Humanities and Society Review
ISSN *(Online)*: XXXX-XXXX
Volume 1, Issue 1, April-June, 2025, Page 15-18
https://doi.org/

Original Research Article Received: 03-05-2025| Accepted: 15-06-2025| Published: 30-06-2025

Climate Change and Moral Responsibility: Ethical Reflections from Eastern and Western Philosophical Traditions

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Abstract

This article examines divergent conceptions of moral responsibility for climate change across Eastern (Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist) and Western (deontological, utilitarian, virtue ethics) philosophical traditions. Through comparative analysis, we identify how foundational ethical frameworks shape responsibility attribution: Western individualism emphasizes *causal accountability* and *remedial obligations* of discrete actors, while Eastern holism prioritizes *relational harmony* and *cosmic balance* through collective action. Indigenous philosophies further contribute *intergenerational custodianship* paradigms challenging anthropocentrism. The study reveals that integrating Confucian relational ethics with capabilities approaches offers a transformative path for just climate governance. We argue that effective climate action requires hybrid ethical frameworks reconciling individual agency with systemic interdependence, supported by institutional reforms embedding *mutual responsiveness* in policy design.

Keywords

climate ethics, moral responsibility, comparative philosophy, anthropocentrism, relational ethics, climate justice, intergenerational equity

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INTRODUCTION: THE PHILOSOPHICAL TERRAIN OF CLIMATE RESPONSIBILITY

Climate change presents a "perfect moral storm" (Gardiner, 2011) challenging conventional ethical paradigms. As anthropogenic warming accelerates, philosophical traditions offer divergent answers to core questions: *Who bears responsibility? What obligations follow? How should burdens be distributed?* Western frameworks predominantly address *isolated moral agents* (individuals, corporations, states), while Eastern philosophies emphasize *relational networks* embedded in cosmic order (Tu, 2001). Indigenous worldviews further disrupt anthropocentric models through *kincentric ecology* (Salmon, 2000).

This comparative analysis addresses three gaps in climate ethics literature:

- Underrepresentation of non-Western perspectives in policy frameworks
- False dichotomy between individual vs collective responsibility
- Neglect of *temporal dimensions* in intergenerational ethics

We adopt a tripartite structure:

- Deconstructing Western *liability models* (Shue, 2014; Jamieson, 2010)
- Examining Eastern *harmony-based ethics* (Ivanhoe, 2016; Tucker, 2017)
- Proposing integrative *relational-responsiveness frameworks*

WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS: AGENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Deontological Frameworks

Kantian ethics grounds responsibility in *rational agency* and *duty*. Climate obligations arise from categorical imperatives: treating humanity as ends-not-means requires preventing harm to vulnerable populations (Caney, 2010). This

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generates *strict duties* for high-emission actors (e.g., historic polluters) but faces limitations in addressing *diffuse causality* (Jamieson, 2010).

Utilitarian Calculations

Consequentialist approaches prioritize *outcome optimization*. Singer's (2010) "expanding circle" argument imposes obligations proportional to capacity to help, demanding significant sacrifices from affluent actors. However, this risks *demandingness objections* and undervalues non-consequentialist considerations (justice, rights).

Virtue Ethics

Aristotelian *character-based responsibility* focuses on cultivating ecological virtues (temperance, foresight). Sandler's (2007) *environmental virtue ethics* advocates for:

- *Acknowledgement responsibility* (recognizing complicity)
- *Remedial responsibility* (acting according to capability)
- *Benevolence responsibility* (positive duties to assist)

Table 1: Western Responsibility Frameworks

Tradition	Responsibility Basis	Climate Application	Limitations
Deontology	Rational duty	Historical polluter pays	Diffuse causality
Utilitarianism	Consequence maximization	Cost-benefit analysis	Demandingness
Virtue Ethics	Character cultivation	Ecological virtues	Institutional scalability

EASTERN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS: HARMONY AND HOLISM

Confucian Relational Ethics

Confucianism conceptualizes responsibility through *five cardinal relationships* (ruler-subject, parent-child, etc.), positioning climate action as *relational maintenance*. The *Mandate of Heaven* (天命) requires rulers to ensure ecological harmony, translating to state obligations to protect vulnerable communities (Angle, 2012). Unlike Western individualism, responsibility is *role-dependent* rather than agency-contingent.

Daoist Natural Equilibrium

Daoist *wu wei* (non-coercive action) opposes technological domination of nature. Climate responsibility entails aligning with *ziran* (spontaneous order) through:

- *Minimal interference*: Reducing ecological disruption
- *Reciprocal responsiveness*: Adapting to natural cycles
- *Cosmic humility*: Rejecting anthropocentrism (Ivanhoe, 2016)

Buddhist Interdependent Co-arising

The doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* frames climate change as disruption of interconnectedness. Moral responsibility manifests through:

- *Karmic accountability*: Intention matters more than outcomes
- *Compassionate action*: *Karuna* for suffering beings
- *Mindful consumption*: Reducing *tanha* (craving) driving extraction (Tucker, 2017)

INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS: BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Kincentric Ecology

Indigenous philosophies reject human-nature binaries. The Haudenosaunee *Seven Generations Principle* obliges present actors to ensure *collective continuance* (Whyte, 2017). Responsibility entails:

- **Custodianship:** Humans as earth stewards, not owners
- **Reciprocity:** Giving back to nourishing ecosystems
- **Ancestral covenants:** Honoring treaties with non-human beings (Kimmerer, 2013)

Temporal Dimensions
Indigenous temporality challenges Western short-termism:

- **Backward-looking:** Accountability to ancestors
- **Present-focused:** Responsibilities to kin networks
- **Forward-oriented:** Obligations to unborn generations (Tuck & Yang, 2012)

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: DIVERGENT RESPONSIBILITY PARADIGMS

Attribution Differences

Aspect	Western Approaches	Eastern Approaches	Indigenous Approaches
Primary Unit	Individual/State	Relational network	Human-nature kinship
Responsibility Trigger	Causation/benefit	Role in cosmic order	Covenant with creation
Enforcement Mechanism	Justice institutions	Social harmony	Ceremonial reciprocity

Pandemic as Responsibility Litmus Test
Contrasting COVID-19 responses reveal ethical divergences:

- **Western**: Lockdowns prioritized individual rights debates (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2020)
- **East Asian**: Mask-wearing framed as collective relational duty (Angle, 2020)
- **Indigenous**: Navajo *K'é* (kinship) guided mutual aid networks (Carroll *et al.,* 2020)

INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK: RELATIONAL-RESPONSIVENESS ETHICS

Synthesizing insights, we propose five principles for climate responsibility:

Mutual Responsiveness
Adapting Confucian *shu* (reciprocity) and feminist ethics:

> "Responsibility arises not from causation alone, but from *capacity to respond* within relational systems" (Held, 2006).

This expands obligations beyond polluters to all with response capacity.

Differentiated Reciprocity
Integrating Indigenous reciprocity with capabilities approach:

- **Capability-sensitive burdens:** Demands proportionate to means
- **Need-based prioritization:** Protect vulnerable communities first (Shue, 2014)
- **Knowledge reciprocity:** Valuing Indigenous ecological knowledge

Temporal Solidarity
Bridging intergenerational ethics:

- **Backward repair:** Remediation for historical injustices
- **Forward continuity:** Institutionalizing future-regard (Gardiner, 2011)

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: INSTITUTIONALIZING ETHICAL HYBRIDITY

Governance Innovations

Traditional Framework	Limitation	Hybrid Solution
Carbon Markets (Utilitarian)	Commodifies harm	Cap-and-share with community dividends
Loss & Damage (Deontological)	State-centric	Relational vulnerability indices
Climate Litigation	Anthropocentric	Rights of nature legislation

Justice Mechanisms

- **Cosmic Accountability Councils**: Integrating Indigenous elders into climate governance (Whyte, 2017)
- **Harmony Impact Assessments**: Evaluating policies through Confucian relational metrics
- **Karmic Carbon Accounting**: Weighting emissions by intentionality (e.g., luxury vs survival)

CONCLUSION: TOWARD MULTIVERSAL CLIMATE ETHICS

No single tradition adequately addresses climate responsibility's complexity. Western individualism overlooks systemic entanglement, Eastern holism risks diffusing accountability, and Indigenous wisdom remains marginalized. The path forward requires:

- **Epistemic Hybridity**: Institutionalizing plural knowledge systems
- **Responsiveness Infrastructure**: Building capacity for mutual response
- **Cosmic Repair**: Recognizing obligations beyond human interests

As climate disruptions intensify, our moral frameworks must evolve beyond anthropocentric limitations. Integrating the *relational wisdom* of Eastern philosophies with the *corrective justice* of Western thought grounded in Indigenous earth kinship offers a transformative vision: responsibility not as burden, but as sacred bond.

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Conflict of Interest: No Conflict of Interest

Source of Funding: Author(s) Funded the Research

How to Cite: Devi. N. (2025). Climate Change and Moral Responsibility: Ethical Reflections from Eastern and Western Philosophical Traditions. *Humanities and Society Review, 1*(1), 15-18.