as Irigaray (1991) shows to devastating effect. Her ten "Questions for Levinas" arise out of her commitment to demonstrate that dualism is about absence, and to reclaim a subjectivity that is embodied, sensuous, and specific. Only one of Irigaray's questions concerns "the face of the natural universe." For her, the embodiment of human specificity is inextricable from the embodiment of the world, and that is the basis of her third question: "who is the other if it is not rooted and situated in the natural universe?" (113).

The ten questions focus on a horrible emptiness: there is no "other" in Levinas. The philosopher of ethical alterity erases the other, sacrificing her specificity and embodied caress. Irigaray's questions thus expose Levinas's refusal, or erasure, of the persons who are the

actual participants in ethical relations.

Looking at Levinas in light of Confucian perspectives, we can see more clearly that the issue is not with how far the boundaries can be extended, but rather with what is being reached for. While Levinas destabilises western ontology by bringing ethics to the fore, he also erases specificity in order to sustain the abstractions which in western thought tend to be coterminous with the universal. His destabilisation is returned into the dominant western tradition that since Plato has valued the abstract and the not-here over and above the real here and now of ourselves and the living world (Plumwood).

In contrast, Mencius points to an actual event in the real world—to people and their perils as they exist in time and place. Rather than reaching for the abstract he demonstrates connection with the material real. The significance of Mencius' example is outstanding. The child on the edge of the well is not abstract; it is embodied and sensual, and must be so if the person is to act to save the child. Mencius does not suggest that the child calls out for help. As I understand the story, the emphasis is not on how a person is called into ethics, but rather on how a person's existing humaneness spills out into action. His exact analogy is with a fire that just starts or a spring that just bubbles up out of the ground (*Mencius* [2A6] 82–83). As Allan explains in her study of Chinese thought, this process of founding or finding principles for human action in the action of the Earth is possible because of the presumption of continuity. She writes:

Because the philosophers assumed that the same cosmological principles underlie human behaviour, they sought to derive principles about the natural world by studying water and natural phenomena which would enable them to understand man and his place in the natural order. (Allan 25)

In short, Mencius' person is always already continuous with the world; the humaneness that bubbles up is part of the living world.

The differences are striking: Levinas goes into the abstract, Mencius goes into the living world. One affirms universality in the

abstract; the other affirms a living ethics that moves transversely through individuals, histories and cultures. One is committed to binaries, the other to continuities. One is confined within western history and modernity, the other opens across time and place in a mode of connectivity that in today's language can justly be called ecological.

The power of the Confucian ethics is its participation in ecologies of the living world. In large generalisations, I am suggesting that for Levinas, in the end, there are no others; there is only an abstracted and empty Other. For Mencius, in contrast, there is no Other; there is rather the multitude of fellow subjects.

This brings us around to questions of new communities and globalisation. Lee contends that the relation between the universal and the relative is embedded in events of the world. I take this to mean that while all the myriad things are potentially moral friends, actual communities of demonstrated friendship arise around specific events, as empathetic response spills out into the world. These real events—real crises and catastrophes—call forth episodic communities of moral friendship that form and dissolve as crises develop and are resolved. From this event-oriented perspective, the crucial factor of globalisation means that episodic communities increasingly are transnational and transpecies.

My thesis is that catastrophe tears open a space in which humaneness bubbles up. I am not proposing a pretty allegory; rather I contend that crisis in the real world implicates the living, the dying, the desperate, and the responsive in relations of awareness. Here in this zone of spontaneous care and compassion, moral friendships spring forth in a community of compassion. Here in this zone, we discover our humanity-in-relation. Here animals and others offer us connection and humaneness, and here we offer to others relationships of caring encounter.

Conclusion

Lee draws Confucian tradition into global discourse and offers a profound and challenging idea that before anything else we are moral

friends. Equally challenging is the idea that these friendships, or moral communities, form around specific events. Globalisation requires us to discover new communities, and catastrophes offer unprecedented opportunities for the formation of new transnational and transpecies communities. These communities break the hold of modernity on our lives, and in their episodic emergence they rupture hegemonies and allow us to experience alternatives.

There will be no shortage of catastrophes, it seems. W.J.T. Mitchell puts into succinct words what many of us now sense: that we are in an age “when the contradictions between ‘sciences of control’ . . . and eruption of the uncontrollable are rampant features of everyday life.” (Wolfe xiii) Our challenge as scholars is to identify processes of moral friendship and to work to enhance the moral possibilities inherent in catastrophe. In these zones of extreme possibility we can forge both empirical and theoretical alternatives to modernity’s cycles of amplifying disaster.

NOTES

¹ <http://www.ema.gov.au/ema/emadisasters.nsf/0/9800a481424dd5a4ca256d65007ea8ef?OpenDocument>

² http://www.palmdps.act.edu.au/wildlife_units/LO_unit/fire_rural.htm (accessed 10/4/05)

³ <http://www.bushfirecovery.act.gov.au/lucky/index.htm> (accessed 10/4/05)

⁴ *Canberra Times*, 22/1/03, p. 10.

⁵ *Canberra Times*, 20/1/03, p. 6.

⁶ <http://www.abc.net.au/stteline/act/content/2003/s78744.htm> (accessed 6/04/2005)

⁷ *Canberra Times*, 20/1/03, p. 15; *Canberra Times*, 26/1/03, p. 5.

⁸ *Canberra Times*, 19/1/03, p. 11.

⁹ *Canberra Times*, 24/1/03, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Canberra Times*, 22/1/03, p. 11.

¹¹ *Canberra Times*, 20/1/03, p. 9.

¹² *Canberra Times*, 25/1/03, p. 1–2.

¹³ There are of course many contemporary arguments for mind in nature

(Bateson 1979), and for continuities and connectivities across the mindful world and the mindful human person (Mathews 2003, Plumwood 2002, Rose in press).

¹⁴ *Canberra Times*, 20/1/03, p. 16.

¹⁵ The Disaster Database, for example, does not list the numbers of animals killed or injured. It is strictly confined to human life and property.

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