Daoism, Nature and Humanity

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Abstract
This paper sympathetically explores Daoism's relevance to environmental philosophy and to the aspiration of people to live in a manner convergent with nature. After discussing the Daoist understanding of nature and the *dao* (Way), the focus turns to the implications of these notions for our relationship to nature. The popular idea that Daoism encourages a return to a 'primitive' way of life is rejected. Instead, it is shown that the Daoist proposal is one of living more 'spontaneously' than people generally do in the modern, technological world, and of allowing other beings to do so as well. These themes are clarified in a final section, inspired by some Daoist remarks, devoted to the relationship of human beings with animals.

1. The appeal of Daoism

As befits the title of the lecture series to which this one belongs, 'Philosophical Traditions', my focus is on so-called 'philosophical' Daoism. Not my term, but one that has often been used to distinguish the thoughts articulated in classic texts like the *Daodejing*, during the Period of the Warring States in China (c.475–221 BCE), from an organized Daoist religion that developed several centuries later. 'Early' Daoism might be a better term, for the once popular older view that Daoist philosophy must be 'kept carefully distinguished from Daoist religion' has given way to a more nuanced perception.[1] Later Daoist preoccupations with longevity and cultivation of the body have their precedents in the classics and it is possible to discern a religious sense expressed in these texts.

By 'these texts', I mean primarily the *Daodejing* ('The Classic of the Way and Virtue (or Power)' – once attributed to a sixth-century BCE sage, Laozi, but actually a work compiled about three centuries later – and the book attributed to Zhuangzi (ca. 369–286 BCE). But I shall refer, too, to a slightly earlier work, *Neiye* ('Inner cultivation'), and to a later compilation of writings albeit attributed to a fifth-century BCE figure, Liezi.[2]

[1] Fung Yulan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 31

[2] References within the text use the abbreviations indicated for the following works: *Daodejing* (D), *The Book of Zhuangzi* (Z), and *The Book of*

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The three hundred or so translations of the *Daodejing* into European languages testify to the current appeal of Daoism in the West – as, in a different way, do the many books with titles like *The Tao of Pooh* and *The Tao of Meow*. Like Buddhism, Daoism seems to offer the kind of God-free spirituality sought after by many people in the West. To philosophers still in recoil from Cartesian dualism, yet unable to accept a blunt physicalism, Daoism presents an attractive metaphysical vision of a world inseparable from our experience of it, yet emergent from a source that is mysterious and ineffable.

But it is, perhaps, Daoism's 'green' reputation – as an ecologically enlightened dispensation – that most endears it to people in the West. Lin Yutang no doubt exaggerated the divide between Confucians and Daoists when he described the former as 'too decorous' and praised the latter for 'go[ing] about with dishevelled hair and bare feet'.[3] The impression remains, however, that Daoism is distinctive in a proposal for intimacy or convergence with nature that few other spiritual traditions can rival.

There are, of course, philosophers for whom a rhetoric of 'oneness with nature' does nothing to recommend a proposal. Roger Scruton, for example, has recently criticised the 'tortured' ecocentric or biocentric literature that advocates 'identifying the self' with nature. Even if such calls are intelligible, he complains, their 'practical conclusions' are opaque, for no account is offered of how 'oneness with nature' might motivate people to act in any determinate way.[4] It is easy to sympathise with this criticism, and some claims made on behalf of Daoism are surely open to it. The Daoist, proclaimed one

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Liezi (L). References are to chapters of these works. (Eg. D 25 refers to chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*). I have drawn on various translations of the works, but especially on P.J. Ivanhoe, *The Daodejing of Laozi* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), Wang Keping, *Reading the Dao: A Thematic Inquiry* (London: Continuum, 2010), A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001) and *The Book of Lieh-Tzu: A Classic of Tao* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1990), and B. Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009).

[3] Yutang Lin, *My Country and its People* (London: Heinemann, 1936), 112

[4] Roger Scruton, *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously about the Planet* (London: Atlantic, 2012), 195

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hyperbolic author, 'plunges into the unknowable … the way of nature', so as 'to merge into nature'.[5]

Such extravagant prose notwithstanding, the possibility remains that Daoism has the philosophical resources not only to provide an intelligible account of convergence with nature, but to explain why this convergence is a dimension of the good life. This is the possibility I explore in this lecture and, in doing so, I touch upon the spiritual and metaphysical attractions of Daoism that I mentioned earlier.

2. Daoist moods and edification

Attention to Daoism is encouraged by the expression in the classic texts of attitudes or moods that also inform contemporary environmental writings in which the idea of convergence is prominent. To begin with, the texts express a *desire* for convergence with nature. Human beings should, it is said, 'follow the way of the earth', just as in turn the earth 'follows the way of heaven' (D25). For Daoists, as for today's 'greens', people's lives should, in some sense, be more 'natural'. Second, the texts express a nostalgia, palpable too in much 'green' literature, for a time, real or imagined, when people did live more naturally: when, for instance, there was 'plainness and simplicity', a minimum of technology and artifice, so that there was less 'selfishness', and men and women could live more 'peacefully in their homes' (D 19, 80).

As the tone of those remarks suggest, the texts also express criticism of, or disillusion with, human beings for creating a complex civilization in which the plain, simple, peaceful life is impossible, and in which people have become estranged from a more natural existence. In the *Zhuangzi*, especially, there are passages that might almost be mistaken for modern diatribes in which it is a frenzied 'busy-ness', a relentless pursuit of goals and purposes, and a subjection to economic imperatives that are blamed for the loss of a more authentic form of human life. More than two thousand years earlier, according to the *Zhuangzi*, the Chinese were already 'scurrying around even when sitting still', always 'uneasy without the busyness of buying and selling', and constantly 'worried' and 'sad' when their ambitions were thwarted. Their life 'rushes on like a galloping horse', a life 'confined by' or 'submerged in' a world of material goods (Z 2, 4, 24).

[5] L. Cranmer-Byng, Introduction to Yang Chu's *Garden of Pleasure* (Forgotten Books, e-book, 2010), 25

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Finally, the texts convey a perception – shared by many modern critics of technology – that the unhappy frenzy of these confined and submerged lives is related to the replacement of a sense of the mystery and wonder of things by hubristic overestimation of the scope of human knowledge and control. The famous opening words of the *Daodejing* tell us that 'the *dao* (way) that can be named is not the constant *dao*', and that the relationship between the *dao* and 'the myriad things' – the world – of which it is the source is itself profoundly mysterious (D 1). Throughout the principal classics, there are calls to 'abandon' confidence in learning and in the ability to articulate the truth of things. 'One who knows does not speak. One who speaks does not know' (D 56).

In conveying a yearning for convergence with nature, nostalgia for an age when people led lives that were simpler and closer to nature, disillusion with the course of human history, and a sense of the mystery of the way of things, Daoism expresses attitudes or moods that are consonant with a tendency in modern environmental thought. It is one thing, however, to recognize this consonance of mood, but another to show that Daoism has the resources to justify these moods and to guide our responses to them – the resources, in effect, to fashion a way of convergence.

The bare structure of the Daoist position is clear enough. Human beings, we saw, should 'follow the way of the earth'. This is because the earth follows the way of heaven, which in turn 'follows the *dao*' itself (D 25). By following nature, therefore, human lives achieve harmony or convergence with the *dao* – with *the* Way, that is. And harmony with the Way is the supreme Daoist imperative. Humankind, one might say, has lost the Way; nature has not. So by returning to living naturally, men and women will once again be 'on the Way'.

While this description of the Daoist position does not address the questions of how and why a life convergent with nature is 'on the Way', it does suggest that mindful attention to natural environments will be edifying. To begin with, nature furnishes the attentive observer with instructive metaphors both for the *dao* and the life of the sage. Like Coleridge's 'symbols', these enable the imagination to give force and life to what would otherwise be inert 'ideas'. The favourite Daoist metaphors correspond, in fact, to one of Coleridge's main symbols, water. Rather as, for the poet, the 'leaping up and plunging forward' of a waterfall is an 'awful image and shadow of God and the world',[6] so for the Daoist water furnishes analogies

[6] S.T. Coleridge, *Collected Letters 1801–06*, (ed.) E.L. Griggs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 852–3

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that give us a sense for the *dao* and the life of virtue.[7] Like water, the *dao* 'preserves and nourishes all things' without making any 'claim to be master over them' (D 34). Moreover, in flowing downwards to the lowest and most 'detestable' places, such as sewers, water teaches the sage a lesson in humility (D 8).

Second, natural environments provide an arena in which, as the *Zhuangzi* puts it, we are able to 'let go of the world' and escape from the frenetic pursuit of 'rank, wealth and prestige' that characterizes life in the city (Z 19, 23). Countless Chinese paintings and poems of the Tang era convey this Daoist message: paintings in which a small, reflective figure sits perched on a mountain far removed from the dust, grime and frenzy of urban existence; and poems that explain how, to get away from 'the affairs of the world', a man repairs to the forest, watches the moon, and listens to 'the wind of the pines' and 'a fisherman's song going into the deep river bank'.[8] It is a message conveyed millennia later by Iris Murdoch, when describing how her absorbed attention to birds and plants in their 'sheer alien pointless independent existence' offers respite from the demands of the 'fat relentless ego'.[9]

In these respects, then, experience of natural environments may be edifying. This does not, however, answer the question of how, exactly, a life convergent with nature is 'on the Way'. Indeed, the question of what convergence with nature *is* remains unaddressed. To make progress with these questions, we must turn to the Daoist understanding of nature and of the *dao* itself.

3. Nature and *dao*

People sceptical of Daoism's relevance to modern environmental concerns will point out that ancient Chinese had no term for nature in, as it were, the David Attenborough sense – nature as what natural historians study, and what TV nature programmes are programmes about. This does not mean, of course, that the Chinese were unable to talk about natural landscapes and wild things, nor that their concepts of nature were without implications for our

[7] See Sarah Allen, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 1997)

[8] Wang Wei (8th century), in P. Harris (trans.) *Three Hundred Tang Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 224

[9] Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Penguin, 1997), 378

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relationship to nature in this sense. It does indicate, though, that the Chinese were not wedded to 'a wilderness ideal' and that they did not emphasize a sharp distinction between the human and natural worlds. Unlike some modern writers, moreover, Daoists were not guilty of confusing wilderness with what is wild. They would have endorsed Roger Deakin's remark that a patch of lawn is a 'jungle in miniature'[10] – a place where, even in Cheltenham or Chelsea, wild creatures and processes are at work.

The environments that the main Daoist texts mention are, to a greater or lesser degree, 'humanised' landscapes – including gardens, parks, farms, and other places with which people actively engage. The landscapes depicted in Chinese paintings are not, typically, devoid of all human presence: there in the distance are boats, huts, temples, carts and so on.

There are several terms in the texts that can, according to context and with suitable caution, be translated by 'nature' – and in various senses of that versatile word. *Tiandi* (heaven-and-earth) is perhaps the nearest term for nature-as-a-whole, nature as the totality of what is subject to the laws of nature – to the patterns and rhythms, especially of Yin and Yang, which Chinese cosmologists discerned in the world. Important, too, are a number of terms that refer to the nature of a particular being – to its 'essence' or its 'original', given nature. *Xing*, for example, has been defined as 'the course in which life completes its development if sufficiently nourished and not obstructed or injured from outside'.[11]

These various senses of 'nature' are, for Daoist thinkers, more obviously connected than they any longer are for us. And what connects them is their relationship to the *dao*. As the source of 'heaven-and-earth' and the 'mother' of 'the myriad things' (D 1), the *dao* imparts to the world its own 'naturalness', 'spontaneity' or, more literally, 'self-so-ness' (*ziran*). The patterns and rhythms of which it is the source enable the world to continue on its course without further intervention, thereby allowing the myriad things to develop and express their 'original' natures, essences (*jing*) or native powers (*de*) that have been 'opened out and arrayed' by the *dao* (Z 23).

The Daoist notion of nature has, unsurprisingly, referred us to the *dao*. Before returning to the matter of convergence with nature, then, let me briefly turn to this pivotal term. Despite some reductivist

[10] Roger Deakin, *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm* (London: Penguin, 2009), 155

[11] A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), 124

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attempts by recent scholars, *dao* cannot be *equated* with nature. While in some contexts, the term is virtually equivalent to 'nature-as-a-whole', the dominant rhetoric in the texts is of the *dao* as the 'source', 'generator' or 'mother' of heaven-and-earth (eg. D 25, Z 6). It would be quite wrong, however, to interpret this rhetoric theistically. This is despite the tendency of early translators to render *dao* as God, with the express intention in one case, at least, of showing that 'the Mysteries of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Incarnate God were anciently known to the Chinese nation'.[12] The *dao* is without the purposes, the substance, and the independence from the world that characterise a creator God. The *Zhuangzi* emphasizes that the *dao* is not 'something that causes' or creates and that, as what 'forms forms' or 'things things', it is not itself a form or a thing (Z 22, 25). The *dao*, explains the *Neiye*, is not 'separated from us' or things, but 'fills the entire world'.[13]

It helps when thinking about the *dao* to remember that the Chinese term has a verbal as well as a nominal form: *dao*, in this sense, is a dynamic notion, for it refers to 'cutting a path or channel', to the *making* of a way, rather as flowing water does. This is why the *Daodejing* can say that the *dao* stands to the world as rivers do to the valleys they both make and flow through (D 32). The imagery encourages a view of the *dao*, not as a divine substance, but as a constant enabling of a world, a constant process of 'giving forth' that makes it possible for things to be present to experience (Z 17).[14] Martin Heidegger, an admirer of Daoism, aptly glossed *dao* as 'the Way that gives all ways'[15] – the well-spring, as it were, for the various ways followed by animals, plants, and 'the ten thousand things'. For Zhuangzi, at least, the existence of things that can be conceptualized and spoken of is inseparable from experience of them: 'Each thing has some place [perspective] from which it can be affirmed as thus and so' (Z 2). This implies that the *dao* is, in effect, the condition for all possible experience, for the perspectives or ways of experience in virtue of which things figure as the things they are.[16]

[12] Cited in Ma Lin, *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2008), 120

[13] H. Roth (trans.), *The Nei-Yeh* (www.stillness.com/tao/neiyeh.txt, 1999), sections 5 and 14

[14] See Hans-Georg Moeller, *Daoism Explained* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 147

[15] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 92

[16] For a fuller account, see David E. Cooper, *Convergence with Nature: A Daoist Perspective* (Dartington: Green Books, 2012), Chapter 6.

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Lacking any form or substance, and not itself an object of possible experience, *dao* is ineffable, since anything is describable only from a particular perspective. Aquatic and maternal characterizations of *dao*, and Heidegger's too, are figurative ones that do not, as it were, try to 'eff' the ineffable. Further characterizations of the workings of *dao* are best postponed until after a discussion of how a life, through its convergence with nature, is 'on the Way'. *Dao*, after all, is what it is that a convergent life accords with. This postponement mirrors the strategy followed in the texts, where analogies with the sage's life are exploited in order to illuminate *dao*. (Notice I've dropped the definite article before '*dao*': it's not there in the Chinese and it encourages the rejected construal of *dao* as a substance or God.)

4. Daoism and 'Primitivism'

So let's revisit, in the light of the above remarks on nature and *dao*, the questions raised earlier about convergence with nature. What is it, and why does it accord with *dao*? I begin by considering an approach that has been labelled 'primitivism'. According to the primitivist interpretation of Daoism, if human beings – unlike other beings in nature – are no longer 'on the Way', the remedy is a return to a state of nature, an abandonment of the humanity that distinguishes them from animals. A life convergent with nature is one assimilated to the existence of animals, or of infants, since theirs is, as Hans-Georg Moeller puts it, 'the least "human" phase in our life – and the most natural'.[17]

The primitivist understanding of Daoism is not unfamiliar: it shapes, for example, that popular image of Daoists going about with dishevelled hair and bare feet. It is an understanding, moreover, that would appeal to some modern environmentalists – to those who, like John Fowles, recommend re-immersion in the 'green chaos' enjoyed by our 'wild, green-men' ancestors,[18] or, like Simon Barnes, 'living a wilder life' suited to our 'ancient wild self'.[19]

There are passages in the texts, certainly, to encourage the primitivist reading. (A.C. Graham, in his celebrated translation of the

[17] Hans-Georg Moeller, *Daodejing (Laozi): A Complete Translation and Commentary* (Chicago: Open Court, 2007), 128

[18] John Fowles, 'Seeing the whole', in S. Armstrong and R. Botzler (eds), *Environmental Ethics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 138–40

[19] Simon Barnes, *How to be Wild* (London: Short Books, 2007), 58 & 282

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Zhuangzi, gives the label 'The Primitivist' to the author of some chapters later added to those supposedly written by Zhuangzi himself). For a start, there are the remarks directed against Confucian confidence in the beneficial role of rituals, social conventions and moral principles in the good life. According to the *Daodejing*, it is only when '*dao* is lost' that a need arises for 'righteousness' and 'ritual propriety' (D 38). Then there are the many remarks that impugn the value of systematic intellectual knowledge (*zhi*). An important chapter in the *Zhuangzi* calls for a 'fasting of the mind' that will 'expel' such knowledge, so as to enhance both a more practical, 'vital' form of understanding and a still, silent receptivity to 'the presence of beings' (Z 4). Finally, several chapters in the classics decry the emergence of complex societies dependent on sophisticated technology. The penultimate chapter of the *Daodejing* is a portrait of an ideal society in which people live in simple, isolated communities and eschew the use of complicated instruments, means of transport, weapons and advanced methods of writing (D 80). The *Zhuangzi*, similarly, inveighs against the use of new-fangled devices for irrigation and ingenious, state of the art traps to catch animals or fish (Z 10, 12).

It is wrong, however, to read such passages as calling for a return to a state of nature prior to civilization. Zhuangzi is not complaining about the use of technology as such, but about the profit-driven 'cunning, deception' and 'trickiness' that a preoccupation with technical advances involves. And the Daoist utopia described in the *Daodejing* is not a primitive form of existence, but a human society in which, simple as it may be, people 'delight in customs', 'beautify their clothing', employ a form of writing, and rear animals.

Nor is there any suggestion that, in returning to a more natural way of living, people are abandoning their distinctive humanity and assimilating their life to that of animals and infants. Far from a desire to 'strip the human subject of all that is quintessentially human', one author explains, the Daoist aim is rather 'to liberate human existence from the false values and views' that have accrued over the centuries.[20] The main reason that the Daoist call cannot be one for regression by human beings to 'wild green-men' is that the Daoist sage possesses *understanding*, specifically an awareness of *dao* and of the consonance with *dao* of his own life. It is because the good Daoist is 'moved by Heaven' (Z 15) and 'esteems the attainment of *dao*' (D 20), that he is able to exercise an intelligent

[20] Eske Møllgard, *An Introduction to Daoist Thought: Action, language and ethics in Zhuangzi* (London: Routledge, 2007), 20

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impartiality and a reflective mastery over his desires (D 46, 49). These are not capacities available to animals or very young children.

It is important to stress, however, that a distinctively human understanding of *dao* is not an intellectual or scholarly feat. Most of the main examples in the *Zhuangzi* of people possessed of this understanding are 'practical' people whose sense of *dao* is manifested in their style of action and comportment. From the butcher whose cleaver is guided by a recognition of 'heaven's structuring' and what is 'inherently so' (Z 3), to the bell-stand maker whose work responds to 'the inborn heavenly nature' of trees, to the swimmer who 'follows the Way of water itself' (Z 19) – these are men whose practice is enabled by their implicit awareness of *dao*.

Reflection on this same cast of characters will also help in understanding the form of convergence with nature that is sought by Daoists, and in so doing reveal another reason why this is very different from regression to a wild state and from an abandonment of the distinctively human.

5. Spontaneity and *wu wei*

A feature common to the performances and practices of the swimmer, the butcher and many other figures in the *Zhuangzi* is their *spontaneity*. The swimmer does not impose a 'course of [his] own' on the water, but adjusts to its flow; the butcher follows no fixed plan, so that when he encounters a difficulty, he pauses, lets his blade move as if by itself, and Hey Presto!, there is the ox, dismembered at his feet. In the wilderness of Dongting, a musician – the legendary Yellow Emperor, no less – plays music that is 'flowing, unforced and uncontrived', constantly 'adjusting to the mandate of [the] things' surrounding him in the natural environment with which, like a jazz player, he is jamming (Z 14).

The spontaneity manifested here is not that of capriciousness, impulse or surrender to the passions: rather, as one of Zhuangzi's translators puts it, it is alert, flexible 'responsiveness in the impersonal calm when vision is most lucid'.[21] Like the swimmer's or the musician's, the mind of the Daoist sage – as an early Chinese editor of the *Zhuangzi* explains – is spontaneous since it 'follows along with the character of each thing', 'unfettered', 'free of dependence' on prejudices, conventions and *idées fixes* that obstruct attentive openness to things.[22]

[21] A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, op. cit. note 2, 14
[22] Guo Xiang, cited in Ziporyn, op. cit. note 2, 132

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This is the spontaneity sought, two millennia later, by Rousseau's 'solitary walker', whose soul 'rambles and glides through the universe', allowing ideas to 'follow their own bent without constraint'.[23] It is interesting that precisely this metaphor of rambling was used by Zhuangzi in the opening chapter of his work to refer to the spontaneous heart-and-mind of the sage.

It is this spontaneity that the texts identify with convergence with nature. The calls for simplicity, suspicion of technology and scholarship, and the setting aside of artificial conventions are not a summons to return to a state of nature. They eulogise, rather, a form of life hospitable to the spontaneity that is barely discernible in complex urban societies. 'Attuned' to things and spontaneously responding to them, a person 'arrives up beyond them to the source of things' (Z 33). By 'following the way of the earth', the sage 'follows the way of *dao*', because '*dao* [itself] follows the way of spontaneity (*ziran*) (D 25). Or better, because *dao* is itself a spontaneous process, a 'movement' – like the swimmer's – which 'happens without any effort or "driving force" that tries to impose a certain direction'. The sage, nature, and *dao* all 'move "self-so"'.[24]

Spontaneity is closely related to the Daoist ideal of *wu wei*, literally 'non-action' but a virtual synonym in some contexts for *ziran*. An early Chinese commentator on the *Daodejing* defined it as 'following what is spontaneous or natural … taking no action that is contrary to nature'.[25] Certainly, the sage who 'conducts affairs through no-action' thereby follows the example of *dao*, which itself leaves 'nothing undone' through 'doing nothing' (D 2, 48). In other contexts, however, *wu wei* is understood not as an exercise of spontaneity by someone, but as a person's helping creatures or things to be 'self-so', to themselves be natural and spontaneous. The sage, it is said, 'supports the own course (*ziran*) of the ten thousand things' (D 64). Here, too, the sage is in emulation of the Way, since *dao* itself is understood as 'giving' to each thing its 'self-so' nature, as the Way that 'gives' the way of each thing.

Wu wei in this sense is exercised by several of the Daoist heroes encountered earlier, such as the bell-stand maker and the Yellow Emperor. The former discerns the 'inborn heavenly nature' of a tree, and will cut it down only if it contains within it 'the completed

[23] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 91

[24] Moeller, op. cit., note 17, 82

[25] Wang Bi, cited in Wang Keping, op. cit., n.2, 37

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bell-stand' – only when, in effect, he feels that his work will honour and realize the nature of the wood (Z 19). The Yellow Emperor, meanwhile, regards his music-making to be not simply 'adjusting to the unforced mandates of things' but as 'helping to clear the way for things' (Z 6). In spontaneous engagement with things in the surrounding environment, he imposes nothing on them: indeed, his responses to their sounds render their natures or 'mandates' more salient. Craftsman and musician alike are accomplishing what, in the *Zhuangzi*, is described as the distinctively human task of 'nourishing' things, not by 'trying to add anything to them', but by 'following along with the way each thing is of itself' (Z 5, 33). The Daoist ideal of *wu wei* enjoins what Heidegger called the 'letting be' or 'releasement' (*Gelassenheit*) of things.

Wu wei is a 'doing nothing' through which, however, things get done. And it is through reflecting on spontaneity and *wu wei* that implications for attitudes and practices emerge from the Daoist call for convergence with nature. One important set of implications are those drawn in the texts for our relationship to animals, and it is on these that my concluding discussion focuses.

6. 'Living together with birds and beasts'

Relationship with animals is a prominent theme in the *Zhuangzi* and in *The Book of Liezi*, a later compilation of thoughts albeit attributed to a thinker who predates Zhuangzi. The tone in these works is different from that of many modern environmentalist writings on animal ethics. There is no reference, for example, to the notion of animal rights. Nor is the central focus on the conservation of animals in the wild. Indeed, Liezi rather congratulates himself that the animals who roam in his garden soon lose the desire to live 'deep in the mountains and hidden away in the valleys' (L 2).

Nor, crucially, is the case for enlightened and humane treatment of animals grounded in today's popular, 'naturalistic' conviction that human beings are simply one species of animal, no different in essence from other species with which, as we are constantly reminded, we share most of our DNA. The texts remind us, to be sure, that the intelligence of some animals is 'similar to man's', that they, like we, 'wish to preserve their lives' (L 2), and that people once lived closely together with birds and beasts (Z 9). But the aim of such remarks is not to assimilate human lives to those of animals. Indeed, the texts frequently emphasize that enlightened practice require mindfulness of differences between species. The

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moral of many anecdotes is that animals are harmed by us because we exaggerate their similarity with ourselves. The sad tale is told, for instance, of a ruler who inadvertently kills a captive bird through providing it with a rich diet and pampered environment totally unsuited to a creature at home in 'deep forests and gliding through rivers' (Z 19). Like the sages of old, we must properly identify 'the habits of all the myriad things' and sensibly 'interpret' the sounds and gestures they make (L 2). Otherwise, we fail to recognize them for what they are and are in no position, therefore, to respect their integrity and respond to their wants and needs.

Horses, for example, have a 'true inborn nature' – chomping grass, running over the terrain, and so on – that is ignored by trainers who bridle, fetter, brand and pen them (Z 9). This 'government' or 'management' of creatures is a crass imposition on the animals of an alien way of life, and the opposite therefore of the treatment enjoined by the ideal of *wu wei* – one that honours, indeed nurtures, the 'self-so' nature of beings. While the texts refer to the part that sheer ignorance or lack of mindful attention plays in our treatment of animals, the equine example indicates that typically other distorting factors are also at work. Above all, there is the powerful tendency to view animals not for what *they* are, but only in relation to our own purposes and needs. Animals, like everything else in a busy, frenzied world of 'buying and selling', organized for the satisfaction of human desires, are seen in terms of their functional roles in this world – as meat on legs, say, or as pets or pests.

In a remarkable passage in the *Liezi*, a plucky young boy chides a visiting dignitary at a banquet for thanking heaven for its gift of fish and birds for humans to eat. 'How', asks the boy, 'can it be claimed that heaven bred them for the sake of man?' It would be no less reasonable to suppose, argues this budding philosopher, that heaven bred human beings for the sake of the mosquitoes that feed on us. More importantly, he accuses the dignitary of a failure to recognize that animals are 'born in the same way that we are' and are like us in having a nature and a purpose of their own, not one engineered for our benefit (L 8). This boy would, one guesses, be an opponent of what some scientists these days proudly refer to as the 'genetic sculpting' of animals.

Liezi and Zhuangzi look back with nostalgia to an age when 'people lived together with the birds and beasts' and shared the world with them (L 2, Z 9). It is not a state of nature they are recalling, but a simpler society not yet subject to economic and technological imperatives, in which it was still possible for human beings to relate to other beings spontaneously – to 'let them be' what they are.

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There are passages in the Daoist texts – not only the classics, but later, 'religious' texts like the third-century CE *One Hundred and Eighty Precepts* of the Celestial Masters – where concern for the integrity of animals is extended to other living things and to the wider natural environment.[26] So an 'environmental ethic' is present in Daoism, but one that is very different from the kinds that prevail in modernity. It is an ethic without a wilderness ideal, without a vocabulary of rights and intrinsic values, and free from any determination to assimilate human existence to that of other forms of life. The convergence with nature that Daoism recommends is not a 'oneness with nature' that obliterates the differences between the human way and the ways of animals, plants and plankton. It is a convergence, rather, that we achieve when our lives are 'on the Way', consonant with the *dao* that holds sway over nature as a whole. We achieve this, however, not by returning to a state of nature, to the condition of our 'wild green-men' ancestors. We do so, rather, through cultivating mindful, spontaneous responsiveness to the world, and by exercising the distinctive human *de* or 'virtue' of appreciating and nurturing the 'self-so-ness', the *dao*-given natures, of the other beings with whom our world is shared.

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[26] On the environmental relevance of these 'religious' texts, see N. Girardot, J. Miller and Xiaogan Liu (eds.), *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

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