

Article

The Realm of *Tianfang* Advocated by the Daoist Philosophy of Naturalism

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Abstract: More and more people talk about so-called Daoist ecological thought. Actually, Daoism does not have a ready-made ecological thought. However, it indeed can act as a vital theoretical resource for constructing such thought. In this article, I will argue how this is possible, and what realm Daoism can attain in the relation between human and nature. I will mainly employ such methods as original problem research, literature analysis and comparative research in the inquiry. Compared with traditional Western metaphysics, Daoist ontology can provide stronger philosophical support for the value and significance of empirical things. In addition, Dao does not dominate things like a personal god with will, but gives them the chance to grow and develop according to their own nature. Lao-Zhuang called on people to imitate this character of Dao. They believed that the primitive nature itself was worthy of respect, and urged us to set limits for ourselves and never to distort things' natural propensities to suit us. Consequently, natural things are neither overshadowed by a noumenon, nor are they subject to humans' conquering and abuse, so they are capable of flourishing freely. This is precisely the realm of *tianfang* which Daoism seeks.

Keywords: Daoism; *ziran* 自然; *tianfang* 天放; relation between self and others; anthropocentrism; self-restraint; harmony in diversity; liberty; environmental ethics



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1. Introduction

With the intensification of conflict between human and nature in modern society, environmental destruction and ecological crisis have become pressing problems. In order to find wisdom to solve these problems, an increasing number of scholars begin to explore the so-called ecological thought from ancient thoughts such as Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism.

This is an excessive interpretation of ancient thoughts. Take Daoism for instance. As Eric Nelson noticed, “The *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* are not relevant to environmental issues by contributing specific scientific research, political policies, or activist initiatives. It would be anachronistic to have such expectations of ancient texts” (Nelson 2009, p. 294). We know that ecological crisis and environmental destruction are new problems brought about by the rapid development of modern industry. In ancient times, they never became universal problems (no matter whether in the East or in the West), and the Daoist concept of *ziran* 自然 never indicates the natural world, so Daoism does not have a ready-made ecological thought.¹

However, just as Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 pointed out, although Daoism contained no environmental ideology, their thought of *ziran wuwei* 自然無為 would make Daoism an ally of the contemporary environmental protection movement (Liu 2007, pp. 59–60). Additionally, in my opinion, Daoism can be called a “philosophy of relation” and “philosophy of living space”. For example, Laozi kept on urging the monarch to deal with the relation between himself and the public in the manner that Dao treats the myriad things, that is, to set limits for himself so as to grant spacious room for the survival and development of the common people. This is a very valuable and modern thought, which is also suitable

for coping with the relationship between human and nature, and can be an important theoretical resource for us to construct ecological philosophy, ecological ethics and ecological aesthetics.

In this article, I will try to answer: Without a ready-made ecological thought, how can Daoism provide theoretical growing points for today's ecological philosophy? What kind of realm can Daoism attain in the relation between human and nature? By doing this research, we can not only clarify the misunderstanding or over-interpretation of related Daoist thoughts, but also find the real connection between ancient thoughts and contemporary environmental ethics, so that Daoism offers profound enlightenment for today's environmental protection and ecological issues.

2. Analyzing Key Concepts

First of all, it is necessary to analyze the two concepts of *ziran* and *tianfang*. In China, *ziran* was first put forward by Laozi. It was mentioned five times:

When things are accomplished, the common people say, "It's ourselves who accomplished these things 我自然." (Laozi, chp. 17)²

Keep orders to a minimum. Always be *ziran*. 希言自然 (Laozi, chp. 23)

Dao imitates *ziran* 道法自然. (Laozi, chp. 25)

The dignity of Dao and *De* 德 lies in the fact that they never give orders but always keep *ziran* 夫莫之命而常自然. (Laozi, chp. 51)

... help the myriad things follow their own course and do not dare to interfere with them 以輔萬物之自然而不敢為. (Laozi, chp. 64)

As we know, Laozi did not define concepts as clearly as Western philosophers did. Now, people may easily misunderstand *ziran* as the natural world or natural laws. To illustrate, a popular teaching book of Chinese philosophy in Europe and America translated "*xiyan ziran* 希言自然" into "Nature says few words" (Chan 1963, p. 151). In fact, the Daoist concept of *ziran* has nothing to do with the natural world or natural laws. It is a compound word. *Zi* 自 means self; the basic implication of *ziran* is that an individual becomes such and such because of his/her own choices 自己而然, rather than being forced or being bestowed, just as Chapters 17 and 25 show. While in the other three chapters, *ziran* is the fundamental character or behavior style of Dao and the sage, indicating to let others follow their own course 讓他者自己而然. Under this circumstance, *ziran* is almost another way of saying *wuwei*.³ If we investigate it in terms of self-others relation, then *ziran* refers to A's principle of *wuwei*, and the state of B being free from external interference and able to lead his/her own life.

Actually, as early as 1919, Hu Shi 胡適 pointed out that the two characters 自然 should be separated and interpreted as self-so 自己如此 (Hu [1919] 1926, pp. 56–57). In spite of this, once people see *ziran*, they still instinctively misinterpret it as the natural world. So, in order to make it clearer and less misleading, now we look upon this issue from the negative dimension. The opposite of *ziran* is *taran* 他然, which on the one hand means *shiran* 使然 (the individual is compulsorily molded to be so, since his/her subjectivity is not allowed to take effect), and on the other hand means *tongran* 同然 (as a result of *shiran*, the individual is forced to comply with a given standard, thus his/her personality is strangled). Obviously, emphasizing *ziran* will inevitably oppose repression and highlight individuality. *Ziran* is used to maintain the autonomy and difference of an individual. The core proposition of Daoism, *ziran wuwei*, is exactly to preserve *ziran* through *wuwei*.

Now, let us turn to the concept of *tianfang*. It appears in the chapter "Horses' Hooves" of *Zhuangzi* 莊子·馬蹄:

I suppose that those who are really good at managing the world would not do so. People have their constant inborn nature. They weave cloth to get dressed and plow lands to get fed. This is the common nature they share. (The ruler

treats them) equally without partiality 一而不黨. This is called *tianfang*. (Guo 1961, p. 334)⁴

What does *tianfang* mean? From ancient times to the present, most people have not explained it properly.⁵ We can see that before the citation above, the author repeatedly opposed Bole, the potter and the carpenter to discipline others. This was actually laying the groundwork for elaboration of the relationship between the monarch and the common people. Therefore, the logical subject of “treating others equally without partiality” is the monarch (precisely speaking, “those who are really good at managing the world”), rather than the common people; and *tianfang* is his way of governing. Perhaps the interpretation of Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, an outstanding Daoist scholar of Tang Dynasty, was the most reasonable. His general idea was: Dao treats everything equally, because handling things intentionally will destroy their inherent nature, while leaving them alone will make them self-sufficient. This is just *tianfang* (in Guo 1961, p. 335). If we resort to *Laozi*, we can understand it more deeply. Chapter 5 says, “Heaven and earth are not partial. They treat the myriad things as straw dogs. The sage should be impartial. He should treat the common people as straw dogs 天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗；聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗”. The sage should imitate the unintentional nature of heaven and earth. It is unnecessary for him to eagerly carry out a policy based on love. All he needs is to reduce intervention and let the common people lead their own lives. Sure enough, they will be self-generated and create a world full of vigor (see S. Wang 2019b). *Zhuangzi* also says, “Allow things to take their own course and admit no selfish consideration, then the world will be at peace.” (“Conforming Makes an Emperor 應帝王”, Guo 1961, p. 294).

Although *tianfang* is mentioned only once, there are some other similar expressions in *Zhuangzi*. For example, “the swamp pheasant walks ten steps for a peck and a hundred steps for a drink, but it does not want to be raised in a cage” (“Essentials for Preserving Life 養生主”, Guo 1961, p. 126). The chapter “Ultimate Joy 至樂” advocates “raising birds as birds” (Guo 1961, p. 621), and “Autumn Floods 秋水” rejects “haltering horses’ heads and piercing oxen’s noses 落馬首，穿牛鼻” (Guo 1961, p. 590), etc. All of these are expecting the realm of *tianfang*.

Another good case in point is Bao Jingyan 鮑敬言, a thinker of the Jin Dynasty who was fond of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. He also mentioned *tianfang*. His thoughts are preserved in the chapter “Refuting Bao” of *Baopuzi* 抱樸子·詰鮑:

All living things like to keep their own nature. So being cut up is not what cassia trees and lacquer trees wish; being plucked or torn are not what pheasants and kingfishers want; being tightened the reins or bridled with snaffles are not out of horses’ inborn nature; bearing load is not what oxen are willing to do . . . People always cut roots of live plants to decorate useless things, and catch birds as their plaything. They pierce originally intact noses and fetter feet in the state of *tianfang*. All these actions are presumably not in accordance with the intent of all things coexisting. (Yang 1997, p. 494)

Here, *tianfang* acts as an adjective, indicating a state of being free and released. In summary, *tianfang* can be comprehended in two highly related aspects: as a way of governing, it means that the monarch must not interfere with the common people (whether viciously or well-intentionedly) but let them follow their own course; as the consequent living state, it means that the common people are free from external constraint and enslavement, thus feel emancipated and at ease (many stories about plants and beasts in Daoist literature allude to the human world). If we cope with self-others relation like this, we may attain a realm in which all kinds of species coexist and each grows according to its own inborn nature, a pattern of existence in which individuals are free while the whole group is very harmonious.

3. The Pattern of Relationship between Dao and the Myriad Things

In the process of discussion, I will make a brief comparison between Chinese and Western metaphysics from the perspective of comparative philosophy. I would like to make two main points.

3.1. No Difference of Being Real or Illusory

In the view of traditional Western metaphysics, there are two worlds of unequal status: the empirical world of phenomena and the ontological world of essence (such as Plato's *εἶδος*, Christian God, Hegel's *Idee*, etc.). The essential world is real but not present, while the phenomenal world is present but not real. The essential world dominates the phenomenal world. Compared with the essential world, the phenomenal world has very little significance. It is only a shadow of the essential world. This idealism, which lasted for more than 2000 years in the West from Plato to Hegel, swallowed up concrete things with abstract ideas. This was dismissed by Nietzsche as an otherworldly way of thinking. Additionally, after the 20th century, it is repeatedly criticized by modern Western philosophy.⁶

Zhang Dainian 張岱年 pointed out that one of the major characteristics of Chinese ontology was that "it does not regard the noumenon as the sole reality, and does not use being real or illusory to explain the difference between the noumenon and things" (Zhang 1982, p. 16). Daoism also explores the *arche* of the universe, just as the philosophy of nature in ancient Greece did. However, compared with traditional Western metaphysics, Daoist ontology does not distinguish between reality and illusion. Daoism believes that Dao gives birth to all things, but all things are not therefore the shadow or dependency of Dao. Dao itself never has the intention to overshadow all things with its light. Laozi said in an anthropomorphic way that glaring light would burn everything, so Dao "softens its light 和其光" (Laozi, chp. 4) in order to become "lightful but not dazzling 光而不耀" (Laozi, chp. 58), just as the winter sun only brings warmth and comfort but does no harm. These features of Daoist ontology enable it to provide stronger philosophical support for the value and significance of empirical things.

3.2. Dao: Not a God-like Creator or Designer

Here, we will talk about how to understand the statement that Dao gives birth to everything. Most people's understanding of this has been biased in one way or another. They either emphasize Dao's decisive effect on empirical things (such as Tomohisa Ikeda 池田知久; see Ikeda 2009, pp. 504–7) or insist that empirical things are born and created on their own (such as Guo Xiang 郭象 and Qian Mu 錢穆; see Guo 1961, p. 800; Qian 2002, p. 141).

We can say the above views have gone to two different extremes. Let us look at the end of the chapter "Zeyang 則陽" in *Zhuangzi*. Taigong Diao comments on Ji Zhen's theory of nonaction 莫為 and Jiezi's theory of an existing prime mover 或使, "The view that something intangible created the world is too concrete, while the view that nothing created the world is too vacant . . . Both views reflect a particular dimension of the fact respectively. How can they be qualified to describe Dao?" (Guo 1961, pp. 916–17). This comment shows that neither theory is acceptable. Why? Hu Wenying 胡文英 of the Qing Dynasty had an accurate understanding about this. He explained, "If we definitely say there is a Master, then there is no room for humans to strive, thus the view is too fixed. However, if we say there is no Master at all, then humans can do whatever they want, so the view is too vacant" (Hu 2011, p. 211).

Dao is intangible from the aspect of entity 體, and intangible from the aspect of function 用. That is to say, Dao's dominance over all things is between existing and not existing. On the one hand, Zhuangzi believed that Dao is a creative ultimate Being and all things' "death and life depend on (Dao)" ("Tian Zifang 田子方", Guo 1961, p. 707), so Dao surely dominates all things to some extent. However, on the other hand, Dao breeds things without controlling them; it gives birth to everything naturally and then lets it grow according to its own nature.

Very few scholars can take into account these two dimensions. Nevertheless, Xu Fuguan's 徐復觀 judgment was accurate. He said:

However, the creation of Dao has been expressed quite clearly in the two books *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, so it is not that things can lead themselves (completely). However, Lao-Zhuang consider that the creation of Dao is not out of will, nor with an intention, but creates things without knowing itself is creating. Hence, Dao creates all things, but since it has no will or purpose, it breeds things without dominating them . . . as if all things were self-created. It is not that Lao-Zhuang seriously believe all things are self-created. (Xu 2005, p. 206)

Like Laozi, Zhuangzi takes Dao as the ontological Creator. Additionally, the so-called “*ziran*” means: although Dao creates things, it has no will and no purpose. Its function in the process of creation is so intangible that it seems Dao has “done nothing”. After things are created, Dao does not interfere with them at all. Therefore, though all things are created by Dao, they are as if they have been created by themselves. (Xu 2005, p. 238)

Mr. Xu believed that Dao gives birth to everything, so everything is not acting on its own. However, since Dao has no will, all things appear to be created by themselves. This view has indeed grasped Lao-Zhuang's true intention. The main reason why Zhuangzi emphasized that everything depended on Dao to some degree and could not master its own life was to break people's persistence in body and thus make them be content with their fate and accept any change. However, generally speaking, Zhuangzi paid more attention to Dao's characteristic of not controlling, lest controlling should make things unable to live freely. It is much better to step back and let all things lead themselves, so that each individual can act as the initiator of his/her own life.⁷

If we contrast Dao with Christian God, we will find an important feature of Dao is that it does not dominate things but lets them lead themselves. To be sure, Dao is the Master (*zhenzai* 真宰) and plays a certain role in shaping all things. However, unlike a personal god with will, it breeds all things without dominating them. One of the great contributions of Daoist cosmology is the elimination of the previously dominant heaven with personality and will. Compared to a personified master with will, Dao has no will and no purpose. It does not create or dominate things as God. In this sense we can say that there exists no Master. “Showing weakness is Dao's way of functioning. 弱者道之用” (*Laozi*, chp. 40) Dao's functioning is so faint that one cannot feel the existence of this external force. According to the logic of Lao-Zhuang's thought, only if a person does not dominate others, is he/she qualified to be the master. This can be called a master who does not master 不宰之宰. What Lao-Zhuang's philosophy requires is just a Dao which breeds all things and lets them lead themselves without dominating or hurting. Sarah Allan realized, “The dao is a life-giving force that generates all the living things, but it does so in the manner in which water gives life, not in the manner of a creator god.” (Allan 1997, p. 100).

Dao gives birth to everything; this does not imply that Dao is dominating everything. Dao gives birth to all things but does not occupy them, breeds all things but does not control them. Therefore, it cannot be equated with the Creator in the general sense. Dao is not a God-like creator or designer, nor a powerful determiner. The relationship between Dao and all things is not the tense relationship between the determiner and the determined. On the contrary, Dao leaves a broad free space for all things to exist and develop. The Dao Lao-Zhuang needed is not a thing that determines all things, but a “thing” that helps all things achieve their aims. They believed that all things have their own nature, and only by conforming to things' nature and helping them fulfill themselves, can it be called “Dao”. Different from traditional Western metaphysics, the fact that everything is based on Dao does not indicate that the noumenon determines the significance of phenomena, but that the noumenon helps the significance of phenomena to emerge.

3.3. The Theoretical Motive of Lao-Zhuang's Dao Theory

Lao-Zhuang's ultimate aim of discussing the Dao of heaven was to guide the Dao of the human world. They talked about the relationship between Dao and all things in order to deal with various kinds of relationships in the earthly world. These relationships embody in different dimensions, such as the political relation between the monarch and the public, the international relations among different states, the interpersonal relationship between self and others, and the relationship between human and nature. Lao-Zhuang took the relationship between Dao and all things as a model to handle the above-mentioned relations, and used the great exemplar of Dao to correct deviations made by humans, alleviate conflicts in the earthly world, and create a virtuous world for all things to settle down. Daoism is far from being a "religion of hermits". Lao-Zhuang never lacked public concern. In fact, they were striving for living space and eternal peace for everyone (including themselves) in a unique way. The tenet of Daoist thought, *ziran wuwei*, is to urge power holders to exercise self-restraint so that everything can exist and develop in accordance with its inherent nature.

Dao acts not forcibly and keeps in accordance with the *de* 德 of things (here *de* means things' inherent nature endowed by Dao)—all things are able to lead themselves. Likewise, if the monarch acts not forcibly and keeps in accordance with the *de* of individuals, then the public will be able to lead themselves. The reason why Daoism dwells on the relation between ontological Dao and empirical things is to urge the monarch to deal with the relation between himself and the public in the manner that Dao treats the myriad things.

Of course, all philosophical ideas have a certain universality. If we reconstruct the relationship between human and nature with this thought, we will attain the realm of *tianfang*, that is, to allow nature to thrive freely without disturbance.

4. Transcending Anthropocentrism under the Guidance of Daoism

To solve ecological problems, people must first transcend anthropocentrism, behind which is the notion of inequality. What is humans' place in the boundless universe? This is also an important question pondered by pre-Qin thinkers. Here, we can make a comparison between Confucianism and Daoism.

4.1. Confucianism: Ranking the Myriad Things in a Hierarchical Sequence

Confucianism extremely highlights the distinction between humans and beasts, and stresses that humans should not reduce themselves to beasts. The Guodian Confucian slips, the silk text "Five Virtues 五行", Mencius, Xunzi and the *Book of Rites* have a typical discussion on this:

Heaven gives birth to hundred kinds of things. Among them, humans are the noblest. ("Collected Speeches I 語叢一", [Jingmen Municipal Museum 1998](#), p. 194)

Confucius saw Rong Qiqi wearing a deer-fur coat, playing a plucked instrument and singing. Confucius asked, "Why are you so happy?" (Rong) replied, "I enjoy many things. Among all things born by heaven, humans are the most honorable. Now that I have been born as a human, this is my first joy . . ." ("Miscellaneous Words" of Garden of Anecdotes 說苑·雜言, [Xiang 1987](#), p. 428)

So, humans are products of the virtue of heaven and earth, the intersection of *yin* and *yang* 陰陽, the convergence of ghosts and gods, and the condensation of the elegant *qi* of the five elements 五行之秀氣. ("Liyun" of the *Book of Rites* 禮記·禮運, [Sun 1989](#), p. 608)

Confucianism ranks humans, beasts and plants in a descending sequence, believing that humans are the noblest of all because they know to comply with rites and righteousness. Beasts and plants do not know this, so their status is degraded.⁸ "Quli Part I" of the *Book of Rites* 禮記·曲禮上 says, "If a person does not comply with rites, then although he/she can speak, isn't he/she still a beast internally? . . . Hence the sage sets up rites to humanize everyone, so that everyone will obey the rites and know to distinguish himself/herself

from beasts.” (Sun 1989, pp. 10–11). To Confucianism, the value of humans lies in the knowledge of rites and righteousness. If someone does not agree with them or abide by them, he/she will degenerate into a beast. Therefore, it is not strange that Mencius stuck to the difference between “barbarians” and Huaxia civilization, looked down upon Xu Xing 許行 as “a southern barbarian with a cuckoo’s tongue 南蠻馱舌之人” (Zhu 1983, pp. 260–61), and criticized Yang Zhu 楊朱 and Mozi 墨子 for reducing themselves to beasts (Zhu 1983, p. 272). Confucianism advocates extending benevolence to beasts, but hindered by the notion of superiority and inferiority, they think that the nonhuman is only the object of giving in charity from above to below. In other words, Confucian school never treats nonhuman beings as independent and equal individuals, so it is impossible for them to break away from anthropocentrism. Their deep-rooted hierarchical notion will intensify the destructive power of human beings.

4.2. Daoism: Stressing the Equality of Human and Nonhuman

Instead, Daoism stresses the similarity and equality of human and nonhuman 非人. It is noteworthy that in Daoism, the concept of *wu* 物 not only refers to things in the general sense, but often refers to humans as well. Laozi’s concept of “the myriad things 萬物” certainly includes humans. Zhuangzi says, “Whatever has form, image, sound and colour is a thing.” (“Understanding Life Fully 達生”, Guo 1961, p. 634). In this case, humans are also things. In the chapter “The Human World 人間世”, the sacred oak appears in Carpenter Shi’s dream and says, “You and I are both things.” (Guo 1961, p. 172). Additionally, the chapter “Xu Wugui 徐無鬼” says, “Teacher, you are the most excellent among all things.” (Guo 1961, p. 848). The phenomenon of referring to humans with *wu* is very common in Daoist literature, because Daoism believes that humans and things are the same in origin, and humans are just a member of the natural world alongside things. “Nine Perseverance” of Wenzi 文子·九守 says, “I am also a thing in the universe, and things are also things. Now that both human and nonhuman are things, why should we despise each other as ‘it’ 相物!” (L. Wang 2000, pp. 117–18).

Zhuangzi believed that human beings have nothing special, and it is really unnecessary for us to be complacent just because we are born as humans. “Now if a person, who has happened to take on human form, were to say, ‘I’m a human! I’m a human!’ the Creator would surely regard him/her as inauspicious.” (“The Great Grandmaster 大宗師”, Guo 1961, p. 262). Rong Qiqi’s joys of being born as human and being born as a man (not a woman), were disdained by Zhuangzi. By comparison, Daoists “do not care whether people call him a horse or a bull 一以己為馬，一以己為牛” (“Conforming Makes an Emperor”, *ibid.*, p. 287).

Daoism stresses the limitedness of human and opposes thinking highly of self. Laozi said, “A person who knows himself/herself is wise” (Laozi, chp. 33), “To manifest weakness is wise 見小曰明” (Laozi, chp. 52). “Knowing oneself” mainly refers to knowing one’s own finiteness. Once a person knows his/her finiteness, he/she will be ready to manifest weakness. Here, “*xiao* 小” does not mean small in volume. “見” must not be read as *jian* which means to see, but must be pronounced as “*xian* 現” which means to manifest. The proposition of “見小曰明” is talking about what attitude we should adopt when facing the world, which means lowering ourselves thus keeping away from self-inflation is wise.⁹

The beginning of the chapter “Autumn Floods” reminds us that humans should be aware that “between heaven and earth, humans are but as a small stone or a tiny tree on a huge mountain . . . When we designate the number of things (in existence), we would speak of them as myriads; and humans are only one of them . . . Compared to the myriad things, aren’t humans like the tip of horsehair?” (Guo 1961, pp. 563–64). Among all things in the universe, humans are only a member. There’s no reason for humans to think they are the center of the universe. Zhuangzi tried to warn humans to step out of themselves and into infinity.¹⁰

5. The Daoist Art of Self-Control

5.1. The Direct Purpose of Setting Limits for Oneself: To Attain the Realm of *wuji* or *sangwo*

Laozi said, “To learn from Dao, we should reduce (ourselves) day by day. By reducing repeatedly, we endeavor to achieve *wuwei* finally.” (Laozi, chp. 48). This effort unfolds into eliminating knowledge (*wuzhi* 無知), eliminating desires (*wuyu* 無欲), eliminating fame (*wuming* 無名), eliminating self-interest (*wushen* 無身), eliminating the heart-and-mind (*wuxin* 無心), etc.

I have written about *wuyu* and *wushen* before (S. Wang 2019a, 2019c). Here, we will briefly discuss *wuzhi*. It is often labeled as obscurantism or anti-intellectualism. This is a mistake of clinging to the literal meaning. We should dig into the context and further explore what the concepts specifically refer to. In fact, *wuzhi* refers to eliminating only the delusive knowledge, such as knowledge which serves as an accomplice of greed, petty shrewdness, knowledge used for differentiating which may give rise to axiological discrimination, *shengzhi* 聖智 which is claimed to be foresight but actually disturbs everything’s inborn nature.

The knowledge that Zhuangzi wanted to eliminate is much the same. Take the first kind for instance, the chapter “Gengsang Chu 庚桑楚” claims, “Knowledge is used for plotting. 知者謨也” (Guo 1961, p. 810).¹¹ Worldly knowledge, which is motivated by desires and in return stimulates desires further, often throws the world into chaos: the subject of knowledge runs wild, and the external world is disturbed. The chapter “Opening Trunks 肱篋” provides the best description:

The more people know about bows, cross-bows, hand-nets, tailed arrows and like contraptions, the more the birds in the sky will be troubled. The more people know about hooks, baits, various kinds of nets and bamboo traps, the more the fish in the water will be bothered. The more people know about pitfalls, cages and various kinds of nets, the more the animals in the swamps will be disturbed . . . Hence whenever the world falls into great disorder, the fault lies in fondness of knowledge. (Guo 1961, p. 359)

The chapter “Movement of Heaven 天運” also says, “Their knowledge is more fatal than the tail of a scorpion. Down to the smallest beast, not a living thing is allowed to keep its own nature.” (Guo 1961, p. 527). It is precisely due to the great destructive power of this knowledge that Zhuangzi claimed to eliminate it or conceal it without using it. The chapter “Mending Nature 繕性” imagines, “Not a single thing is injured, and no living beings die young. Although people have knowledge, they do not use it.” (Guo 1961, p. 550).

To sum up, *wuzhi*, *wuyu*, *wuming*, *wushen*, *wuxin* are to eliminate oneself (*wuji* 無己 or *sangwo* 喪我), namely, to weaken self-consciousness and to prevent self-expansion and self-centeredness, so they can be called the art of self-control.

5.2. The Ultimate Purpose of Setting Limits for Oneself: To Grant Others More Living Space

Daoist cultivation of *wuji sangwo* is not only a matter of personal cultivation, but also a matter of positioning oneself properly in a group. Humans are relational beings. Humans are destined to position themselves appropriately in their association with others. Daoism always emphasizes the position of self and the consciousness of people’s self-image, because people’s self-understanding not only has a profound impact on their own way of living, but also affects the manifestation of others’ significance. On the one hand, *wuji* or *sangwo* is trying not to be enslaved by one’s own avarice; on the other hand, it is trying to set limits for oneself, so as not to squeeze others. In Zhuangzi’s words, it is to “treat others with an open mind 虛而待物” (“The Human World”, Guo 1961, p. 147) and rebuild the relationship between self and others with a non-egocentric attitude. Q. Wang (2004) also pointed out that Laozi’s principle of *ziran wuwei* was to let others or assist others to lead themselves, so as to endow others with legality philosophically, establish private space for others and demand respect for it.

6. Co-Existence and Co-Prosperity of the Myriad Things

Ecological philosophy not only needs to solve problems of resource utilization and sustainable development, but also needs to break the idea of inequality and the overflow of desires to occupy and control, and admit that all things have the equal right to exist and develop. Only in this way can we thoroughly break away from anthropocentrism, and human and nature can be truly integrated as one. Nature is no longer the object for the human to conquer, while the human no longer plays the role of conqueror.

6.1. The Equality of Things' Different Natures

Confucianism emphasizes the hierarchical relationship among people and between human and nonhuman, which makes us have to wonder whether there is still the possibility of "all things coexisting 萬物並育" and "different ways running parallel 道並行" under this theoretical framework. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, claimed that everything could not be labeled as noble or humble. This person and that person, human and nonhuman, and all kinds of theories are equal. There is no so-called distinction of being upper or lower. Only this kind of mutual recognition and respect among individuals can help to realize the ideal of harmony in diversity 和而不同.

Zhuangzi extremely despised the practice of classifying everything into the noble or the humble, the superior or the inferior. The chapter "Autumn Floods" says:

From the point of view of Dao, things are neither noble nor humble. From the point of view of things, each regards itself as noble and others as humble. (Guo 1961, p. 584)

From the standpoint of Dao, what is noble and what is humble? ... All things being equal, which is short and which is long? (Guo 1961, p. 577)

In the view of Daoism, the distinction between noble and humble, right and wrong, etc. is artificial, and the action of differentiating is problematic. The chapter "Autumn Floods" discusses "being equal (*qi* 齊)" from the standpoint of axiology:

A ridgepole can be used to knock down a city wall but cannot be employed to block up a hole. This refers to the difference in function. The horses Qiji and Hualiu can run 1000 *li* in one day, but when it comes to catching rats, they cannot do better than a leopard cat. This refers to the difference in skill. An owl can catch fleas at night and discern the tip of hair, but if it comes out in the daytime, no matter how wide it opens its eyes, it cannot see a mound. This refers to the difference in nature. (Guo 1961, p. 580)

Observed in the light of function, if we regard a thing as useful because it has a certain function, then among all things there is nothing that is not useful. If we regard a thing as useless because it does not have a specific function, then among all things there is nothing that is not useless. Once you know that east and west are opposite but mutually indispensable, the division of things' functions will be determined. (Guo 1961, pp. 577–78)

All things in the universe, even the most trivial, also have their special value and significance. Additionally, among them there is no distinction of nobility or inferiority. Like hawthorns, pears, oranges and pomelos, their flavors are different but all are tasty. So why should we praise one and despise the others? "On Viewing Things Equally 齊物論", the most brilliant chapter of *Zhuangzi*, says, "Things all must have reasonable elements; things all must have acceptable elements. There is nothing that is not reasonable, nothing that is not acceptable." (Guo 1961, p. 69).

6.2. No Destroying Things' Inborn Nature by Human Action

Confucianists are keen to transform others. They regard themselves as the personification of virtue and morality, and consider others as objects to be cultivated. They always

want to shape others according to their standard. This will inevitably result in erasing others' uniqueness and the world's diversity by external norms. Driven by this kind of thinking, they will unsurprisingly consider the natural world as an object to be conquered. Xunzi, the third figure of pre-Qin Confucianists, said, "Adoring heaven and worshiping it, is impossible to be better than breeding it as a thing and controlling it. Conforming to heaven and praising it, is impossible to be better than mastering its law and utilizing it." ("On Heaven" of Xunzi 荀子·天論, X. Wang 1988, p. 317). This thought of controlling the natural world is a logical extension of Confucian cultivating tradition. Xunzi highlighted man's subjectivity and creativity, which is worthy of affirmation. However, we must be alert simultaneously, because excessive expansion of subjectivity will easily degenerate into egocentrism, whose amplified form is arrogant anthropocentrism.

Daoism, however, believes that everything's inborn nature is already precious, so humans should let it lead itself. Similarly, the wild nature is worthy of respect, and must never be subjected to exterior forced changes. The chapter "Horses' Hooves" questions penetratingly, "Is it in the nature of clay and timber that they should fit compass, square, hook and plumb line?" (Guo 1961, p. 330). In addition, this chapter lists sins of the potter, the carpenter, Bole and the sage, for they have committed the crime of violating things' inherent nature 殘樸. The chapter "The Great Grandmaster" even uses horrific words such as branding the face (*qing* 黥) and cutting off the nose (*yi* 劓) to express the injury to life caused by these external regulations.

Daoism definitely puts forward such propositions as "Creatures cannot overcome the Creator 物不勝天" ("The Great Grandmaster", Guo 1961, p. 260) and "Do not destroy things' inborn nature by artificial actions 無以人滅天" ("Autumn Floods", Guo 1961, pp. 590–91). They remind us to face our own finiteness, to set limits on ourselves and not to bend others' nature to meet our needs, for fear that we should unnecessarily break the spontaneous order of the world and artificially make the world more complicated. Daoism believes it is exactly uniqueness that represents the value and significance of individuals, and they intend to maintain such a diverse world. This is best illustrated by the following words:

Ducks' legs are short, but if we try to lengthen them, it will cause misery. Cranes' legs are long, but if we try to cut off a portion of them, it will produce grief. Hence, what is long by nature needs no cutting short; what is short by nature needs no stretching. ("Webbed Toes 駢拇", Guo 1961, p. 317)

Everything has its own nature. We have no privilege to make them uniform by a criterion imposed from outside, rather, we should let them be uneven. "Viewing things equally (*qiwu* 齊物)" highlights the equality of things' different natures. To put it in another word, it aims to preserve things' morphological diversity by emphasizing their axiological equivalence. In the final analysis, the theory of viewing things equally is pluralism with the purpose of preserving differences.¹² Hu Wenying comprehended properly, "The theory of viewing things equally explains that things must not be made uniform, cannot be made uniform, should not be made uniform, and need not be made uniform." (Hu 2011, p. 17).

Conversely, if we do not conform to things' own nature, then nothing will be intact, and the great harmony of the universe will be destroyed absolutely. Of course, if it is really necessary for an object to be transformed, we should take its inherent nature into account and endeavor to "return to the primitive state after all the carving and chiseling 既雕既琢，復歸於樸" ("A Mountain Tree 山木", Guo 1961, p. 677), that is, to achieve natural effect under the premise of conforming to the intrinsic nature of the object.

Zhuangzi not only opposed vicious domination, but also rejected the imposition of so-called goodness. For example, he explicitly opposed "to 'benefit' the world by one man's decisions and enactments 以一人之斷制利天下" ("Xu Wugui", Guo 1961, p. 861). The chapter "Ultimate Joy" distinguishes two ways of raising birds:

Once a seabird alighted in the suburbs of Lu state. The feudal king himself offered it wine in the ancestral temple, told his subordinates to perform the music of Nine Shao 九韶 for it to listen to and present it with the top-ranked sacrifice (*tailao* 太牢)

to feast on. Nevertheless, the bird looked bewildered and sad, refusing to eat a single piece of meat or drink a cup of wine, and in three days it died. This is to raise birds as to raise the king himself 以己養養鳥, not to raise birds as birds 以鳥養養鳥. To raise birds as birds, we should let them roost in deep forests, roam around raised platforms and flat ground, float on rivers and lakes, eat mudfish and minnows . . . (Guo 1961, p. 621)

Raising birds as tending the king appears to be quite good, but it is actually doing evil with good intentions. The crucial reason for this lies in the fact that we use our mind to measure others and do not allow birds to grow in accordance with their own nature.¹³ By contrast, the core of raising birds as birds is to give birds a wide range of free space for them to grow and develop according to their own nature. This is exactly *tianfang*, far from interfering with them from our wishful thinking (even kindly). Furthermore, many people precisely use the name of being good for others to forcibly interfere with them.

6.3. The Great Harmony between Human and Nature

Lao-Zhuang's philosophy contains a profound thought of harmony (*he* 和). The handed-down version of *Laozi* says, "Knowing to be harmonious is the way of eternity. Knowing the way of eternity is wise. 知和曰常, 知常曰明" (*Laozi*, chp. 55). However, according to the unearthed versions, these two sentences must be rewritten as "To be harmonious is the way of eternity. Knowing to be harmonious is wise 和曰常, 知和曰明" (see [Jingmen Municipal Museum 1998](#), p. 113; [Lab of Ancient Literature of National Cultural Heritage Administration 1980](#), p. 4; [Institute of Excavated Literature of Peking University 2012](#), p. 131). Laozi's emphasis on harmony can be seen here. It can be said that Lao-Zhuang's philosophy is focused on the two themes of individual freedom and social harmony.

It should be noted that harmony not only means order, but also logically contains demand for multiplicity. Harmony exists only in diversity. Monism (*tong* 同) has nothing to do with harmony, and cannot bring order either.¹⁴ Harmony is the balance among diverse individuals. Only in this way can we create a colorful and vibrant world. The key reason why harmony is worth pursuing is that it is the best environment in which all things can grow and develop undisturbedly and endlessly.

Zhuangzi said, "The universe and I exist together, and all things and I are integrated into one. 天地與我並生, 而萬物與我為一" ("On Viewing Things Equally", Guo 1961, p. 79). He believed that all things in the universe were not created to oppose each other. They could have been peacefully side by side without opposition. Zhuangzi advocated a state of existence without controlling others or being controlled by others. The chapter "A Mountain Tree" says, "Thus to enslave others is weary, while to be enslaved by others is worrying. 故有人者累, 見有於人者憂" (Guo 1961, p. 674). Neither enslaving others nor being enslaved can make an individual at ease. Zhuangzi cherished a philosophical pity for people's mutual bondage. In his view, the ideal group-self relationship is that both parties are not tied to desire to manipulate, so that among individuals there exists no controlling or being controlled, enslaving or being enslaved.

As for the ultimate men, they seek food and pleasures in the universe together. They do not come into conflict of interest, or do mischief or plot against each other . . . ("Gengsang Chu", Guo 1961, p. 789)

(So the sage) plays together with things and takes pleasure in the fulfillment of others while holding on to being himself. ("Zeyang", Guo 1961, p. 878)

The sage lives with others but does not hurt them. People who do not hurt others will not be hurt by others. Only people who do no harm can get on well with others. ("Zhi Travels North 知北遊", Guo 1961, p. 765)

Ordinary people consider humans only as things, while Zhuangzi regarded things as humans. He believed that others were our objects to make friends with and to play with, not to be manipulated and used by us. He expected all things to be in their respective place, to

keep their respective nature, and not to invade one another. This further reveals that the freedom (*xiaoyao* 逍遥) he pursued is not only his personal freedom, but also links with the living state of all things, that is, to expect that everyone is free. Like Laozi, Zhuangzi anticipated fulfillment of all things, not just his personal fulfillment. The Daoist School was striving for space of existence for each individual so that they could fully exhibit their respective values of life.

6.4. The Liberty of Aesthetic Objects

Zhuangzi aimed to achieve a world of “million differences 有萬不同”. *Tianfang* is a state of great harmony in which all kinds of things coexist and each enjoys his/her own nature. The chapter “Horses’ Hooves” imagines a scene of *tianfang* in a virtuous world:

At that time, there were no paths or tunnels on the hills and no boats or bridges on the waters. All creatures lived in companies, with their settlements next to one another. Birds and beasts multiplied to groups; grass and trees thrived. So beasts might be led about by tying a cord; nestles could be climbed up to and peeped into without disturbing them. In the age of Perfect Virtue 至德之世, humans dwelled together with birds and beasts, and mingled with the myriad things. How could they know the distinctions between “gentleman” and “snob”? (Guo 1961, pp. 334–36)

It is a pity that Zhuangzi’s such thought of harmony among all things is misunderstood again and again. For example, a scholar commented as follows, “These pictures are obviously describing primitive people who have not yet broken away from the state of living with animals . . . He (Zhuangzi) wanted humans to preserve only the pure biological nature.” (A New Compilation 1988, pp. 154–55). In fact, Zhuangzi was suggesting that “I” open myself up to meet the world and let everything be as it is. “I” and others roam and play together in the universe of great harmony. At this moment, hierarchical boundaries disappear. Person and person, human and nature are integrated as one. They attain authentic coexistence 本真的共在 and accomplish a dance of life together. In the words of Martin Buber, who was deeply influenced by Zhuangzi, the antagonistic structure of “I-it” (*der Ich-Es-Beziehung*) has been transformed into a parallel structure of “I-thou” (*der Ich-Du-Beziehung*) (Buber 1983).

To let things exhibit as they are is an appreciation of individuality and diversity, and recognition of things’ equal right to exist. This is a world of great beauty. The realm of *tianfang* is not only an ethical proposition, but also an aesthetic assertion. Hegel said that aesthetic appreciation had a liberating quality. I would like to add that not only aesthetic subjects are liberated, but aesthetic objects should be liberated as well. Take birds for instance again, the tweet of the bird in a cage is a prisoner’s song. Birds are not toys of humans. If we really love birds, we should let them take the universe for home and a garden for a cage. Broadly speaking, we should conform to things’ own nature and let them get what they want, rather than acting on our desires, even for viewing.

Additionally, quite different from Hegel’s core notion “Beauty is the sensuous presentation of *Idee*”, Daoism believes that everything is not a vassal of Dao, and its value is inherent and self-sufficient. In this way, everything is no longer the manifestation of something spiritual behind it, but has the chance to perform on the stage directly.

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Notes

- 1 Likewise, the proposition “Heaven and human are integrated as one 天人合一” has become a very fashionable idiom, but it is almost distorted into a slogan of Greenpeace. In fact, its original meaning is definitely not the harmony between human and nature; rather, it is stressing from the perspective of virtue that humans should conform to heaven, i.e., to imitate the virtue of heaven 法天和 match with heaven 配天. If a person’s virtue has reached the height of heaven, then we can say he/she and heaven have been integrated as one. In short, we should be aware of the difference between interpreting the original thought 照著講 and extending the thought to other domains 接著講, otherwise we may drift away from the text and fall into boundless association.
- 2 Except those specially stated, all quotations from *Laozi* in this article are based on Lou (1980).
- 3 *Wuwei* is often distorted into doing nothing or no action. Actually, it only negates invasive actions or actions which are not in accordance with Dao. Meanwhile, it advocates doing what Dao is doing. Roger T. Ames properly translated it as “noncoercive action that is in accordance with the *de* of things” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 66).
- 4 All citations from *Zhuangzi* in this article are based upon Guo (1961).
- 5 Cui Zhuan’s 崔譔 version of *Zhuangzi* mistakes *tianfang* for “*tianmu* 天牧” (in Guo 1961, p. 335). Apparently, this is a clerical error caused by a similar form (放 vs. 牧), and has violated the rhyme reading too (黨 and 放). Some scholars like Wang Shumin 王叔岷, however, read it as “*fangtian* 放天” (S. Wang 1999, p. 335). This was to misunderstand 放 as a borrowed character of 仿, so as to conform to the Daoist thought of learning from heaven.
- 6 Naturally this kind of discussion from traditional Western metaphysics has its special value, but it is problematic to apply it to distinguish the real and the illusory and pursue the essential world behind the empirical world.
- 7 Inspired by this, Heidegger put forward “*Sein-lassen*” (see Ye 1995, pp. 140–41).
- 8 See the silk text “Five Virtues 五行” (Lab of Ancient Literature of National Cultural Heritage Administration 1980, p. 23); “Ruling Institutions” of *Xunzi* 荀子·王制 (X. Wang 1988, p. 164).
- 9 People usually misunderstand the proposition of “見小曰明”. To illustrate, Wing-Tsit Chan translated it into “Seeing what is small is called enlightenment” (Chan 1963, p. 164), while Philip J. Ivanhoe translated it as “To discern the minute is called ‘enlightenment’” (Ivanhoe 2002, p. 184). The main reason for such typical misinterpretations is that they have not realized that here “見” must be pronounced as “*xian* 現”. For detailed analysis of the ancient and modern commentaries on this proposition and my own interpretation, see (S. Wang 2015).
- 10 Under the influence of *Zhuangzi*, Heidegger also said, “*Innerhalb des Seienden im Ganzen ist kein Rechtsgrund zu finden für die Hervorhebung gerade des Seienden, das man Mensch nennt und zu dem wir selbst zufällig gehören.*” (Heidegger 1953, p. 6).
- 11 謨 is an interchangeable word of 謀 since they have the same pronunciation.
- 12 People often think that *Zhuangzi* insisted all things were identical, or wanted to use external standards to make things uniform. Quite the opposite, *Zhuangzi* acknowledged the existence of differences and tried to justify them so as to remind us not to distinguish them axiologically.
- 13 The fable that *Hundun* 渾沌 was chiseled to death at the end of the chapter “Conforming Makes an Emperor” (Guo 1961, p. 309) is also a typical case of doing bad things with a good intention. (see B. Wang 2004, p. 141)
- 14 Mohist’s theory of “advocating sameness 尚同” has more drawbacks. Even *Xunzi* criticized them “only knowing uniformity, not knowing diversity 有見於齊，無見於畸” (“On Heaven” of *Xunzi* 荀子·天論, X. Wang 1988, p. 319).

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