

People Are Special, Animals Are Not: *An Early Medieval Confucian's Views on the Difference between Humans and Beasts*

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Abstract

Early Confucians viewed their world in an anthropocentric way – man was an embodiment of the cosmos and embodied the virtues of benevolence and righteousness. By the early medieval period (220–589), though, Confucian tales of virtuous animals flourished, betraying that Confucian attitudes towards animals had changed: the moral boundaries between animals and humans were fluid and beasts could serve as exemplars for humans.

One of the few early medieval Confucian thinkers who spoke at length about animals was He Chengtian 何承天 (370–447), a famed historian, astronomer, classical scholar, musicologist, and numerologist. His view of what separates humans from animals emerges from letters and essays he wrote attacking Buddhism. To refute the idea that humans and animals are both sentient beings, he espoused the old belief that people had a privileged place in the universe because of their moral excellence. Moreover, even though there was a gap between sages and ordinary humans, the latter were still ethically superior to beasts. In addition, for him, meat-eating was both a natural and sacred activity. Ironically, man's benevolence and righteousness are most visible in the humane ways that Confucians wanted people to hunt and fish. He Chengtian's opposition to Buddhism thus seems to have pushed him to a more extreme view of animals than his contemporaries. Nevertheless, his attempt to refute the idea of karmic retribution through an example taken from the animal kingdom betrays that he saw humans and non-human animals on a more equal footing than he cared to admit.

Keywords: Confucianism, anti-Buddhist polemics, He Chengtian, sustainable hunting and fishing, karmic retribution, animal-human differences

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I. Introduction

Early Confucians viewed their world in an anthropocentric way—man was an embodiment of the cosmos and exemplified the virtues of benevolence and righteousness (*renyi* 仁義). By the early medieval period (220–589), though, tales of virtuous animals flourished, betraying that, at least for some Confucians, their attitudes towards animals had changed. One of the few early medieval Confucian thinkers who spoke at any length about animals was He Chengtian 何承天 (370–447) who was a famous historian, astronomer, classicist, musicologist, and a numerologist. His view of animals emerges from a series of letters and essays he exchanged with his fellow literati Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443) and Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (384–456), in which they debated the merits of Buddhism. Throughout these exchanges, He Chengtian attempted to discredit Buddhist ideas and promote Confucianism's superiority.¹ To do so, he frequently invoked animals. This paper will determine what his view of animals was by closely examining the four instances where he speaks of them, particularly 1) his argument that humans and non-human animals are not equal as sentient beings (*youqing zhongsheng* 有情衆生); 2) his contention that, whether they are sage or fool, people are still categorically different from beasts because of their inherent possession of benevolence (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義); 3) his belief that meat-eating is natural and that Confucians practice humane hunting; and 4) his observation that one merely needs to look at the animal world to realize that karmic retribution theory (*yingguo baoying* 因果報應) is groundless. At the end of the article, to determine how representative He Chengtian's views were, I will attempt to reconcile his views with other early medieval Confucians who were writing tales about filial animals. I will suggest that he took extreme positions to discredit Buddhism, but that, like many of his contemporaries, he saw humans and non-human animals on a more equal footing than he admitted.

¹ For a historical overview of Confucian attacks on Buddhism and Buddhist responses, see Huang (2020).

Past research on how Confucians viewed animals is limited. One of the earliest and most complete discussions of how early Chinese differentiated humans from animals is found in Roel Sterckx's *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China* (2002). However, Sterckx was not interested in Confucianism per se and stopped his inquiry at the end of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). In 2003, Donald Blakeley published an article on the Confucian view of animal welfare based on the views of Confucius (Kongzi) 孔子 (c. 551–c. 479 BCE), Mencius (Mengzi) 孟子 (c. 372–c. 288 BCE), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200 CE), and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1528). Blakeley maintains that the Confucian view of animals remained fundamentally constant for 2,000 years (2003). In 2006, Rodney Taylor provides a good summation of how Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi 荀子 (298–238 BCE), and various Neo-Confucian philosophers envisioned the human-animal relationship. But like Blakeley, he entirely omits the medieval period from his discussion (2006). In the same volume as Taylor, based on the Mencius and Xunzi, Ames argues that Confucianism championed human exceptionalism due to man's creativity (2006). In a 2008 essay, John Major discusses second century BCE insights on how men are superior to animals, but not solely from a Confucian perspective. In 2010, based on the *Analects*, *Mengzi*, and the *Liji* 禮記 (The Book of Rites), Fan Ruiping provides an excellent account of how early Confucian envisioned human and animal relations (2010). Most recently, Michael Nylan has argued that *Ru* 儒 (for her “students of classical learning”) believed that humans and animals were different in that the former could become “complete persons” (*chengren* 成人) through being able to see beyond themselves, or in her words by “fulfilling his or her potentials through receptivity to other lives” (2019). Unfortunately, she does not offer much evidence to support this claim. My article differs from its predecessors in two important ways. First, it does not approach the question of how Confucians conceived of the differences between humans and animals by re-examining the earliest texts of the tradition, as if Confucianism was unchanging. Instead, it looks at the opinions of a man who lived 500 years after the last foundational Confucian text was penned. Second, it gives a sense of how Buddhism forced Confucians to reassess and rethink how they viewed the animal world.

II. Who Was He Chengtian?

He Chengtian was a polymath and sometimes a high-ranking official. He was from a prestigious lineage whose original home was Donghai 東海 Prefecture (in present-day southern Shandong 山東 Province). Since his father died when he was five, his early education came from his mother and uncles, one of whom was the famous historian and Confucian scholar Xu Guang 徐廣 (352–425). He Chengtian lived most of his life in the Southern dynasties' capital, Jiankang 健康 (present-day Nanjing 南京), serving as an official. During his early career he did not ascend to high positions because he occasionally resigned from office: three times in thirteen years. He did so because each of his patrons rebelled or were about to do so—he foresaw that they would not emerge victorious. His career blossomed with the establishment of the new Liu-Song 劉宋 dynasty (420–479). He especially gained the trust and favor of Emperor Wen 宋文帝 (r. 424–453), but he was often relegated to provincial posts because of his arrogance and obstinacy (Yang 2018, 17–34).

He Chengtian was an accomplished mathematical astronomer and musicologist. He is probably most famous for his work with astronomy and calendrics. His uncle, Xu Guang, excelled in these fields; it appears He Chengtian began his studies of these subjects under his tutelage. In terms of astronomy, He Chengtian believed in the *huntian* 渾天 (“Enveloping Sky”) theory, according to which the universe is shaped like an egg and the Earth is like a flat yoke within it.² For him, everything within the universe, including the Sun, Moon and the five planets, was in perpetual movement along fixed paths. Calendric measurements, then, had to follow the changes in the movements of the celestial bodies. Measurements of these changes had to be done through close observation (Yang 2018, 103). After 40 years' effort, in 443, He Chengtian wrote *The Yuanjia [reign period] Calculation of the Stars and Times* (*Yuanjia lifa* 元嘉曆法). Its measurements were so accurate that, in 445, Emperor Wen decreed that all officials should

² For an explanation of the “Enveloping Sky” theory, see Schafer (1977, 35–36). For an extensive discussion of his views of the cosmos, see Gao and Yang (2012).

use this work (Gao 2013, 22; Goodman 2010, 181–82). Indeed, it was so precise that it was still in use until the Southern Song 南宋 (1127–1279) and even made its way to Japan (Endo 2014, 374). He Chengtian's interest in measurement and music led him to also craft more precise measurements for the 12 musical pitches. His detailed calibrations were called *He Chengtian's New Pitches* (*He Chengtian xin lü* 何承天新律). To make music more elegant and tailored to literature, he created the *Fifteen Songs for the Drums, Horns, and Cymbals* (*Gu chui nao ge shiwu shou* 鼓吹鐃歌十五首) (Gao 2013, 66–76).

He Chengtian was equally interested in the humanities. Like his uncle Xu Guang, he had a keen interest in the study of history. In 438, because an imperial university had not yet been built, Emperor Wen combined four schools in the capital into a college called the Academy of the Four Subjects (Sixueguan 四學館). He Chengtian's academy, which specialized in the study of History, was one of the four. This was undoubtedly China's first academy solely dedicated to historical studies. He Chengtian wrote two histories about the Spring and Autumn period 春秋時代 (722–481 BCE), as well as a draft history of the Liu-Song 劉宋 dynasty entitled the *History of the Song* (*Song shu* 宋書), which included 15 treatises on specific topics. One of these was “The Treatise on Harmonic and Celestial Systems” (律曆志) (Yang 2018, 44–50). With only slight editing, Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513) probably incorporated this treatise into his still extant *Song shu*. He Chengtian was also an accomplished scholar of the Confucian classics. One of his most important accomplishments in this field was his *Discussions on Rites* (*Lilun* 禮論), which organized and consolidated previous writings on ritual. When confronted with over 800 chapters of previous ritual material, He Chengtian pared down the corpus to 300 chapters and organized it by topic; thereby, making the ritual treatises much easier to access (Gao 2013, 76–84). With little doubt, He Chengtian was one of the most accomplished figures of the Liu-Song court.

How, though, do we know about his attitudes towards animals? We get a glimpse of his opinions through a remarkable series of letters debating the merits of Buddhism, which he exchanged with two other renowned Liu-Song literati: Zong Bing (375–443) and Yan Yanzhi (384–456). Zong Bing was a recluse who was famous for his calligraphy and

wrote the first Chinese theoretical work on landscape painting. He befriended and studied with the famous Buddhist master Hui Yuan 慧遠 (334–416) (Knechtges and Chang 2014, 2348–50). Yan Yanzhi was one of the Liu-Song's most famous masters of both prose and poetry. He also held high positions at court and made He Chengtian's acquaintance there (Knechtges and Chang 2014, 1778–89; Su 2011, 273–76). The letters these men exchanged were so celebrated that the monk Seng You 僧祐 (445–518) included them in the third and fourth fascicles of his *Hongming ji* 弘明集 (Collection for the Propagation and Clarification of Buddhism), which is the earliest surviving collection of Buddhist apologetic works. The *Hongming ji* has six letters that were exchanged between He Chengtian and Zong Bing, and another five letters and one essay that were exchanged between He Chongtian and Yan Yanzhi. In these writings, He Chengtian attacks the ideas of Buddhism, while Zong Bing and Yan Yanzhi counter his criticisms point-by-point. This exchange of letters presents us with a valuable record of Confucian objections to Buddhism, as well as how Buddhist laymen understood and defended their adopted foreign religion.³

III. People Cannot Be Classified Together with Animals as Sentient Beings

In a previous article, I noted that early Confucians advocated an anthropocentric view of the universe, asserting human superiority over all other creatures due to their embodiment of the finest characteristics of Heaven and Earth. Unlike other animals, people can realize benevolence and righteousness and recognize the five cardinal relationships (*wulun* 五倫) (Knapp 2019, 65–67). In his efforts to debunk the Buddhist ideas of transmigration and reincarnation (*shengsi lunhui* 生死輪回), He Chengtian was unwilling to concede that humans, like animals, were sentient beings. Echoing the sentiments of earlier Confucians, he rejected the notion that animals and humans were equal in any way. In his essay “Essay on Attaining Original Nature” (*Daxing lun* 達性論), He

³ For an analysis of He Chengtian's arguments against Buddhism, see Jiang and Sun (2017).

Chengtian makes it clear that humans are exceptional: they are on a par with Heaven and Earth in importance.

When *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 are in place, the numinous king joins them. There is nothing in the universe that is more venerated. Heaven uses *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 to be differentiated; Earth uses *rou* 柔 “softness” and *gang* 剛 “hardness” to be employed. By means of *ren* “humanity” and *yi* “righteousness,” people establish themselves. Without Heaven and Earth, people would never be born; without people, Heaven and Earth would never be efficacious. The Three Powers (Heaven, Earth, and people) share the same form and need each other to be complete.⁴ (Seng 2013, 191; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 125)

In sum, people have a privileged spot in the cosmos, which is equal to that of Heaven and Earth. It is on this account that they share in the pure and harmonious *qi* 氣 (energy, psycho-physical stuff) of the cosmos and their intelligence is particularly acute. Indeed, without humans the cosmos would be incomplete. That which humans share with Heaven and Earth are *ren* and *yi*, which correspond to Heaven’s signal attributes of *yin* and *yang* and Earth’s *rou* and *gang*. Humans provide a “missing link.” Although Heaven and Earth could exist without them, it is only the existence of people that allows them to flourish. Sharing the nature of Heaven and Earth is what makes people both smarter and morally better than other creatures.⁵

For He Chengtian, the embodiment of this unity of Heaven, Earth, and humans was the sage king. In his “Daxing lun” he tells us how,

⁴ The translation is mine, but I have consulted Ziegler’s, translation. The characteristics of the Three Powers echoes that found in the Shuogua 說卦 section of the Yijing 易經, see Ruan (1965, 183) cited in Ji (2020, 308).

夫兩儀既位，帝王參之，宇中莫尊焉。天以陽陰分、地以剛柔用、人以仁義立。人非天地不生、天地非人不靈，三才同體、相須而成者也。

⁵ He Chengtian either knowingly or unknowingly ignores the fact that for Buddhists, even though people and animals are the same in being sentient beings, they are by no means equals. Buddhism also favors people. To be reborn as a human or deity is to have a fortunate destiny because these beings are best suited to make spiritual progress and attain enlightenment. To be reborn as an animal is an “unfortunate destiny” because animals have short and painful lives with little opportunity or understanding for obtaining salvation. See Ohnuma (2017, 1–40) and Harris (2006, 208).

by ruling well, a perfect ruler can enhance everything on Earth and in Heaven.

Therefore, rulers are those who have pure and harmonious *qi*, acutely develop spiritual intelligence (*shenming* 神明), feelings that can sum up the past and present, wisdom that encompasses the ten thousand things, subtle thoughts that exhaust the dark and mysterious, creations that are equal to Nature (*zaozuo* 造作) and are at home in benevolence and ability. When they take care of commoners and help Heaven spread virtue, the sun and moon become pure and clear, the four auspicious beasts (unicorns, phoenixes, dragons, and tortoises) appear, auspicious winds harmonize the pitches, the Jade Candle (the four seasons) shines brightly, the Nine Grains and domestic animals are produced by the land and nourished by the water (i.e., they are abundant), things salty and sour and all other products are complete.⁶ (Seng 2013, 191–92; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 126)

Even though the ten thousand things have an existence independent of humans, for them to flourish, a virtuous ruler is a must. It is only when such a leader exists that all things reach their full potential: only the best of humans can bring out the best of everything. When sage kings bring about this perfection, auspicious omens, such as the numinous beasts and perfect environmental conditions, become manifest. Note that the sage king shares with Heaven and Earth harmonious *qi* and spiritual intelligence (*shenming*). The sage king can bring about this perfect order because he studies and replicates the patterns of Heaven and Earth.

He Chengtian more fully develops the reason why humans are superior to animals by specifying the principles by which sage kings rule: frugality and simplicity. Good rulers instill frugality and simplicity in their subjects, which enables them to live superior lives.

When people employ frugality, then it is easy to feel contented. When it is easy to feel contented, then one has extra strength. Having extra

⁶ The translation is my own, with consultation from Harumi Hirano Ziegler.

故能稟氣清和、神明特達、情綜古今、智周萬物、妙思窮幽顯、制作侔造化、歸仁與能，是君長。撫養黎元、助天宣德、日月淑清、四靈來格、祥鳳協律、玉燭楊暉、九穀芻豢、陸產水育、酸咸百品、備其膳羞。

strength, one's feelings are then peaceful. A heart that regulates joy (*lezhi* 樂治) is thereupon created. When affairs are simple, they are orderly. When orderly, the spiritual intelligence becomes efficacious (*ling* 靈). When spiritual intelligence is efficacious, then plans are carefully thought out. The duties of solving [people's hardships *jizhi* 濟治] are completed by this means. Therefore, Heaven and Earth teach people simplicity and frugality. The [*Yijing* 易經 "Classic of Changes"] hexagrams *Qian* 乾 and *Kun* 坤 show people ease and simplicity. Thus, [people] are taught and shown how to be industrious and earnest to a high degree. How is it possible that humans are sentient beings like insects that fly or float on the water?⁷ (Seng 2013, 192; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 126)

By practicing frugality, people are contented. When contented, they are energetic, which makes them peaceful. When peaceful, people can regulate their emotions. When people lead simple lives, they are orderly. When orderly, people's mental faculties flourish, so they can make good plans and decisions. Hence, what separates humans from animals is that the latter do not understand the cosmic principles of frugality and simplicity. Consequently, the lives of animals are harried, unhappy, and exhausting. They also lack spiritual intelligence. Hence, because animals can never be on a par with Heaven and Earth, there is no way that one can place brutish and dumb animals on the same elevated plain with people.

IV. Even Ordinary People Are Not Sentient Beings

After reading the "Daxing lun," Yan Yanzhi challenged He Chengtian's argument that people are not sentient beings. He argued that, even though sages who can match Heaven and Earth seem to be on a higher plain than that of sentient beings, that is certainly not the case of ordinary people who have no moral achievements and who are

⁷ 夫民用儉則易足、易足則力有餘、力有餘則志情泰、樂治之心、於是生焉。事簡則不擾，不擾則神明靈、神明靈則謀慮審、濟治之務，於是成焉。故天地以儉素訓民；乾坤以易簡示人。所以訓示殷勤，若此之篤也。安得與夫飛沉蠅蠅、并為衆生哉？

often mired in desire. Anyhow, sentient beings are those who have consciousness and feelings, which easily includes both ordinary people and animals. Moreover, animals and people are the same in that they both cling to life (Seng 2013, 196; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 127–28). Here we hear echoes of the *Xuanxue* 玄學 (“the mysterious learning”) debate on how sages differ from ordinary people (Chan 2010; Middendorf 2010). Yan Yanzhi also points out that there are few people that are truly benevolent and righteous, yet there are many who claim to be, but only do so to advance their own selfish interests. Hence people of this ilk cannot be classified together with the sages (Seng 2013, 202–203; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 133–34).

In a second letter to Yan Yanzhi, He Chengtian argued that despite the elevated status of sages, they still had much in common with ordinary people. He contends that all humans are made in the image of Heaven and Earth and embody their important characteristics.

As for [people], *yin* and *yang* shape their *qi*; hardness and softness provide their original nature. They have round heads and square feet. Their appearance and features are not unique. All people abundantly have compassion and are ashamed of evildoings. However, those who embody *yin* and *yang* only hold up *ren* and *yi* as their beginning. I know you desire to limit [people] based on their talent and are cautious of those who might be fakes. Thereupon, you compare wise men and incorrupt gentlemen to the feathered crowd, and that the worthy have the same *qi* as creatures with shells. How is it possible that the hexagrams were created for this purpose? (Seng 2013, 209; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 139)

The first sentence makes it apparent that He Chengtian believed that both Heaven and Earth influence people’s *qi* and *xing* 形 (“form” or “shape”), which is visible in their physical appearance—their heads are round like Heaven, while their feet are square like the Earth.⁸ All people have compassion and want to avoid shameful acts. In other words, no matter whether they are sages or ordinary people, they are all made in

⁸ This harkens back to Dong Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 description of humans. See Knapp (2019, 65–66).

Heaven and Earth's image and inherently possess *ren* and *yi*. Here, he puts forth a Mencian vision of human nature, in which the sprouts of goodness are inherent in everyone. Thus, to compare morally worthy men with animals is nothing short of ridiculous.

He Chengtian also loathed separating those few people who qualified as sages from the many worthy men of the past, such as Confucius' favorite disciple Yan Hui 顏回. Yan Hui might not have been a sage, but he could not be viewed as mere ordinary person either. Here we see the assumption again that morally good people could not be compared to mere animals. The modern scholar Gao Min 高敏 notes that, even though He Chengtian believes there is a wide chasm between sages and ordinary people, they all share the ability to act morally and contribute to society, whereas birds and beasts are entirely without morality (Gao 2023, 165). This argument allows us to see one of the effects of Buddhism on medieval Confucianism: Confucians usually emphasized hierarchy among humans: there were exemplary people (*junzi* 君子) and mean fellows (*xiaoren* 小人), or sages and ordinary people. The former were impartial, harmonious, and without self-interest, whereas the latter were partial and always self-interested (Chan 2010). However, Buddhism's lumping together people with animals as sentient beings caused Confucians like He Chengtian to stress the shared characteristics of all humans, no matter the quality of their moral accomplishments.

V. Meat-Eating Is Natural; Confucians Kill Humanely

Another important difference that set He Chengtian apart from Zong Bing and Yan Yanzhi was his attitude towards killing animals. Both Zong Bing and Yan Yanzhi thought that men should not kill other creatures.⁹ The more people kill, the more savage they become. He Chengtian believes that such principles only apply to barbaric

⁹ On the lay advocacy of Buddhist vegetarianism during the early medieval period, see Kieschnick (2005, 186–212), Lavoix (2002, 103–44), and Pu (2014, 39–100). On more general attitudes on respecting animal life in Chinese tradition, see Chapple (1993, 33–39).

foreigners, but not to civilized Chinese. He states,

Chinese (*Hua* 華) and barbarians (*rong* 戎) are different. How is that so? The people of Central States (*Zhongguo zhi ren* 中國之人) receive *qi* that is pure and harmonious, which joins together with *ren* (“benevolence”) and includes *yi* (“righteousness”). As a result, the Duke of Zhou (Zhong Gong 周公) and Confucius illuminated the teachings of [good] customs. As for foreigners, the human nature they are endowed with is hard and strong; [as a result,] they are greedy, filled with desire, angry, and violent. Therefore Mr. Shakyamuni [the Buddha] drew up the severe laws of the Five Prohibitions.”¹⁰ (Seng 2013, 173–74; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 112–13)

Simply put, Buddhism has harsh and inflexible prohibitions against killing because foreigners are unruly and cruel by nature. In contrast, Chinese are naturally humane and righteous, so there is no need to have such repressive laws. Thus, foreigners are not supposed to eat meat because, if they are allowed to kill, they will do so wantonly and mercilessly. It is only by means of the strict prohibition that threatens a rebirth in hell that one can quell their violent natures. Chinese, on the other hand, eat meat but they take life mercifully. He Chengtian writes,

Among the admonitions on punishing violence, nothing is crueler than hells (*diyu* 地獄 “earth prisons”). Among the encouragements to induce people to behave, nothing is sweeter than paradise (*tiantang* 天堂). As for eliminating the slaughter [of animals], the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (The Doctrine of the Mean) does not speak about this. The Duke of Zhou and Confucius also did not advocate this. They followed Heaven’s nature and got rid of extremes. [Prohibitions against] sexual misconduct and stealing are made apparent in the Five Punishments; crimes related to alcohol are clarified in the *Book of History*’s “Warning about Alcohol.” In the Spring Hunt, marsh thickets are not surrounded.¹¹ When we see something alive, we cannot bear to watch it

¹⁰ 華戎自有不同。何者？中國之人、稟氣清和、合仁抱義、故周孔明性習之教、外國之徒、受性剛強、貪欲忿戾、故釋氏嚴五戒之科。

¹¹ See “Quli xia” 曲禮下 2.9 and “Wangzhi” 王制 5.28 in Liu and Chen (1992, 8 and 33).

die. We have the Five Offenses in hunting¹² and only chase game from three directions.¹³ We fish but do not use a net.¹⁴ Therefore, benevolence and cherishment (*ren'ai* 愛) go everywhere, and even reaches pigs and fish. Auspicious rituals always have a small table with dishes of flesh; elderly people must eat meat. In the spring [men] plow and in the fall they harvest. According to the appropriate times, [women] weave silk. The three numinous beings arrive, the hundred deities all come together.¹⁵ (Seng 2013, 174; Ziegler, vol. 1, 113)

To stop foreigners from excessively killing animals, Buddhism must resort to frightening its followers with the threat of Hell and the promise of Heaven. In contrast to foreigners, Confucians do take lives to consume meat. There is no danger, though, that their killing will become bloodlust. That is because Chinese kill animals in a humane way. They always provide animals with an escape route. They endeavor to not endanger the life cycle of animals; hence, they kill neither pregnant animals nor under-aged ones. Furthermore, they do not steal eggs, overturn nests, or burn fields before insects have burrowed into the ground. They also limit how much they take, which is why they do not surround animals in a field, and why they only fish with lines rather than nets. Chinese eat flesh, but they procure it in neither a cruel nor wasteful manner. In other words, they cleave to the middle and do not go to extremes. That is because eating meat is natural and time honored; moreover, it is necessary to secure animal flesh to properly venerate elders and the spirits. Interestingly, we would say they practice hunting and fishing in a sustainable manner. While Confucian sacrifice some mature animals, they do not disrupt the animals' reproductive

¹² They are 1) before insects have burrowed, do not light fields a fire, 2) take neither fawns nor eggs, 3) do not kill pregnant animals, 4) do not kill animals that are not yet fully grown, and 5) do not overturn nests. These rules come from the *Liji*'s 禮記 "Wangzhi" 王制 chapter. See Ji (2020, 321).

¹³ *Sanqu* 三驅 means that, in pursuing game, one does not surround them and only approaches them on three sides, which allows a few to escape. This demonstrates the hunter's esteem for life. See Seng (2013, 151).

¹⁴ See "Shuer" 述而7.27 in Harvard-Yenching Institute Yinde Bianzuanchu (1972, 13).

¹⁵ 懲暴之戒、莫苦乎地獄; 誘善之功、莫美乎天堂。將盡殘害之根、非中庸之謂、周孔則不然、順其天性、去其甚泰、姪盜者於五刑、酒宰明於周告、春田不圍澤、見生不忍死。五犯三驅、釣而不綱、是以仁愛普治、澤及純魚、嘉禮有常俎、老者得食肉、春耕秋收、蠶織以時、三靈格思、百神咸秩

cycle. Like the consumption of alcohol, the killing of animals should always be done in moderation.

However, rather than acts to conserve animal resources, for Confucians these taboos on animal killing were inspired by feelings of compassion. The following anecdote about the exemplary Eastern Han (25–220 CE) official Lu Gong 魯恭 (32–112 CE) makes this apparent.

When he was the magistrate of Zhongmou, all-under-Heaven was infested with locusts: all the prefectures and townships suffered from this calamity. The only jurisdiction the locusts would not enter was Zhongmou. When Yuan An [?–92 CE], the Minister of Education, heard this, he sent an envoy to investigate this report. When the envoy secretly arrived in Zhongmou, he rested under a mulberry tree. He saw that there was a wild chicken in the field, yet when it perceived a human, it was not afraid. The envoy said to a small boy who was a cow-herder, “Why don’t you catch it?” The small boy replied, “the wild chicken just laid eggs, so I cannot bear harming her.” The envoy sighed saying, “virtue can overcome calamities: this is the first extraordinary occurrence. Birds and beasts aren’t frightened by people: this is the second extraordinary occurrence. That a child could have a benevolent and considerate heart-mind is the third extraordinary occurrence.” When this was memorialized to the Son of Heaven, [Lu Gong] was promoted to the position of Minister of Education.¹⁶

Most importantly this anecdote indicates that the reason the young lad refrains from grabbing the chicken is because he has a compassionate heart—he feels pity for the mother hen because it has just hatched its young. That even a young child can have these feelings of sympathy for other animals is unusual. In short, he restrains himself not because he wants to ensure that there will be more wild chickens in the future, but because it is the morally right thing to do. Second, because the animals know that humans in this district will treat them in a humane way, they

¹⁶ From a section on fine officials from an unnamed encyclopedia at Dunhuang (P 3636 and P 4022). See Wang (1993, vol. 1, 264). This account comes from Fan (1977, 25, 874–75).

以畋以漁、養兼賢鄙、三品之獲、實充寶庖、金石發華、笙簧協節、醉酒飽德、介茲萬年。處者弘日新之業，仕者敷先王之教。誠者明君、澤被萬物、龍章表觀、鳴玉節趨、斯亦堯孔之樂地。及時不遇、考槃阿澗、以善其身、殺雞為黍、聊寄懷抱。或負鼎割烹、揚隆名於長世、或屠羊鼓刀、陵高志於浮云、此又君子之處心也。

are not afraid of people. The *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (History of the Later Han) version of this tale says, “[Lu Gong’s] moral transformation [even] reached the birds and beasts (*hua ji niaoshou* 化及鳥獸).”¹⁷ Roel Sterckx maintains that such prohibitions on killing animals were merely meant to illuminate the health of human nature, rather than show real concern for the welfare of animals (2003, 17–18, 29). Of course, he is right, but if the dividing line between humans and animals was as porous as he contends, then the concern shown for animals was no less real than that which was shown to humans.

Indeed, for He Chengtian, slaughtering animals and eating meat is simply a normal human activity. For a gentleman, the cooking and consumption of meat is good and natural. He Chengtian tells us,

By means of hunting and fishing, both the worthy and the low are nourished. The three types of catch truly are enough to fill the kitchen for guests.¹⁸ Metal and stone are used to display brilliance; the *sheng* and the short flute harmonize the segments [of music]; [the lord] fills [his guests] with wine and satiates them with kindness. Introducing these things [makes the court last] for ten thousand years. Those who reside at home expand their new enterprises. Officeholders spread the teachings of the former kings. The sincerity of an enlightened lord spreads over and covers the ten thousand things. The dragon emblem [of the emperor] becomes manifest and visible, while in advancing and retreating the jade belt hooks [of officials] emit sounds. This also is the joy of Yao and Confucius. When the time is not right to serve [in office], to perfect his person, [a gentleman] tests himself beside a mountain stream. He kills a chicken and cooks millet, and merely trusts his ambition. Or [like Yi Yin 伊尹], he shoulders a *ding* vessel to cook [for a worthy lord] to make his name famous for generations. Or [like Lu Wang 呂望], in slaughtering sheep, he makes his knife sing, which lifts his lofty aspirations to the floating clouds. These are all the

¹⁷ Fan (1977, 25, 875). Chen Huaiyu has shown that for medieval Confucians, animals, such as tigers and locusts, become pests because officials lack virtue and make mistakes. By means of displaying benevolence, they can make any animal docile and well-behaved. Hence, in the tale of Lu Gong, the wild chicken became unafraid of humans because of Lu’s benevolent rule. See Chen (2023, 44–51).

¹⁸ The *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳 states that there are three noble hunts: one in the spring, one in the fall, and one in the winter. The spring hunt is done to entertain guests.

ways a gentleman harbors his ambitions.¹⁹ (Seng 2013, 214; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 143)

In this statement, He Chengtian makes it clear that the consumption of flesh is necessary for all educated men, no matter their status. First, to show hospitality to guests, it is as necessary as music, wine, and other foods. Indeed, providing animal flesh manifests the brilliance of the court. Meat-eating allows recluses to increase their purity, officers to spread Confucian learning, and the ruler to extend his transformative virtue to all things. Meat is of such central importance that even for men who are not serving the court, the consumption and serving of animal flesh is necessary and a possible means to command the attention of future patrons. In short, like humans who enable Heaven and Earth to shine, the consumption of meat allows people to be their best.²⁰

In short, He Chengtian articulates the Confucian view of the use of animals. Both Fan Ruiping and Donald Blakeley have deftly explained this worldview. According to Fan, how Confucians look at animals is based on idea of graded love (*chadeng zhi ai* 差等之愛). There are three types of love: for one's parents, other people, and animals. However, the intensity of one's love differs: one loves his/her parents most, other people less so, and animals the least. Fan calls these grades of care: devotional love, benevolent love, and sympathetic love. The last of these means we must care for animals and not abuse them. Nevertheless, to perform rituals on behalf of our parents and other people, we need to use them as sacrifices. As Fan notes, "while we must always care for human life, in certain contexts we need not and should

¹⁹ 以畋以漁、養兼賢鄙、三品之獲、實充賓庖、金石發華、笙簧協節、醉酒飽德、介茲萬年。處者弘日新之業，仕者敷先王之教。誠者明君、澤被萬物、龍章表觀、鳴玉節趨、斯亦堯孔之樂地。及時不遇、考槃阿澗、以善其身、杀雞為黍、聊寄懷抱。或負鼎割烹、揚隆名於長世、或屠羊鼓刀、陵高志於浮云、此又君子之處心也。

²⁰ Jiang Xinyan argues that, even though Mengzi did feel compassion for the suffering of animals, alleviating the suffering of humans was even more important, which was a form of Mencian "love with distinctions." He thinks that, if there was enough food for everyone to have a sufficient diet, then probably Mengzi's compassion for animals would lead him to disapprove of meat-eating (Jiang 2005, 68). Given how closely tied it was to religiously obligatory sacrifices, this seems hard to believe.

not care for animal life” (Fan 2010, 83). After all, unlike parents or other people, one cherishes (*ai* 愛) animals, but does not respect them (*jing* 敬) (81–88). From a slightly different angle, Blakeley states that Confucians valued animals in three ways: 1) as living beings, 2) their benefit for others, and 3) their value to nature (*dao* 道 or *tian* 天). Sometimes animals need to be sacrificed to ensure the welfare of humans and especially nature itself. Nevertheless, humans should not abuse animals in this process and need to make sure that animals can flourish as well. Hence, Blakeley tells us, “A successful hunt, then, requires that it be without unfair advantage, excess, waste, or needless damage in its accomplishment” (2003, 141–42). These modern scholarly articulations seem to tally well with He Chengtian’s own sentiments: “Great officers neither [destroy] fawns nor eggs; commoners do not cast fine nets. . . . At night moral transformation [even] reaches fish. This is because people cherish what they use” (Seng 2013, 192; Ziegler 2015, vol. 1, 126).²¹ People need to take animal life, but since they also value the lives of non-humans, they only kill in a measured way, with an eye to ensuring the overall welfare of animals and nature itself.

VI. Animals Prove That *Karma* Is Nonsense

Although He Chengtian stresses that people and animals are not alike, upon attempting to debunk the Buddhist idea of *karma*, he ironically compares humans to animals. He was so dubious about the Buddhist idea of *karma* that he wrote a short essay about it called the “Questioning Karmic Retribution” (Baoying wen 報應問), which is preserved in Dao Xuan’s 道宣 (596–667) *Guang Minghongji* 廣弘明集 (Expanded Collection of Propagation and Clarification of Buddhism). One of He Chengtian’s doubts about karmic retribution is how can one know this supernatural system even exists? Being an astronomer, He Chengtian wanted physical evidence. He notes, “In order to inform oneself about the motions of the sun and the moon, one consults an

²¹ My own translation differs from Ziegler.

大夫不麋卵，庶人不數罟，行葦作歌，宵魚垂化，所以愛人用也。

armillary sphere. Whenever one wants to extend the trustworthiness of his understanding of dark matters, he should make sure they tally with known matters” (Seng 2013, 231).²² Endo Yusuke 遠藤祐介 notes that He Chengtian’s primary criticism of Buddhism is that it relies on the truths that are hidden and murky, i.e., things that the naked eye cannot observe (2014, 64).²³ In other words, there is no objective means by which to ascertain what happens after death.

He Chengtian also faults the idea of *karma* because it does not square with common sense, especially regarding the sinfulness of killing. To this end, he provides the specific case of geese and swallows.

Geese are birds which float on clear ponds and feed on spring grasses (lifeless matter); all the wriggling creatures (around them) do not rouse (their appetite). Yet they are caught by a cook and [are] sure to end up under his knife on the chopping-board. (On the other hand) swallows, hovering and wheeling in the air, prefer flying insects as food (that is, they eat living beings). And yet, people all like them, so that they need not be afraid to make nests under a canopy or eaves of houses. But not only geese and swallows, but all of creation testifies to the same, namely, that one who kills the living does not suffer evil retribution, and one who does good (abstains from killing) is not rewarded. That is why I sincerely doubt the sincerity of those who teach (*karma*); because facts prove the opposite.²⁴ (Seng and Daoxuan 1991, *juan* 30, 231; Liebenthal 1952, 375)

It is telling that, when attempting to prove his argument, He Chengtian, the scientist, puts forward only one example, which stems from his observation of the natural world. Geese are herbivorous; thus, according to a Buddhist point of view, sinless. Nevertheless, they often end up in the cooking pot. Swallows do nothing but eat living insects, so from a Buddhist point of view, they should accumulate an endless amount of bad *karma*. Nevertheless, people love these birds and never

²² 夫欲知日月之行。故假察於璿機。將伸幽冥之信。宜取符於見事。

²³ Jiang and Sun also make this point (2017, 64).

²⁴ 夫鵠之為禽。浮清池咀春草。眾生蠢動弗之犯也。而庖人執焉。豈有得免刀俎者。燕翻翔求食。唯飛蟲是甘。而人皆愛之。雖巢幕而不懼。直鵠燕也。群生萬有往往如之。是知殺生者無惡報。為福者無善應。所以為訓者如彼。所以示世者如此。余甚惑之。

harm them. From this one case, He Chengtian deduces that there is no supernatural penalty for killing other animals and no benefit from refraining from doing so. Consequently, the Buddhist argument that killing others creates bad *karma* is illogical.

Anticipating objections to his example, He Chengtian argues that, just like other beasts, humans are also naturally disposed to kill animals to consume their flesh.

If one says that swallows do not sin (in eating living beings) because they only find insects appetizing, why should people alone be guilty when eating livestock? If one replies that animals are ignorant, whereas men are acquainted with the sutras [so they are cognizant that they are committing a sin], hunting and fishing with small and large nets was no crime before the arrival of Buddhist laws and regulations. Only after entering China with its religious laws and regulations (did it become sinful). This is precisely setting a trap for the people. For those who are benevolent, how is it possible for them to do such a thing? As a result, I say the Buddhist scriptures are merely fictitious, expedient teachings, which merely urge people to do good. They have no connection to real accounts. Consequently, the sages made institutions to spread virtue and heal things, [so that] I can take care [of others] and enjoy myself. This truly is to receive Heaven's blessings. The three grades of the catch of the fields for the guest's kitchen are prepared here. Upon seeing the living, one cannot bear seeing it dead. If one hears its voice, he cannot eat its meat. Indeed, this is what an exemplary person must undertake."²⁵ (Seng and Daoxuan 1991, *juan* 30, 231; Liebenthal 1952, 375)

In this passage, he argues against the objection that animals harm other animals because they are ignorant of the sinful nature of killing. He points out that, before the coming of Buddhism, hunting and fishing were never considered morally wrong. It is only Buddhism that has stigmatized them. By promoting this belief, Buddhists are harming

²⁵ 若謂燕非蟲不甘故罪所不及。民食芻豢奚獨嬰辜。若謂禽豕無知而人識經教。斯則未有經教之時。畋漁網罟亦無罪也。無故以科法入中國。乃所以為民陷穽也。彼仁人者豈其然哉。故余謂佛經但是假設權教。勸人為善耳。無關實敘。是以聖人作制推德翳物。我將我享。寔膺天祐。田獲三品賓庖豫焉。若乃見生不忍死。聞聲不食肉。固君子之所務也。

a multitude of people because what they once considered as natural behavior is now being condemned as wrong. In contrast, the sages set up the world so that people can prosper both physically and morally. Even though an exemplary person cannot bear to see an animal killed, he knows their death benefits his fellow man.

What is particularly interesting about this example of the geese and the swallow is that He Chengtian is comparing animals to humans. If animals are not punished for killing other creatures, how can humans be held accountable? If the laws of *karma* do not apply to animals, how could they only apply to humans? Even though he tenaciously maintained that humans and animals are different, in this case, he maintained that humans and animals should be regarded as the same. This example only makes sense if He Chengtian sees animals and humans as equals. If humans are superior to animals, should they not be held to a higher standard? After all, only humans can be benevolent and righteous. Nonetheless, He Chengtian finds this example so powerful that this is the only one he provides in the essay to disprove the notion of *karma*. Here, He Chengtian contradicts himself. On the one hand, he insists that humans and animals are completely different, but when he tries to debunk *karma*, he assumes that the same laws and behaviors apply to both humans and animals. Even though his rhetoric does not admit it, this contradiction appears to indicate that he believes that in many ways human and non-human animals are alike.

As previously demonstrated, during the early medieval period, Confucian authors were creating and transmitting narratives that emphasized that humans did indeed have much to learn from animals. That is because at least some members of the cultural elite believed that various animals, such as crows, dogs, and gibbons, could embody the virtues of filiality, loyalty, and righteousness (Knapp 2019, 81–82). But what would He Chengtian say about all those Confucian tales of filial and righteous animals, which were circulating among elite men at the exact same time he was debating with these learned Buddhist laymen? Would he have dismissed the stories as merely didactic tools? In that previous article, I maintained that these stories probably came about because of their authors' close observation of nature (Knapp 2019, 67–75, 81–82). Being acutely aware of the heavens

above, He Chengtian no doubt also closely observed the natural world. Hence, he too probably believed that animals and humans had many similarities. However, to score points against his Buddhist opponents, he was more than willing to stick to hard positions of the past to make his case. However, that rhetoric could not completely erase the fact that educated men of the fifth century knew of their close affinity with animals. At the same time, as Rolf Sterckx has indicated, according to Confucian authors, such as Mengzi 孟子 and Xunzi 荀子, the boundary between animals and humans was easily crossed. Men who lack Confucian virtues, such as *ren*, *yi*, and *li* 禮 (“rituals, rites, and propriety”), are no different from animals. Moreover, the influence of the sages and true kings could civilize wild animals (2002, 88–91, 123–64; 2003, 17–18, 20–21).

Since there was so much previous overlap between animals and humans in Confucian thought, it is not surprising that He Chengtian struggled to keep them apart. We see this in other Confucian texts of this period as well. In the introduction of his work, the author of a *Xiaozi zhuan* 孝子傳 (Accounts of Filial Children) manuscript preserved in Kyoto unconsciously commits this error as well. The first line of its introduction reads, “You have doubtlessly heard that Heaven has produced the ten thousand things and that humans are the most honored amongst them.”²⁶ In the next paragraph, though, he states, “As for the kindness one’s parents have shown you, how could anyone but you pay it back? Regarding filial care, how could anyone substitute for you? Crows understand the need to *fanbu* 反哺 (“return regurgitation”); a goose recognizes that it needs to bring food [for its parents]. If birds and beasts can do this, how much more should humans!” (Yōu gaku no Kai 2003, 17–18).²⁷ So, even though humans are the highest of the ten thousand things, we still have much to learn about filiality from animals. If these inferior beasts can do it, surely, we can easily do it as well. So, just as He Chengtian contradicted himself, so did the author of this work. Men were not all morally good and animals were not all morally bad. Indeed, the highest animal can learn from its non-human

²⁶ 蓋聞、天生萬物、人最為尊

²⁷ 父母之恩、非身可報。如其孝養、豈得替乎？鳥知反哺、雁識銜糞。禽鳥尚爾、況於人哉？

inferiors. That is because humans are complex moral beings who have many of the same instincts and desires that animals possess. Due to innate moral excellence, some types of animals are ethical beacons to humans.

VII. Conclusion

What this paper shows is that to undermine the validity of the Buddhist concept that humans and animals are both sentient beings, He Chengtian reaffirmed the traditional Confucian idea of human exceptionalism. Humans along with Heaven and Earth form the cosmos. Without humans, Heaven and Earth would exist but they would have much less luster—they could only attain their full potential through the offices of a perfect king. In other words, humans are essential for the flourishing of the cosmos. This is the case because, through their benevolence and righteousness (*renyi*), humans can have harmonious *qi* and acute spiritual intelligence, which distinctly separates them from animals. Moreover, unlike Buddhists, Chinese make use of all the living creatures; hence, they eat meat. Nevertheless, when they hunt and fish they do so in a humane and sustainable manner: they hunt neither pregnant nor juvenile animals. They fish with loosely knit nets. Eating animal flesh is completely natural for the refined Chinese because they take life in moderation. So, on one level, it appears plainly evident that He Chengtian viewed people as vastly different from and superior to animals.

However, from He Chengtian's equating humans with animals in his criticism of karmic retribution, we can discern that his attitudes towards animals were indeed not all that different from other Confucians of this time. This is because he justified taking the life of other creatures by noting that animals kill other beasts to survive, which causes them no ill effects. So here, he justified a type of behavior by saying that the same rules apply to both animals and humans. In other words, humans are not so different from animals. The many tales about animals who embodied Confucian virtues in their behavior make the same point: animals resemble humans to the extent to that they too

can also embody Confucian virtues. Like other Confucians of his day, He Chengtian could not completely deny that truth that humans and non-human animals were similar.

As for He Chengtian's stress on human exceptionalism, it seems to be a rhetorical club. It seems likely that He Chengtian's attacks on the Buddhist notions of sentient beings, transmigration, and *karma* inspired him to take an extreme position on animals. To attack the notion that humans might die and be reborn as animals, He Chengtian had to discredit the notion that humans and animals were alike. To attack the notion of *karma*, he had to contend that, if it is not sinful for animals to hunt and eat other beasts, then it is not sinful for humans to do so either. In other words, it was his need to differentiate Confucianism from Buddhism that led him to extreme of denying what he had observed with his own eyes.

That He Chengtian had to spend so much time and energy debunking the idea that people and animals belonged to the same ontological category and the idea of karmic retribution demonstrates the immense influence Buddhism had on his time. To reaffirm human superiority, he had to split hairs. Humans are different from non-human animals because they are benevolent and righteous. But since other Confucians of his time were transmitting narratives that indicated that several types of animals were also benevolent and righteous, He Chengtian's arguments seem to be shallow and unconvincing. His Mencian argument that sages and ordinary people are of the same kind because they are born compassionate and shameful of evil deeds contradicts the Mencian idea that people who are not virtuous are little better than animals: Mencius said, "Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while gentlemen retain it" (Lau 2003, Book IV B.19, 178–79).²⁸ In short, He Chengtian desperately feels the need to vigorously defend Confucian ideas about human exceptionalism, but he has a difficult time doing so. His arguments about the status of animals indicate how threatening Buddhist ideas were to his worldview and how few Confucian resources there were to counter them. Buddhism too

²⁸ 人之所以異於禽獸者幾希，庶民去之，君子存之。

promoted human exceptionalism, but Buddhists acknowledged that the line between humans and animals was porous. This was a fact that many of He Chengtian's Confucian contemporaries were also tacitly acknowledging.

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