

Article

Nature Prescribes Laws to Humans: The *Ziran* of the Myriad Things in Early Daoism

Jing Liu

Center for Zhouyi & Ancient Chinese Philosophy, School of Philosophy and Social Development,
Shandong University, Jinan 250100, China; jing6@hawaii.edu

Abstract: This essay examines the nature of things in early Daoism via the lens of comparative philosophy. Daoism uses *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity) to express the nature of things. I explore the *ziran* or spontaneity of the myriad things through the analysis of *de* 德, *sheng* 生 (*xing* 性), and freedom (*ziyou* 自由). The sections on *de* 德 and *sheng* 生 reveal that the spontaneity of things is the ultimate reality, which contains the oneness of one and many, essence and appearance, change and changelessness. The section on freedom revolves around two essential questions in metaphysics: What are things? What is the relation between things and humans? Different from the motto of modern metaphysics, “humans prescribes laws to nature”, early Daoism believes that human existence belongs to the constant *ziran*. I call this “nature prescribes laws to humans”.

Keywords: *ziran* 自然; nature; spontaneity; *de* 德; *sheng* 生; freedom

1. Introduction

Ever since Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s profound critiques of modern metaphysics, the critique of modernity has become a tradition in itself. Heidegger especially focused on the critique of the objectification of nature in modern metaphysics (Heidegger 1977). With the worsening environmental situation, environmental philosophers have also reflected on the problem of anthropocentrism and dualism in Western metaphysics. Ecofeminists have systematically criticized patriarchy’s oppression of women and nature and tried to seek new articulations of nature in a refreshed orientation towards women’s role. Up until today, it might not be an exaggeration to say that modern dualistic metaphysics has fallen apart within the domain of philosophy. However, dominion over nature is still prevalent in our everyday life. A philosophy grounded in nature is still to be established so that a new way of life can grow out of it.

In the field of Chinese philosophy, as demanded by environmental issues, scholars have become aware of the affinity between Daoism and ecology. *Ziran* (spontaneity) has started to catch philosophers’ attention. Chen Guying noticed that Daoism takes *ziran* as human nature (*xing* 性) (Chen 2010); Liu Xiaogan raised the idea of “Humanistic Naturalness”. According to Liu, “... what *ziran* expresses is an ideal for human survival in and out of groups and the pursuit of that ideal, a way of getting into harmony with nature, of drawing closer to natural order and harmony”. (Liu 2008). David Chai envisions a Daoist nature “no longer bound to a singular actuality but one whose presence is felt across an endless range of possibilities as the substantive realization of *Dao*”. (Chai 2018). However, how *ziran* designates a different understanding of nature is yet to be asked.

My essay tries to fill this gap by examining the *ziran* of the myriad things in early Daoism. It highlights the spontaneity of the myriad things as the ultimate reality, which contains the oneness of one and many, essence and appearance, change and changelessness. By revealing the *ziran* of things as freedom, it takes efforts to revert the modern metaphysical motto “humans prescribe laws to nature” to a Daoist one “nature prescribes laws to humans”, anchoring the human existence on the ground of nature.



Citation: Liu, Jing. 2023. Nature Prescribes Laws to Humans: The *Ziran* of the Myriad Things in Early Daoism. *Religions* 14: 646. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050646>

Academic Editors: Shan Gao and Benjamin Coles

Received: 7 March 2023

Revised: 29 April 2023

Accepted: 5 May 2023

Published: 12 May 2023



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What is “the myriad things”? Is it simply the aggregation of things?

There has been no time like ours wherein things are brought to us in such quick and expedient ways. As a contrast to this quickness and expedience, however, clean water, fresh air, rich soil, etc., viz., the fundamental “things” on which the existence of all things depends, are now becoming rarer and rarer. The uniformity of industrial production has caused the disappearance of diversity from our world. Under humans’ insatiable desire for things, the ceaselessly generative realm of the myriad things has receded.¹

But are things not always already presented to us under the insatiable desire for them in our capitalist consumeristic time? Our world is filled with all sorts of products; meanwhile, the realm of the myriad things has left us. Here, it seems appropriate for us to make the common-sense distinction between natural things and man-made products. Obviously, natural things are becoming rarer and rarer in our daily life, while man-made products are occupying the world. But what does this distinction mean? What attitude towards things is hidden in it? What if precisely it is in this ancient and convenient distinction that the destining of the departing of the myriad things has been fermented? The distinction then will not be able to reveal but will rather conceal deeper problems. For now, I do not make this distinction. What needs to be asked is the following: Where did we lose the meaning of things? How can it be presented to us?

As a matter of fact, we are always dealing with things. In our time dominated by capitalist means of consumption, however, the association between things and humans is flattened: things are only processed, managed, and consumed as goods. This is so with the things in regard to our clothing, eating, living, and transportation; it is also true with the “nature” that is under protection. A whole industry has been built up around humans’ recreation in “nature”. The spectacles in nature have become goods to be consumed.

Let us take a look at a common scene in our daily life: I go to the supermarket to buy apples. These apples come far away from New Zealand. From the plantation to the transportation to the supermarket, the processing of these apples is controlled by capitalist industry through modern science and technology. The pesticides and fertilizers used in the growth of the apple trees and the chemicals needed in their storage are all carefully calculated by scientists in the labs and controlled by the industrial chain. Here, the industrial chain is not only an economic form; rather, it delineates the existence of the modern man on the different levels of ontology, existence, and politics. Both space and time are overcome here. New Zealand’s autumn is packaged and frozen in a supermarket, presented to me as a commodity; while I, as a consumer, live in spring in another corner of the world.

Apples in this picture are not even related to apple trees. What apple trees look like, when they bloom; how their flowers and leaves are; and the earth, day and night, and wind and rain that are condensed in the growth of the trees are all concealed. Apples are therefore deprived of any identity related to their life (the growth of the apple tree), existing only as an object to be consumed. Meanwhile, although science and technology have become *the* belief of our time, humans’ “knowing” is becoming poorer and poorer. Knowing is taken away from the lifeworld and reduced to scientific knowledge, which is again transferred into the hands of some small groups of experts and becomes a means to control things for the purpose of making profits. It is noteworthy that a double alienation and exploitation towards both things and humans happens simultaneously in this picture. For this reason, different from a prevalent narrative of “humans master nature”, I maintain that the modern myth of master/slave between humans and nature has been an illusory political, economic, and philosophical construct from the beginning. The process of domination over nature is at the same time the one of humans’ self-alienation. So what does this “same process” mean? What relation between things and humans is revealed to us here?

Modern attitudes towards things have their historical roots. Many Western metaphysics² seek the nature or essence of things in a changeless oneness. Therefore, the nature of things is severed out of things, whether put in a separate realm of *eidos* or insinuated in the changing properties of things as *ὑποκείμενον* (*hypokeimenon*), i.e., something that

underlies. The nature of things thus presented can only be grasped by human reason or λόγος, whose function is viewed as the unification of the sporadic changing appearances of things. (λέγω, the verbal form of λόγος, has the meaning of “gathering”, from which developed the meaning of “unify”.) Things and nature in this view are de-natured to the extent that they are merely appearances whose truth is controlled and to be unconcealed by human knowledge. As is shown by the Greek word for “truth”, ἀλήθεια originally means “unconcealment”, famously elaborated by Heidegger. In modern metaphysics, things are understood as objects that “object” to and resist man. And, for this reason, they need to be subjected to man the subject. Things or nature have no independent existence apart from human subjectivity.

Things and nature in this picture are postulated as the other of the human self, which is identified through reason. Such is the simultaneous postulation of the rational self and nature in Western metaphysics. However, the nature of things cannot be grasped by the objectification of them, which is nothing but an illusory ongoing self-construction and self-affirmation of the human ego. It alienates at once both the nature of things and that of humans. At the end of the day, we have to ask, even if we could spread the last particle of a flower in front of us, can the nature or meaning of the flower then be revealed to us? Precisely in the self-construction of the anthropocentric ego that seeks to conquer and master, the nature of things is lost and goes into hiding.

The changeless oneness thus grasped is, in the end, an anthropocentric self-construction that aims to control, channel, and manipulate things that are ultimately in ceaseless generativity. It scrapes a thin layer on the surface of the spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) of things and uses it to set up walls against it. (Notice that *eidos* originally means “form” and “appearance.”) Our scientific knowledge, insofar as it aims to dominate things, does not go further than this. Thereby we have built our own underground prison, in the omnipresent spontaneity of things, so that we can seek safety and freedom, which is achieved by entrenching walls against things. Meanwhile, we are not completely ignorant of our belonging to things; it is still dimly felt in our fragmented scientific and technological being. Thereby we are left in fear, waiting for the unpredictable punishments of gods, like Prometheus.

The nature of things is expressed through *ziran* 自然 (self-soing, self-going, nature, natural, spontaneity, etc.) in Daoist philosophy. The *ziran* of things is the ultimate reality (*zhenshi* 真實) of the world. “The ultimate reality” here should not be misunderstood as implying something underlying the appearance; rather, it refers to the immediately experienced yet most commonly unrecognized. What is called “the ultimate reality” here is used to express the Chinese word *zhenshi* 真實, literally meaning “true and concrete”. *Shi* 實 originally means “to fill”, and “concrete”. In the fundamental Daoist text *Daodejing* (DDJ), for example, Laozi states that one should “dwell in concreteness not gloriousness.”³ The *shi* or concreteness here refers to *dao* and *de*. Also, chapter 16 states:

Empty (<i>xu</i> 虛) oneself so as to achieve constancy (<i>heng</i> 恒)	致虛恒也
Preserve the emptiness (<i>chong</i> 沖) so as to bring out concreteness	守沖篤也
In the process of all things emerging together	萬物旁作
I thereby observe (<i>guan</i> 觀) their reversion (<i>fu</i> 復)	吾以觀其復也
Things proliferate	夫物芸芸
And each again returns to its root	各復歸於其根
This is called tranquility	曰靜
As for tranquility, this is called returning to the destining	靜是謂復命
Returning to the destining is called the common	復命, 常也
Knowing the common is called illumination (<i>ming</i> 明)	知常, 明也
While not knowing the common leads to recklessness	不知常, 妄 ⁴

The *du* 篤 here means *shi* 實, or concreteness.⁵ *Chong* 沖 and *xu* 虛 echo each other (both meaning “emptiness”⁶), and *heng* 恒 (“constancy”) and *du* 篤 (“concreteness”) elaborate each other. This is to say the constant true concreteness (*zhenshi* 真實) exposes itself in emptiness, i.e., *chong* and *xu*. It is only in emptiness that truth and reality are called forth



and preserved. That which is true and real (or *zhenshi* 真實) is therefore not an abstract idea, but the concreteness that is to be experienced in our life through the practice of emptying. Thereon one can observe that things proliferate and each returns to their root, going back to tranquility. Such is the spontaneity (*ziran*) of things, the way ultimate reality is. *Zhen* 真 is, as Zhuangzi says, “returning to being true”.⁷ Like the character *shi* 實, it also refers to the ultimate reality.

The *ziran* of the myriad things is the ultimate reality. It is therefore the happening of *dao*. The spontaneity of things is the expression of *dao*, and *dao* is the expression of the spontaneity of things. There is no otherworldly realm or substance called *dao* that is independent of the spontaneity of things. This is against the understanding that separates *dao* and things as two different pieces. Though this is not in any sense the dissolution of the root-source meaning of *dao*. Rather, this worry itself shows the understanding of *dao* as some “thing” that is sought outside of the spontaneity of things, whereby precisely the root-source meaning of *dao* is lost. Spontaneity of things as the ultimate reality illuminates the root-source meaning of *dao*. That *dao* is the root-source means *dao* dwells in the spontaneity of the myriad things. Only at the root-source is the reality of the spontaneity of all unconcealed to humans.

“The ultimate reality” is similar to the Buddhist idea “suchness” (*zhenru* 真如, *rushi* 如是) or “the ultimate true form” (*jiujingshixiang* 究竟實相). It is, of course, different from the substantial “reality” in some forms of Western metaphysics, although it does not exclude this understanding of reality. Ultimately, the different views of reality understood from either substantiality or process are only distinct manifestations of *ziran*.

For the translation of *ziran* in terms of things I will use “spontaneity”, which expresses the oneness of one and many, essence and appearance, change and changelessness. In what follows, I will elaborate the meaning of spontaneity in terms of creativity (*de* 德), *sheng* 生, and freedom. Spontaneity as the ultimate reality is against the metaphysics that entitles truth only to human beings who are thought of as being exclusively equipped with logos amongst all beings. That spontaneity is the ultimate reality is to say humans belong to truth, i.e., the *ziran* of the myriad things. In the ultimate reality as spontaneity human existence unfolds. I refer to humans’ belonging to nature in the ultimate sense as “*ziran* prescribes laws to humans”. What is called “laws” here is understood from the Chinese character *fa* 法, designating that which is constant. That *ziran* prescribes laws to humans is to say the existence of humans belongs to the constant nature.

2. Spontaneity as Creativity (*de* 德)

De 德 in oracle bone script is written as . With the eye on the left and the way on the right, the character symbolizes an eye focusing on the way. This is interestingly similar to the *dao* character in the bronze script, , symbolizing walking on the way. Before Laozi, *de* in the Zhou Dynasty was mainly used to refer to the morality of humans, especially the rulers, which is a meaning that had been inherited by many schools of Chinese philosophy afterward. This is why it is usually translated as “virtue.” *De* in the DDJ, however, has its target. Laozi takes aim at the ideology of *yidepeitian* 以德配天 (lit., “partaking in heaven with virtue”) in the Zhou Dynasty, that is, the notion that heaven bestows power to those who are virtuous. As a historical matter of fact, this ideology was used to justify and strengthen the rule of the Zhou Dynasty. With a new interpretation of *de*, Laozi liberates this term from its traditional connotations as a political and moral human property and releases it to *dao* and the myriad things.

In my view, Laozi hereby raises a Zen question: What is the original face of *de*? The *de* as such is not a tool to serve the purpose of maintaining hierarchies but intends to return spontaneity (*ziran*) to the myriad things and humans. On the one hand, it is closely associated with *dao*; on the other, it is an expression of the nature of things (the nature of humans included). Therefore, *de* in the DDJ pervades the different layers of *dao*, things and humans. In fact, Laozi makes the *de* of things, i.e., the spontaneity or *ziran* of things, set the

foundation for the *de* of humans. The *de* of humans follows the spontaneity of the myriad things. Obviously, the *de* of humans thus understood, which gains its meaning through *ziran*, is very different from the interpretation as “virtue” or “morality” by other schools. This historical background also lets another important meaning of *ziran*, that is, freedom, be revealed to us.

Because of these characteristics of *de* in the DDJ, when it does not specially refer to the *de* of humans, I use Whitehead’s term and translate it as “creativity.” The *Xici* commentary has, “The daily renovation is called the abundant *de* 德 (creativity); the ceaseless generativity is called *yi* 易 (change).” (Li 1994, p. 561)⁸ And also, “the great *de* of heaven and earth is called generativity (*sheng*).” (Li 1994, p. 619)⁹ *De* is ceaseless creativity. “Creativity” is used here to show that it covers death and life, i.e., what is called by Zhuangzi “waxing and waning, withering and decay” (*yingxushuaisha* 盈虛衰殺). It designates the spontaneity (*ziran*) of *dao* and things.

Next, I will elaborate the meaning of *de* through the reading of chapter 51 in the DDJ. Chapter 51 has:

<i>Dao</i> gives life	道生之
<i>De</i> nurtures	德畜之
Events shape	物形之
And circumstances consummate	而器 ¹⁰ 成之
Therefore all things revere <i>dao</i> and honor <i>de</i>	是以萬物尊道而貴德
As for the reverence directed at <i>dao</i>	道之尊也
And the honor directed at <i>de</i>	德之貴也
It is out of the constant self-soing (<i>heng ziran</i>)	夫莫之爵而恒自然
Without anyone having ennobled them	
<i>Dao</i> gives them life and nurtures them	道生之 畜之
Rears and develops them	長之 遂之
It brings them to fruition and maturation	亭之 毒之
Nourishes and extinguishes them	養之 覆之
<i>Dao</i> gives them life	生而弗有也
Yet, does not manage them	
It assists them	為而弗恃也
Yet, makes no claim upon them	
It rears them	長而弗宰
Yet, does not dominate them	
This is called the dark <i>de</i> ¹¹	是謂玄德

In this chapter, *dao*, *de*, things, *heng* 恒 (constant), and *ziran* all appear together. Contrary to a common understanding, I do not think it is the case that the “*dao* gives life” comes prior to the “*de* nurtures”, which again is subsequently followed by the growth, nourishing and extinguishment of things, no matter how we understand this “priority”, whether it is cosmological, logical, or existential in terms of humans’ experience in practice. The “*dao* gives life” is at once “*de* nurtures”, which is constancy or *heng*, spontaneity or *ziran*, and which is the growth, nourishing, and extinguishment of things.

The meaning of *de* in this chapter is elaborated from the perspectives of both giving and receiving. From the perspective of giving, *dao* gives life to all and nourishes all, and this is the *de* or creativity of *dao*; from the perspective of receiving, things receive *dao* so that they can have life and grow (*sheng* 生). Such is the *de* or creativity of things, viz., the spontaneity of things, or their growth, nourishing, and extinguishment. *De* 德 and *de* 得 are homophonic. *De* 得 means receiving and gaining, which implicates and elaborates the meaning of *de* 德. These two perspectives are mingled into one, the “*dao* gives life” is the spontaneity of the myriad things, and this is the dark *de* (*xuande* 玄德). That which is called the “dark creativity” is spontaneity itself, the illumination of the myriad things by the creativity of the darkness (referring to *dao*, the Way).

Creativity is the Way making its ways. *De* is an expression of *dao*, and *dao* is an expression of *de*. *Dao* and *de* disclose each other. There is no priority or posterity between them. People who seek priority and posterity amongst *dao*, *de*, and things often grasp *de*, explicitly or implicitly, as particularity and *dao* as universality, while *de* is further taken as a property of things. This view is quite prevalent among academics. For example, Zhang Dainian, in his *An Outline of Chinese Philosophy*, claims, “*De* is what a thing gains from *dao*. *De* is particularity and *dao* is totality.” (Zhang 2006, p. 44) Zhang interprets *de* as the particularity that partakes in the universal *dao*; he then seeks the universality of *dao* in the totality of things. Xu Fuguan says, “What Zhuangzi calls *de* is the *dao* that is internalized in things” (Xu 1969, p. 225), as if *dao* can be external to things. In accordance with the view that *de* is the spontaneity of things, things are the condensation of creativity or *de*. So it is not the case, as a common opinion holds, that things have *de*, whereby *de* is taken as a property of things as substance. Such a view is a misreading of *dao*, *de*, and things altogether. Under this expedient distinction of universality/particularity and substance/property, *dao*, *de* and things are all substantialized and therefore reified.

However, *dao* is not an abstract metaphysical principle, and neither can the expedient distinction of universality/particularity capture the relation between *dao* and *de*. Spontaneity as *de* 德 (creativity) and *sheng* 生 (generativity) is not particularity, but the oneness of particularity and universality, one and many. *Dao* is at once its creativity, that is, the disclosing of *dao*; such is *ziran*, or spontaneity. Particularity and universality belong to each other in spontaneity.¹²

De also implies *shi* 實, i.e., true and concrete. For example, the *deshan* 德善 (literally true goodness) and *dexin* 德信 (true credibility) in chapter 49 indicate this meaning. It is often associated with *heng* 恒 or constancy in the DDJ. *Hengde* 恒德 is a common expression in the DDJ. Chapter 51 is a good example. *Heng* in the DDJ is used to describe *dao* and *ziran*. Following this, the growth, nourishing, and extinguishment of things are constancy, creativity, *ziran*, or spontaneity. And such is *dao*. Spontaneity as constant creativity is to say, that which is permanent is permanent creativity.

3. Spontaneity as *Sheng* 生

Ziran in Daoism expresses the nature of things (including human nature). What is usually translated as “nature” here is the character *xing* 性. This character, however, is not in the DDJ, nor is it in the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. This is because the original form of the character *xing* is *sheng* 生 (life, growth, etc.), which is an important term in both texts. It is only later that the heart radical was added to *sheng* 生 and the *xing* 性 character was developed. Take the *Zhuangzi* as an example. In the inner chapters, the *sheng* character that appears in the nourishment of life (*yangsheng* 養生) in the “Yang Sheng Zhu” (“The Primacy of Nourishing Life”¹³), the “rectification of life” (*zhengsheng* 正生) and “following *ziran* but not adding to life” (*changyin ziran er buyisheng* 常因自然而不益生) in the “De Chong Fu” (“Markers of Full Virtuosity”¹⁴), etc., can all be seen as *xing* 性. For example, the “following *ziran* but not adding to life” is to say that true nature follows *ziran*. “Da Zong Shi” (“The Great Master”) says, “Fish live free at ease in water, and human beings dwell free at ease in *dao*. Those who live free at ease in the water dart through the ponds, finding their nourishment and support. Those who dwell in *dao* free at ease do not bother to serve any particular goal, thereby allowing the flow of their lives to settle into stability (*shengding* 生定).” (Chen 1983, p. 213)¹⁵ The *sheng* here can also be viewed as *xing*. This passage uses the fish’s living in water freely as a metaphor to show the following matter of fact: Non-acting and dwelling in *dao*, humans can achieve tranquility of their nature. The character *xing* 性 only began to appear in the outer and miscellaneous chapters. Both the “Pian Mu” (“Webbed Toes”) and the “Da Sheng” (“Fathoming Life”) list *sheng*, *xing*, and *de* together. For example, the “Pian Mu” has, “All in the world spring to life (*sheng* 生) spontaneously, not knowing why they are born (*sheng* 生)” (Chen 1983, p. 260).¹⁶ *Sheng* is understood through spontaneity or *ziran*; it also says in this chapter that “harming their life and hurting their nature” (*canshengshangxing* 殘生傷性). The *sheng* and *xing* correspond to

and elaborate each other here. “Da Sheng” says, “Those who open the heavenly benefit life (*desheng* 德生); those who open the human damage life.” (Chen 1983, p. 504)¹⁷ The *sheng* or life here can also be understood as *xing* or nature, put together with *de*, to show the meaning of *ziran*.

Comparing *sheng* 生 with *xing* 性, a distinctive feature of *sheng* is that it penetrates *dao* and things at the same time, like many important terms in Daoism (e.g., *dao*, *de* and *ziran*) We can say “*dao* gives life” (*daosheng* 道生), as well as talk about the life of things (*wuzhisheng* 物之生). Take the example of chapter 34. It states, “Freely flows the Great Way. It runs to the left and right. All myriad things depend on it for life ...”¹⁸ What is translated here as “freely flowing” is the character *fan* 汎, using the free-flowing water to symbolize the all-pervading characteristic of *dao*. *Ziran* is articulated here from the perspectives of *both* *dao* and things. It is the freely flowing Great Way, as well as the life of the myriad things. The character *xing* 性 (nature), however, loses the significance of *sheng* that penetrates both *dao* and things and is used specially to refer to things. The nature of things that departs from the *dao* in language means its understanding of both *dao* and things has deviated from their original meanings.

In what follows, I will explore the meaning of *ziran* through the original form of *xing* 性, i.e., *sheng* 生. *Sheng* in the oracle bone script is written as 𠂔, with the lower part the earth, and the upper part the grass. The Shuowen Jiezi 說文解字 glosses, “*Sheng* means to proceed. The character symbolizes the grass growing out of the earth.” *Sheng* means to arise, to grow, to proceed, to produce, life, etc. Of course, it also has the meaning of “nature” or *xing* 性, though *xing* or what is translated as “nature” here has to be understood from its original meaning of *sheng*. The *Xici* commentary states, “The daily renovation is called the abundant *de* (creativity); the ceaseless generativity (*shengsheng* 生生) is called *yi* (change).” That which is daily renovating (i.e., the ceaseless generativity or the *shengsheng*) is *ziran*, and this is creativity or *de*, and also *dao*.

The oracle bone script *sheng* presents the following image to us: A seed buried in the soil perceives the spring, sprouting out of the soil and growing in the sunlight. A broader picture is indicated: When the sun has reached the meridian height, it begins to decline; when the moon has become full, it begins to wane; warmth and coldness push each other; yang deceases and yin increases; “Thunder moves, wind disperses, rain nourishes, sun dries.” (Li 1994, p. 693)¹⁹ The spontaneity of the myriad things discloses as such.

Sheng as nature of things means that the true being (that is, becoming) of things is truth (that is, their presencing). Such is *ziran*, and the ultimate reality (*zhenshi* 真實). As such, there is no separation between essence and appearance. In the process of a seed growing into a tree, the growth and death of the seed, the trunk, the branches, and leaves is reality itself. Reality is appearing; what appears is reality. Reality is not, therefore, some changeless substance that underlies changing appearances, as with Aristotle’s *hupokemenon*. The ceaselessly generative things are the ultimate reality of *ziran*. Hence, the myriad things show the truth; the truth shows the myriad things.²⁰ And this is spontaneity. Reality and truth are not any humanistic unifying principle of some unknown lifeless matter. The ceaselessly generative spontaneity as the ultimate reality is all-pervasive, and *ziran* is the oneness of essence and appearance. The high mountains and the flowing water, the drifting clouds and the vast ocean, wind and rain, sun and moon—all things are as they are. Such is the spontaneity as the ultimate reality.

That things are as they are is reality and the nature of things. This understanding of the nature of things is embodied in the essential thoughts of Western metaphysics, such as reality, substance, essence, nature (φύσις, *phusis*), and so on. These are basically different forms of “being.” “Reality”, “substance”, and “essence” in ancient Greek are all οὐσία, the nominal form of the copula “to be”; τί ἐστι (“what is”) is also translated as “essence”; what φύσις articulates is also Being. As Heidegger says, “Phusis is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable.” (Heidegger 2000, p. 15) The problem of Plato is that Being is understood only as immutable and atemporal. The fact is, however,

that Being always was, is, and will be, which is to say, Being is becoming. There is no substance or another world called Being besides, or under or above becoming.²¹

The Daoist *ziran* is similar to the Buddhist idea of suchness, both expressing the truth of all phenomena. Next, I will elucidate its meaning through a Chan Buddhist koan. According to the Compendium of the Five Lamps (*Wudenghuiyuan* 五燈會元):

Master Xuansha was addressing his monastics when he heard a swallow singing. He said to the assembly, “This is the profound dharma of real form. It skillfully conveys the essence of the true teaching”. He then descended from the teaching seat.²²

Reality appears in the singing of the swallow right here, at this moment. That is to say, the singing of the swallow appears in reality; it is reality itself. Such is *ziran* or spontaneity. The sound and color of all beings can only be true and real when seen in spontaneity. *Ziran* or spontaneity is the constantly appearing reality. It is arising emphatically, flowing into ever novel forms.

In the image of *sheng* as the sprouting seed, some seeds grow into trees, while some become food for other animals, and some become compost for other trees. All of these are the manifestations of spontaneity. In this growth process of the seed, we can distinguish the seed and the tree or seek the identity between them. At the same time, the identities of the sun, wind and rain, and the earth are also condensed in the growth of the tree. The Daoist idea of *hua* 化 (transformation) can help to elaborate this point. The ocean evaporates and clouds are generated; clouds gather and rain falls; the rain again transforms into trees, creeks, and so on; the fruits of the trees and the creeks then transform into the lives of the animals. As such, all is in all, for all is *ziran*. This is what Buddhism calls “All is one and one is all.” The “one” here can refer to particular individuals and also spontaneity as reality itself. In terms of individuals, every individual as a microcosmos contains and reflects the universe as a whole. Moreover, within every individual there are infinite worlds; in terms of spontaneity as reality, everything is spontaneity or *ziran*, and spontaneity is all. All distinctions or identities are the condensation of spontaneity, and also a result of human conceptualization for the convenience of utility.

As a comparison, identity in some Western philosophies such as Plato’s is confined to ideas and forms, which seeks essence only through the changeless sameness. Some mainstream modern scientific ideas follow this type of philosophical thinking, for example, the definition of lifeless matter, the search for the smallest particles, for some fixed structures, etc.²³ Nevertheless, with regard to phenomena, there is nothing the “same” between a seed and a tree. Of course, according to Aristotle, if a seed is not influenced by harmful external conditions, it naturally grows into a tree. Though what is equally true is that, if not influenced by any “external” conditions, a seed cannot even begin to grow into a tree. A seed needs to assimilate all differences, i.e., the earth, sun and moon, wind and rain, hot and cold, etc., everything that can be seen or not, for it to grow into a tree. Sameness and difference come out of the interception and shift of human perspectives. What is important here is that we have to understand a matter of fact: It is not that there is any *ziran* sought through changeless substance or nature of things, but no matter how humans seek or delineate, there is nothing that is not *ziran*. No matter whether we understand it or not, there is nothing that is not *ziran*.

That spontaneity is the ultimate reality is to say that that which is constant constantly dwells in ceaseless transformation. That which is in change and impermanence is the appearing of the true and real. That which constantly is in constant flow; the One can be differentiated. That which is impermanent (*wuchang* 無常) is the non-be-ing (*wu-ing*) of that which permanently is. Because it is in constant transformation, therefore it is constant. And such is spontaneity.

Spontaneity is the oneness of change and changelessness. Change and changelessness mutually postulate each other. Change is always the change of what is the same; changelessness is only possible because of the experience of change. Metaphysics rightly grasps the point here: it is the changeless that changes. As is recounted by Kant, “Only what is permanent is altered; what can be transformed does not itself suffer any alteration . . . ”

(CPR, B231; Kant 2007) However, both change and changelessness are the result of human conceptualization. In making change and changelessness mutually belong to each other, spontaneity transcends the perspectives of change and changelessness. From the ancient to now till the infinite future, there is only spontaneity. Ultimately, there is nothing else except for spontaneity. In this sense, substance, property, form and matter, relationality, process, reason, emotion, cause and effect, etc., are all reflections of spontaneity as reality.

4. Spontaneity as Freedom: Nature Prescribes Laws to Humans

In *Tales of Hulan River* Xiao, Hong writes:

When the flowers bloomed it was as though they were awakening from a slumber. When the birds flew it was as though they were climbing up to the heavens. When the insects chirped it was as though they were talking to each other. All these things were alive. There was no limit to their abilities, and whatever they do, they had the power to do it. They did as they willed in complete freedom.

If the pumpkins felt like climbing up the trellis they did so, and if they felt like climbing up the side of the house they did so. If the cucumber plant wanted to bring forth an abortive flower it did so; if it wanted to bear a cucumber it did so; if it wanted none of these, then not a single cucumber nor a single flower appeared, and no one would question its decision. The cornstalks grew as tall as they wished, and if they felt like reaching up to the heavens, no one would give it a second thought. Butterflies flew wherever they desired; one moment there would be a pair of yellow butterflies flying over the other side of the wall, the next moment a solitary white butterfly flying over from this side of the wall. Whose house had they just left? Whose house were they flying to? Even the sun didn't know the answers to such questions. (Xiao 1988, p. 76)

In my view, what this passage shows to us is not only a literary imagination. It rather vividly articulates the Daoist understanding of the nature of things and freedom in a literary way, that is, *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity, nature) is freedom (*ziyou* 自由). As master Linji Yixuan says, “Lively” (“*huopopodi* 活潑潑地”) There is no doubt that this understanding of the nature of things and freedom is different from, or rather, contrary to modern metaphysics, according to which things merely follow the rules of cause and effect, having no freedom to talk about at all. Freedom, for the Enlightenment thinkers, exclusively belongs to human beings. That nature is a machine is a major metaphor of modern metaphysics. This is still a common belief about the nature of things and freedom in our time.

According to Daoist philosophy, however, things are as they are. Such is *ziran* or spontaneity, reality, and also freedom. Freedom is therefore not the form sealed in some other world that can only be approached through human reason; neither is it an autonomous will of the animal rationale exerted against the necessity of nature, or the free choice of the human customer. It does not primarily concern humans at all. Rather, spontaneity and freedom as the ultimate reality are the condition for any form of human existence. It is not the case, thereupon, that humans possess freedom or master nature. But rather, humans belong to *ziran* (nature, spontaneity) and freedom. For this reason, Laozi says, “The human emulates the earthly; the earthly emulates the heavenly; the heavenly emulates *ziran*.” (DDJ, 25) The spontaneity of *dao* and things is what humans emulate. According to Kant, humans prescribe laws to nature, which is a motto of modern metaphysics. Laozi's claim, therefore, is contrary to this view, which I would like to call here “nature prescribes laws to humans.” Right away, we face a Kantian question: how is it possible for nature to prescribe laws to humans?

Let us first take a look at Kant's concepts of nature and freedom. Nature has multiple layers of meanings in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and they serve different purposes. On the first level, the common sense understanding of the modern concept of nature as the external world is actually things in themselves in Kant's philosophy. This is the X that is beyond any human experience and knowledge. It is the noumena, the pure nothingness that is to be negated and shed light on by human reason. On the second level, nature as

mere appearance is a representation of the a priori categories.²⁴ Causality, for example, is one of them. Kant states, “... all objects of an experience possible to us are nothing but appearances; that is, they are mere representations which—in the manner in which they are represented, namely, as extended beings, or series of alterations—have no independent existence outside our thoughts.” (CPR, B519.) Nature, insofar as it is experienced, is mere representation and has no independent existence outside of human thoughts. For this reason, Kant claims “Categories are concepts which prescribe laws a priori to appearances, and therefore to nature as the sum total of all appearances.” (CPR, B163) Nature is only a sum total of all appearances, to which human reason gives laws. Thirdly, when it comes to freedom, however, even this nature as mere appearance has to be overcome. For Kant, freedom is “... independent and free... from all natural necessity.” (CPR, B569) From the antitheses of nature and freedom develops the division of the distinct realms of noumena and phenomena.

Here, nature is posited as the chain that needs to be broken off for the sake of human freedom. Consequently, freedom is spoken of in different senses. Firstly, human freedom or spontaneity means things in nature are determined as mere representations through the concepts of understanding. This, together with sensitivity, however, is posited as another layer of “nature” that needs to be overcome by the freedom of practical reason. These different layers of meanings of nature and freedom in Kant, as one of the most important founders of modern metaphysics, show that the modern concept of “nature” is a convenient human construct for political, economic, and axiological setups. It is designed to fulfill the role of “the dominated.” Nature is set up as that which is to be conquered and mastered by human subjects armed with a dominating intellect. Consequently, the accomplishment of human freedom means the disavowal of nature. Free will means first of all freedom from the causality of nature. But, according to Kant, causality itself is an a priori construct of human understanding, to which the autonomous agent himself has to be subsumed. Insofar as a priori is understood as necessary and objective, freedom is reason overcoming its own necessity and objectivity. If this desperate situation of the self-contradictory reason teaches us anything at all, it at least should shed light on the following matter of fact, that is, that freedom cannot be taken away and eliminated from nature, and, in the end, when understood as a power against nature, whether it can be achieved becomes fundamentally problematic.

This illusory freedom against nature is associated with a certain understanding of the nature of things. With the degradation of things to mere appearances to human understanding, freedom is ascribed exclusively to the animal rationale.

Chinese culture, on the contrary, offers us a different image of the nature of things, and also the relation between things and humans—and accordingly a different understanding of freedom. As I have pointed out, nature prescribes laws to humans in Daoism. We have also raised a Kantian question: How is it possible for nature to prescribe laws to humans?

Things are not merely representations of human understanding in Daoist philosophy. On the contrary, humans belong to things. Next, I will explore Daoist thoughts on things and the relation between things and humans through chapter 37 of the DDJ. Chapter 37 states,

<i>Dao</i> constantly non-acts	道恒無為也
Should nobles and kings be able to hold fast to this,	侯王能守之
The myriad things will be transformed of their own accord.	而萬物將自化
After they are transformed, should desire raise its head,	化而欲作
Press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block.	將鎮之以無名之樸
Thereon leave off desiring,	夫亦將知足
In not desiring, achieve tranquility	知足以靜
The myriad things will be at peace of their own accord.	萬物將自定

The self-transformation (*zihua* 自化) of the myriad things here refers to self-soing or spontaneity (*ziran* 自然). A common interpretation of this chapter is to understand the myriad things as humans, that is, people (*wanmin* 萬民) from the perspective of political

philosophy. That is to say, the nobles and kings stay non-acting (*wuwei* 無為) and the people will gain the *ziran* of their nature. However, I do not think we have to be confined to this understanding. The most important thing is that we are aware of the following fact, that is, in classical Chinese, “things” or *wu* 物 contains the meaning of “humans” or *ren* 人, which expresses a different understanding of things. I will explore this point later. Meanwhile, the nobles and kings, and also sages in the DDJ do not have to be understood as “rulers”. They can also refer to people who practice the *dao*, which again does not have to be merely personal and therefore unpolitical. In fact, for Laozi, those who can become sages must first of all be practitioners of *dao*; while the practice of *dao* is always political. With respect to human life itself, the realm of spirituality or *jingshen* 精神 and the political dimension are not separate, which is an important feature of Laozi’s philosophy. The freedom of spirituality always seeks its political expression, while the expression of political power must be grounded in the freedom of the spirit. For Laozi, those who seek to distinguish hierarchies in society have no legitimacy in politics, which still awaits our attention and further exploration.

An important question that this chapter explores is the relation between things and humans in *dao*. In my view, it is not the case, as is commonly understood, that the spontaneity of the myriad things is a consequence of the nobles and kings emulating the *ziran* or self-soing of the *dao*. The myriad things are spontaneous in themselves. The self-transforming of the myriad things is only disturbed when the kings cannot preserve non-action. Moreover, it is only when humans can preserve their true nature of *ziran* that the *ziran* of *dao* and things can be disclosed to them. Nobles and kings should repress greed and other selfish desires and return to non-be-ing so that there can be peace in the world. “After they are transformed, should desire raise its head, press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block.” These verses remind us to return to the spontaneity of things at every moment. The “uncarved block” refers to the spontaneity of things. Again, this chapter manifests the conspicuous feature of Laozi’s philosophy, that is, it penetrates *dao*, things, and humans. *Dao*, *heng* (constancy), *wuwei*, the *zihua* (self-transformation) of things, and humans’ preserving their uncarved block are all spontaneity. The spontaneity of things is the non-action or *wuwei* of *dao*. There is no priority or posterity between them. Any attempt to distinguish priority and posterity between them inevitably separates *dao* and things as two pieces.

The “desire” here first of all refers to that of the practitioner of the *dao*. It can also be understood generally as human desire. The tension between the rising desire and the spontaneity of *dao* and things becomes salient here. Humans must press down their selfish desire to preserve the uncarved block, i.e., the simplicity in themselves, so that the *ziran* of *dao* and things can be disclosed to them. However, ultimately isn’t human desire itself *ziran* or nature? No matter what, how can the human, as one member of the myriad things, oppose nature at all?

In ancient Chinese, the term “things” includes within it the category “humans”, though “humans” cannot be used to refer to “things”. This is related to the understanding of “things” in Chinese. *Wu* 物 or “thing” in Chinese has the meaning of “event.” Things understood from the disclosing of events reveals to us the spontaneity of the nature of things. The spontaneity of the nature of things is the ultimate real event, which determines the extensive use of “thing” in Daoist texts. *Wu* 物 in Daoism penetrates *dao*, things, and humans just like *de* 德, *sheng* 生, *ziran* 自然, etc. Laozi uses *wu* or “thing” to refer to *dao*, calling it *youwu* 有物 (lit. “be-ing thing”) and *wuwu* 無物 (literally “non-be-ing thing”). For example, chapter 25 states, “There is a thing (*youwu* 有物), a gathering chaos, emerging before the heavenly and the earthly.”²⁵ Chapter 14 says, “... reverts again to non-be-ing (*wuwu* 無物, literally “no thing”), and also “the form of the formless, and the image of non-be-ing (*wuwu* 無物)”.²⁶ Doubtless, the modern metaphysical perspective that takes things as objects cannot interpret this use of “thing,” for *dao* surely is not any “thing” confined in a certain form. From the perspective that things are the disclosing of spontaneity as reality,

however, this use is all natural. Of course, “thing” in the DDJ is also used to refer to the myriad things, which also contains the meaning of “human”.

The spontaneity of the myriad things is the ultimate reality. Things understood as such are not objects represented by rational subjects. Rather, humans belong to things; that is to say, human existence takes root in the spontaneity of things. Human existence unfolds in the process of the causal effects and freedom of the spontaneity of things, not the opposite; humans belong to this process, not the opposite; human freedom is contained and grounded in the freedom or spontaneity of the myriad things, not the opposite. In this sense, we say that “nature prescribes laws to humans”.

The sun goes and the moon comes; spring arrives and flowers come into bloom; the lotus flowers come out of water in summer; the wild geese fly to the south in autumn; the white snow falls onto the leafless boughs in winter: the spontaneity of the myriad things happens in a way unknown to humans. It is experienceable but cannot be grasped by abstract concepts. We can, of course—and we are always doing so—intercept fragments of spontaneity or nature (*ziran*) with concepts and knowledge. But when these concepts and knowledge are used to oppose and deny nature, we thereby use our confidence in knowledge to complete our ignorance about spontaneity as reality. We therefore firmly belong to nature’s game of life and death, for death itself is part of nature.

The spontaneity of things (including human existence) unfolds in relationality, and freedom lies in this process. Things in relationality and causality are expressions of freedom. Take the example we used in the last section. The ocean evaporates and the clouds are generated; the wind blows and the clouds flow; the clouds gather together and the rain falls; and the rain nourishes all myriad things, such that all is in all. In respect to relationality and process, there is no changeless “self”, i.e., the discrete, individual things as substances. There is only “us”, i.e., the ceaselessly flowing spontaneity of the myriad things. Therefore, Zhuangzi says, “All the myriad things and I are one” (“Qi Wu Lun”). Of course, we can distinguish things with language for the sake of convenience, for example, wind, clouds, rain, and things, etc., for the reason that there is causality in space and time. (I understand causality in a broad sense here as the disclosing of relationality.) Ultimately, however, things are the condensation of creative generativity. The distinctions made by language do not obstruct the oneness of them. The ocean is in the wind and clouds; the wind and clouds are in the rain; and the ocean, wind, clouds, and the rain are all in the myriad things. The concrete is the condensation of the empty; the empty is the dispersion of the concrete. The concrete and the empty generate each other, and change and transformation flow infinitely. There is only spontaneity in itself.

Freedom reveals itself in spontaneity. Freedom permanently abides in the life and death of the myriad things. The life and death of the myriad things is thereon permanent freedom itself. The ceaselessly flowing causality is the self-manifestation of freedom. This illustrates the Buddhist idea of interdependent co-arising and emptiness of Buddha nature (*yuanqixingkong* 緣起性空). The coming-to-be and passing-away of things are formed through causality, or karma, all belonging to spontaneity. That which is empty is nothing but spontaneity in itself.

The causality of things is expressed by “inter-dependence” (*xiangdai* 相待) in the Zhuangzi. For Zhuangzi, one should enter the freedom of “non-dependence” (*wudai* 無待) from inter-dependence; and the freedom of non-dependence discloses itself in the mutually generating and mutually intertwining causality. Therefore, it says,

“Yin and Yang shine on each other, cover each other, and regulate each the other; the four seasons give place to one another, generate one another, and consume one another. Desires and aversions, the avoidings of this and movements towards that then arise one after another from this process; and from this came the joining of the male and female. Then are seen now security and now insecurity, in mutual change; fortune and misfortune produce each other; gentleness and urgency press on each other; the movements of gathering and dispersion are thus established.” (Chen 1983, p. 741)²⁷

This is how freedom functions. Take another example of the idea of the *fangsheng* 方生 (“simultaneity of life and death”) in the “Qi Wu Lun” (“Equalizing Things”). What *fangsheng* 方生 refers to is the interdependence of all. Zhuangzi states,

“Simultaneous life is simultaneous death, and vice versa; simultaneous admissibility is simultaneous inadmissibility, and vice versa; what is circumstantially right is also circumstantially wrong, and vice versa.” (Chen 1983, p. 62)²⁸

The *fang* 方 character here indicates simultaneity. Because of life there is death, and death transforms into life again. Life and death are the same process;²⁹ because of admissibility there is inadmissibility, and inadmissibility gives rise to admissibility; the affirmation of this is from the negation of that, and from affirmation negation is again generated. The intertwining of cause and effect and the flow of spontaneity are like this. I am in you and you are in me. In the end, there is no clear and distinct boundary between this and that. “Whenever fragmentation is going on, formation, completion, is also going on. Whenever formation is going on, destruction is also going on. Hence, there is no completion or destruction. Things return and are connected to form the oneness” (Chen 1983, p. 69). Change and transformation become infinite in the process of life and death, formation, completion, and destruction. And all is spontaneity.

That *ziran* or spontaneity is *ziyou* 自由 or freedom is to say the instantaneous context itself is freedom.³⁰ Cause and effect is the self-expression of freedom. In this regard, there is an essential similarity between whether a bud is ready to bloom or not, or how it is going to bloom under the sunshine and humans’ seeking freedom or keeping silence under oppression. Both are moved by and happen with the perception of the power of spontaneity. Both are the illumination of freedom. This is not, in any case, a denial of freedom in terms of humans’ struggle against oppression. Rather, what it says is that the human can only achieve her freedom when she understands and partakes in the ultimate reality. Like spring arrives and flowers come into bloom, where there is oppression, there is resistance. For this reason, the instantaneous context within the interdependent cause and effect is freedom itself. The life and death and love and hate of humans, the shadow of a bird occasionally flying over the green in the bright spring sunshine, or the leaves falling onto the water in the wind, slowly flowing away with the water, are all shining of freedom.

Kant rightly sees that causality is a human construction, that is, one of the “a priori categories”. The problem is that the categorical human construct is taken as a disavowal of nature. Nature is merely a representation that has no independent existence outside of human thoughts, while the noumenal nature in itself is excluded from human experience. The fact is, on the contrary, the subjective construct of causality belongs to nature, that is to say, again, cause and effect is an expression of spontaneity itself. In this sense, humans are always experiencing spontaneity as reality. This experience itself belongs to spontaneity. Ultimately, this is spontaneity experiencing spontaneity, that is, the self-experience of spontaneity.

Freedom as the ultimate reality is not merely a human idea or value. Neither is it simply any teleological “freedom from” or “freedom to”, even though it does not exclude these kinds of “freedom” that are delineated within the coming and going of cause and effect. Human reason is not the precondition of freedom. It is rather the opposite: spontaneity and freedom as the ultimate reality is the precondition of any form of human existence. Hence, humankind does not possess freedom or dominate nature. On the contrary, as one member of the myriad things, she is ultimately possessed by spontaneity (*ziran*, nature) itself. She, in terms of both her awareness of belonging to nature and her ignorance of forgetting nature, is an expression of spontaneity.

Human essence and freedom are involved in and follow the spontaneity of things. It can only be accomplished with the attainment of the freedom of things. The sea, wind, and clouds summon us to leave the dead sedimentation of historical ideologies, to shatter the idolatry of our own remnants, to break all self-illusions, and to enter eternal freedom. As Saint-John Perse says, “The uninhabitable is our site.” (Perse 2014, p. 477) Spontaneity and freedom transcend historicity. Any history has already been and is always cast away and

transcended, and for this reason, is preserved. This is the intrinsic meaning of “historicity.” Hence, any effort that seeks some fixed and changeless identity is essentially illusory. Insofar as it departs from freedom, it necessarily causes alienation and oppression. However, this “transcendence” is not a disavowal of historicity. Freedom always discloses within history. What “transcendence” signifies is the fact that history is led by and reflects freedom. The human should understand henceforth preserve this matter of fact in her own existence. What “transcendence” shows is that historicity is freedom.

The spontaneity of things is the ground that human freedom takes root in. Human freedom can never be achieved through the denial and dominance over things. In fact, the self-understanding of humans is involved in the understanding of things. The oppression of humans in history goes hand in hand with the interpretation of things. Thereon in Chinese history, the hierarchical order in society is set up through the cosmological order. As is famously put at the beginning of the Xici commentary,

“Heaven is lofty and honourable; earth is low. Thus *Qian* 乾 and *Kun* 坤³¹ are settled (in accordance with this). Things low and high appear display in a similar relation. The noble and mean, have their places assigned accordingly.” (Li 1994, p. 541)

The hierarchical interpretation of the cosmological order serves the purpose of the social hierarchy setups. In the West, the oppression of women and the dominance of nature go together. Hence, nature is taken as the passive matter and also as female, etc.³² The self-understanding of the human mirrors their understanding of nature. Hierarchical values are often grounded on hierarchical interpretations of nature. As I have shown, the Daoist view of the relation between things and humans sees humans as belonging to nature. Consequently, humans’ liberation lies in the realization of the spontaneity of nature. This is why both Laozi and Zhuangzi set the spontaneity of things as the ground for the freedom of humans.

Notwithstanding, when we talk about humans’ belonging to nature, a common misunderstanding arises right away. With a defensive attitude, it is taken as a denial of the technological existence of the modern human. This misunderstanding originates from the metaphysics that puts nature as the opposite of humans, which, in the end, is an anthropocentric self-construction of the human ego. The quest for human essence in some metaphysics, e.g., Plato’s reason, the modern subject sought through the cognition of self-consciousness, etc., is nothing but the self-construction of the human ego. Insofar as this “self” understands itself as the opposite of things and nature, thereupon making human technology the denial of nature, it constitutes the deepest ignorance of humans: the modern man believes that he can, with the power of instrumental reason, be the master of nature, and control, channel and drive nature to proceed in the direction of his will.

However, humans primarily belong to nature. Therefore, any efforts to dominate nature have from the beginning constituted humanity’s self-subjugation. When humans seek to control things, they thereby first of all have completed a self-constraint; when humans deny things, they have simultaneously completed self-denial, even though it is presented as a way of self-construction. Thereupon, we see that the violence against things and the reification of humans in capitalist industrial production are the same process. In our time, with such powerful and advanced science and technology, for which humans are so proud of themselves, the global situation is only worsening. Nuclear weapons, bio-weapons, pollution, global warming, water depletion, and so on are all problems that are brought forth by modern science and technology and are now threatening human existence and forcing us to foresee, actually, an end of human history.

Human existence and human history are part of the spontaneity of things. Our denial of things belongs to the self-denial of nature, that is, the unconcealment and creativity of spontaneity itself. As we mentioned above, death is part of nature. In this regard, modern technology accomplishes a self-expression of nature in its exploitation of nature. In terms of human history, however, this self-expression of nature is the self-eradication of human existence. That is, when the modern human postulates themselves as the opposite of na-

ture, they have thereby departed from the root of their own existence. The technological human history against nature is the very event of the eradication of human existence.

5. Conclusions

However, isn't the power of spontaneity still flowing even in a desert of a Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) plant farm? Even though the growth of plants is controlled by chemicals and the procedure of their life is transmuted by technology, every leaf still grows towards sunlight, and their roots still seek the nourishment of the earth. All possibilities of control, regulation, and "modification" are rooted in nature itself. Ultimately, humans can only follow nature, and any technology is possible only because it has grasped some power of nature. It is impossible for humans to obtain power through the control and domination of nature, which is unfortunately the biggest illusion of modern metaphysics and the time that it defines. Power can only be attained through our belonging to nature, because there is no power except for nature.

When our belonging to nature is emphasized, there is always concern about the human. But where are humans now? Are we then to be erased for the sake of the earth? Should we forget technology and go back to a primitive way of living like the Amish? As a response to these worries, I want to stress that the awareness of our belonging to nature is not to say that we should abandon technology. Rather, for humans to restore the root of our existence in the present historical context, technology needs to seek integration with nature. Science and technology like to wear the masks of objectivity and neutrality. The fact is, however, that any science and technology are the result and practice of a certain metaphysics and epistemology. Furthermore, metaphysics, science, and technology are tightly associated with the political and economic system. Hence, what technology needs to be developed or repressed is determined by whether the monopoly capitalist groups can make profits and the number of profits to be generated in the capitalist industrial system. The so-called objective science and technology serve the interests of a small special group of people.³³ Therefore, we see that a large amount of scientific research has been invested in the military industry, hence high-tech weapons and endless imperialist wars, ever craving for more blood of the numberless. Meanwhile, even though the destruction brought by GMOs has been largely proven and the consequences are unpredictable, GMOs as a means to control both domestic and international economy and to make high profits, have gained wide support from many governments. At the same time, the green technologies that reduce pollution, foster life health, and are urgently needed for sustainability are widely suppressed because they harm the benefits of the monopoly groups.

What is more dangerous is the politicization of the environmental crisis. With their ostensible proclamations of dealing with the crisis and without any substantial moves, the world's politicians are only using the crisis of the existence of all beings as propaganda to enhance control over people internationally. For example, on 13 April 2021, Japan's government announced a decision to dump 1.25 million tons of radioactive wastewater from the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant into the Pacific Ocean in two years. It has started in the spring of 2023. At an international time such as ours, it is not difficult for politicians and experts to sit down and come up with a practical plan to deal with this issue. However, despite the fact that in China, Korea, and Russia there are widespread concerns for and fear of the unpredictable contamination of the oceans and the atmosphere caused by the radioactive chemicals contained in nuclear waste, US State Secretary Antony Blinken thanked Japan "for its transparent efforts in its decision to dispose of the treated water from the Fukushima Daiichi site" on Twitter. Here we have a glimpse of the disastrous effect of the politicization of environmental crisis: because Japan is viewed as an ally of the allegedly democratic white states, its nuclear waste is propagandized as "correct." Its dire and unpredictable pollution of the earth, the ocean, and the atmosphere should then be merrily forgotten.³⁴

That nature becomes the object of human reason and that nature becomes the raw material for profits, the weight to be sold in political struggle, delineate the same process of industrial capitalism from the different aspects of philosophy, politics, and economics.³⁵

While the many political struggles may never end, the world needs to understand that there is a realm in which people have to put down their politics and come together for the future of the human race. And that realm is nature, the home of the human. Until now, we have seen no political efforts taken to solve this problem, and we therefore hope to see them in the near future.

It is also true that global environmental awareness has been growing in our era. Environmentalists have written books and have been protesting on streets, in museums and supermarkets, on dams, and have chained themselves to buildings. Finally, the world is turning its attention to developing new technologies for green energy. Wind turbines have been set up and solar panels installed; electric vehicles have become a new fashion. It is said that nowadays the organic way of living is even preferred by capitalists, instead of only by a small group of leftist radicals. These are good phenomena that should be cherished, for they are the results of generations of hard work. However, the green trends are still weak, and the philosophical ground of nature on which the human future stands is still awaiting to be established, which is what I am trying to do in this essay. We need enough awareness to understand that if we were to fail, the future of the human race could be easily blown away. The integration of technology and nature is not only necessary, but also urgent.

The Daoist understanding of the relation between things and humans, i.e., our ultimate belonging to nature, requires the reflection of our very existence. Human history is not independent of or outside of the event of spontaneity; rather, it belongs to nature and is itself an expression of nature. Henceforth, the opening of a more free, good, beautiful, and healthy time demands us to break the illusions of the human ego. It demands the awareness of our belonging to nature.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Glossary

<i>jingjie</i> 境界	boundary: limit, area, domain
<i>ziran</i> 自然	spontaneity, self-going, nature (in modern Chinese)
<i>shi</i> 實	real, concrete
<i>zhenshi</i> 真實	true and real
<i>fa</i> 法	law, to take measure from, to follow
<i>xu</i> 虛	empty
<i>chong</i> 冲	empty, surge, infuse
<i>du</i> 篤	concrete, true, genuine
<i>heng</i> 恒	constant, consistent
<i>guan</i> 觀	observe
<i>fu</i> 復	return, back and forth
<i>ming</i> 明	bright, light
<i>jing</i> 靜	serene, peaceful, quiet, gentle
<i>ru</i> 如	suchness, as it is
<i>jiujingshixiang</i> 究竟實相	the ultimate true form, the ultimate reality
<i>de</i> 德	virtue, creativity
<i>yi</i> 易	change, easy

<i>you</i> 有	being, have
<i>wu</i> 無	nonbeing, not have, absence, not
<i>qi</i> 器	instrument
<i>de</i> 得	get, gain, satisfied
<i>xuan</i> 玄	dark, mysterious
<i>dao</i> 道	road, way, path, to speak, to lead
<i>shan</i> 善	good, virtuous, kind
<i>xin</i> 信	trust, credible, believe
<i>xing</i> 性	nature, character, sex
<i>sheng</i> 生	life, growth, living, birth
<i>yangsheng</i> 養生	nourishing life
<i>hua</i> 化	transform, change
<i>wuchang</i> 無常	impermanent
<i>ziyou</i> 自由	freedom
<i>wu</i> 物	thing, creature
<i>xiangdai</i> 相待	interdependence
<i>wudai</i> 無待	non-dependence

Notes

- I understand “the myriad things” here in terms of the Buddhist idea of “realm” (*jingjie* 境界), under the perspective of which it is not merely the sum total of things, nor is it only a subjective human experience, but the realization of diversity.
- I am here following Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s critique of the Western metaphysical tradition. Plato’s world of Being, Aristotle’s substance, and “the unmoved mover” manifested as a God beyond the world in Christianity are its main targets. Heidegger also criticized modern metaphysics for its objectification of the world. See Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture”. (Heidegger 2002, p. 57)
- “處其實，不居其華。”
- My translation with reference to (Ames and Hall 2003; Lau 1963). For the Chinese texts of the *Daodejing* (DDJ) cited in this article, I combine different versions and come up with what I think as ideal. I usually give preference to the Mawangdui Silk Texts. See 劉笑敢, <老子古今: 五種對勘與析評引論>, 中国社会科学出版社, (Liu 2006) and (Zhu 2012). The *chong* 冲 character in the second verse is a reading that follows the Han Dynasty Bamboo Scripts. In all other versions, the *jing* 靜 character is taken. There are a few reasons that I follow this reading. First, the Bamboo Script was earlier than other versions. Second, the *chong* character (meaning “emptiness”) resonates with *xu* 虛 (meaning also “being empty”) in the first line. Third, *chong* is an important character for description of the Dao in the DDJ. For example, chapter 4 says, “Dao is empty (*chong* 冲), yet its use is never to be drained”.
- Du* in Chinese means concreteness or truthfulness as in the word *dushi* 篤實, meaning concrete and true. Erya-Shigu says, “*Du* means to make concrete and strong” (“篤, 固也.”).
- In the sense that these two terms do not mean a metaphysical void but rather depict the movement of the dao, the emptiness here should be understood as a throbbing one that designates the flow of all beings.
- “反其真。” See “The Great Master” and “Autumn Floods.” The *zhen* or “being true” in the Zhuangzi covers different levels of ontology, existence, and epistemology. However, in my view they are all grounded in the ultimate reality (*zhenshi* 真實) itself, for the reason of which the *zhenzai* 真宰 (true master), *zhenren* 真人 (true person), *zhenzhi* 真知 (true knowing), and *zhenxing* 真性 (true nature) become possible at all. Being true therefore pervades dao, de, things, and humans. Because of the truth or *zhen* of dao and de, there is the *zhen* or truth of things (as Tian Dao (“The Heavenly Way”) says, “penetrates to the truth of things”, i.e., *jiwuzhizhen* 極物之真), and that of humans.
- “日新之謂盛德，生生之謂易”。
- “天地之大德曰生。”
- The *qi* 器 in the DDJ certainly should not be simply understood as “instrument”; rather, instruments have to be redefined through *qi* 器. *Qi* depicts the *you* 有 or be-ing of all. Chapter 28 says that “when the uncarved block shatters it becomes vessels 樸散則為器”. The *pu* or uncarved block implies the dao as *wu* or non-be-ing, while the *qi* shows its be-ing or becoming. Laozi also refers to the event of the world as the sacred *qi* (“天下神器”), which also stresses the disclosing of all. It is for this reason that the latter versions of the DDJ, e.g., Wang Bi’s version, use *shi* 勢 instead of *qi* 器. The *shi* grasps the becoming of things through the propensity or power that involves and shapes a certain thing or event.
- Edited translation from (Ames and Hall 2003).
- It is a characteristic of Chinese philosophy to use different words to depict the same event of nature, e.g., *dao*, *de*, *tian*, *ziran*, *sheng* etc. These terms, therefore, should be taken as aspectual that entail each other rather than analytic categories that seek definitions through setting boundaries. I got this idea from Roger T. Ames.
- Please check the reference: Ziporyn’s translation. (Ziporyn 2009).

- 14 Please check the reference: Ibid.
- 15 My translation. “魚相造乎水，人相造乎道。相造乎水者，穿池而養給。相造乎道者，無事而生定”。
- 16 “天下誘然皆生，而不知其所以生”。
- 17 “開天者德生，開人者賊生”。
- 18 “大道汎兮其可左右。萬物恃之而生”。
- 19 <說卦傳>，“雷以動之，風以散之，雨以潤之，日以烜之”。
- 20 This is inspired by Dogen Zenji, “Only a True Flower Shows Its True Face” in *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 4, Tokyo: Kosen (Nishiyama 1983, p. 110).
- 21 This is the foundation of the understanding of true nature of things as emptiness in Buddhism. Emptiness is suchness. Suchness is emptiness.
- 22 Shi Puji, ed., Volume 7 of the *Compendium of the Five Lamps*. [玄沙大師參次，聞燕子聲，乃曰，“深談實相，善說法要。”便下座.] See (Puji n.d.).
- 23 Bertrand Russell gives us a good account of the “removal of almost all traces of animism from the laws of physics” in modern science in his *A History of Western Philosophy*. See (Russell 1945, p. 537).
- 24 A priori knowledge, according to Kant, is “knowledge that is absolutely independent of all experience” (CPR, B3).
- 25 “有物混成，先天地生”。
- 26 “復歸於無物”，and “無狀之狀，無物之象”。
- 27 “陰陽相照，相蓋，相治，四時相代，相生，相殺，欲惡去就於是橋起，雌雄片合於是庸有。安危相易，禍福相生，緩急相摩，聚散以成”。(Ze Yang 則陽) My translation.
- 28 “方生方死，方死方生；方可方不可，方不可方可；因是因非，因非因是”。 My translation.
- 29 There are different interpretations of this obscure line. Zhong Tai, for example understands it as the arising and passing away of opinions. See (Zhong 2002, p. 39).
- 30 *Ziran* 自然 is ultimately freedom. There are layers of meanings to this point. *Ziran* is not simply what is experienced. Rather what is experienced is always under certain biases constructed by social norms. For Daoism, we have to get rid of knowing or *zhi* 知 to reach *ziran*. Such is the practice of *wuzhi* 無知 (non-knowing). The world is as it is, yet we live in categories and concepts shaped by the society. For Daoism, it is only when these biases and categories are expelled can freedom and *ziran* be achieved.
- 31 *Qian* 乾 and *Kun* 坤 are the two fundamental hexagrams in the *Yijing*, respectively symbolizing heaven and earth.
- 32 That the degradation of nature and the dominion over women go hand in hand in Western history is a fundamental viewpoint of ecofeminism. See (Plumwood 1993, pp. 93–103). See also (Merchant 1983, pp. 164–92).
- 33 See (Shiva 1989, p. 23). See also (Allen 2010). Allen insightfully points out that “the problem is not with machines but with the ethics of engineering and the government of technology”.
- 34 Despite the plant’s operator, the Tokyo Electric Power Co.’s claim that the wastewater is safe, the level of tritium remains above national standard. (Tsoi 2023) According to environmental groups, “The water in the storage tanks contains unknown quantities of radioactive contaminants besides tritium”. (Kuhn 2021) Japan has been criticized for its lack of transparency and an undemocratic decision-making process. According to Greenpeace Japan, “Rather than using the best available technology to minimize radiation hazards by storing and processing the water over the long term, they have opted for the cheapest option, dumping the water into the Pacific Ocean”. (Elton 2023)
- 35 I do not exclusively criticize capitalism on the issue of environmental crisis. Both capitalism and communism, the two major modern regimes, are responsible. For a detailed analysis of this issue see (Liu 2022).

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