Ecological Implications of the Logic of Non-Duality: An Analysis of the Plotinian One and the Daoist Dao

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between language and reality and the ecological implications of dualism, categorical logic, and the Aristotelian three laws of logic, on humans' attitude toward the natural world. The paper engages in a comparative analysis of two traditions: one from the West (Neo-Platonism) and one from the East (Daoism). It argues that while both Neo-Platonism (as represented by Plotinus' Enneads) and Classic Daoism (as represented by the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi) are successful in debunking rigid dualistic logic, Plotinus's Oneness emanation theory in the end falls short of supporting an inclusive ecological ethics in a comprehensive manner. Still mired in dualism, Plotinian Neo-Platonism treats nature and the physical world as recalcitrant matter—an evil best to be avoided rather than embraced. By contrast, Classic Daoism’s non-dual multi-universe perspective of the world has much to offer with regard to creating a new eco-philosophy and ethics that supports a healthy, sustainable, ecology.

Keywords: Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Neo-Platonism, Daoism, nature, matter, emanation, non-duality, dualism, law of excluded middle, law of non-contradiction, law of identity, mutual production of opposites, water, female, ecology

Ekološke implikacije logike nedualnosti: Analiza Plotinovega enega in daoističnega Dao

Izvleček

Članek raziskuje odnos med jezikom in resničnostjo in ekološkimi posledicami dualizma, kategorialne logike ter Aristotelovih treh zakonov logike na človekov odnos do naravnega sveta. Članek se ukvarja s primerjalno analizo dveh tradicij: zahodne (novoplatonizem) in vzhodne (daoizem). Trdi, da sta novoplatonizem (ki ga predstavljajo Plotinove Enneade) in klasični daoizem (ki ga predstavljata Daodejing in Zhuangzi) sicer uspešna pri razbijanju toge dualistične logike, vendar Plotinovi teoriji o emanaciji enosti na koncu ne uspe podpreti celovite ekološke etike. Plotinov novoplatonizem, ki je še vedno ujet

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v dualizem, obravnava naravo in fizični svet kot nepokorno materijo – zlo, ki se mu je bolje izogniti kot pa ga sprejeti. Nasprotno pa lahko klasični daoizem s svojim nedvojnim večsvetnim pogledom na svet veliko ponudi pri oblikovanju nove ekofilozofije in etike, ki podpirata zdravo in trajnostno ekologijo.

Ključne besede: Aristotel, Platon, Plotin, Laozi, Zhuangzi, novoplatonizem, daoizem, narava, snov, emanacija, nedualnost, dualizem, zakon izključene sredine, zakon neskladja, zakon identitete, vzajemna proizvodnja nasprotij, voda, ženska, ekologija

“Being and non-being generate one another.” (Laozi, Daodejing, chapter 2)
“Everything must either be or not be [but not both].”
(Aristotle, On Interpretation, 19a27-28)

Setting the Problem

Our linguistic framework, whether mental or verbal, affects how we perceive the self and the world, which in turn conditions our stance on the environment, gender, politics, and transnational relations. Thus, the relation between language and reality has important implications for ecology. Does language mirror reality as it really is? How far can linguistic-conceptual naming go? Is a binary, or a non-binary, paradigm better suited for capturing the ever-delicate balance between humanity and nature, self and others? The above brief quotations from three distinct traditions give us a glimpse of the complexity of the issue. On the one hand, we have traditions from the East and the West that challenge rigid binary thinking regarding being and non-being and the problem of categorical names. For example, in his discussion of the divine triads of the One, the Nous, and the World-Soul, the Neo-Platonist Plotinus writes, “The One is everything and not everything” (Enneads V.2.1, in O’Brien 1964, 106). He further adds, “The One, is not a being, for then its unity would repose in another than itself. There is no name that suits it really” (Enneads VI. 9.5 in ibid., 80). In describing dao (the first principle of all that exist), the Daodejing 道德經, a Daoist classic, states “The dao named dao is not the constant dao. / Names can name no lasting names. (道可道非常道,名可名非常名。)” (Chapter 1, my translation). Similarly, the Diamond Sutra (Jin Gang Jing 金剛經, vājra-cchedikā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra), a Mahayana Buddhist text, expounds, “All characteristics are in fact no-characteristics (諸相非相)” (chapter 5, in Price and Wang 1990, 21) and “truth is uncontainable and inexpressible. It neither is nor is not. (如來所説法,皆不可取,不可說,非法,非非法。)”
The Hindu classic *Bhagavad Gita*, 5: 3, teaches us that “Free from duality, [the practitioner] is easily liberated” (Johnson 2008, 23).

On the other hand, we have modern rationalist thinkers such as René Descartes (Cress 1993) and A. J. Ayer (1952), among others, who express their total confidence in reason and our language’s capacity to adequately convey meaning and truth as they are. Going back to the cradle of Western philosophy, we find that the conceptual root of binary thinking is already implanted in Aristotle’s three laws of logic: the laws of 1) non-contradiction, 2) excluded middle, and 3) identity. The law of non-contradiction states that contradictory statements about the same object/thing/event cannot both be true, a direct challenge to non-binary thinking. Symbolically, the law of non-contradiction is expressed as \(~(p \land \neg p)\): it is impossible for \(p\) and \(\neg p\) both be true at the same time. If \(p\) stands for the proposition “X is A” and \(\neg p\) for “X is not-A”, then X cannot both be A and not-A at the same time; to be A and not-A at the same time is a contradiction. Aristotle expresses such a view in a number of places in his *Metaphysics*: e.g.,

> the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect … For it is impossible for anyone to believe the same thing to be and not to be, as some think Heraclitus says. (*Metaphysics IV*, 1005b19-20, 1005b23-24 in Aristotle 1941a, 736–37; see also IV, 1011b13-14 in ibid., 749).

Moreover, the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction implies the law of excluded middle, \(~(p \land \neg p) \equiv (p \lor \neg p)\). There is no third term. This connection is made in his work on logic, *On Interpretation* 19a27-28 (Aristotle 1941b, 48). Furthermore, of the two propositions: “A is A” or “A is not-A”, because “A is not-A” is contradictory, “A is A” must be true. This leads to the law of identity: a thing is always identical with itself, namely, \((\forall a) (a = a)\). Aristotle regards these three laws of logic as *self-evident* axioms.

By contrast, Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic Greek thinker with a noted idea of impermanence, who denied the laws of non-contradiction and identity in his famous river statements: “You cannot step twice into the same rivers” (Burnet 1920, 136); “We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not” (ibid.,

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1 Chapter and page references are based on *The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-Neng* (Price and Wong 1990).

2 This version of the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction bears a striking resemblance to Plato’s statement in the *Republic* 436b7-8, where it says, “It is obvious that the same thing will never do or suffer opposites in the same respect in relation to the same thing and at the same time” (Hamilton and Cairns 1987, 678) in his proof for the tripartite structure of the soul, that the soul has three distinct powers: reason, passion, and desire.
139). Other than Heraclitus, Aristotelian logic has also been questioned by Plotinus (founder of the Neo-Platonist School), by the Daoist, the Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, and by a number of contemporary philosophers of logic. Most notably in the past three decades, it has been challenged by dialethism and paraconsistent logic spearheaded by the analytical philosopher Graham Priest and others (Priest 1987; 1995; 1998a; 1998b; 2004; 2018; 2022, et al.).

In this paper I wish to focus on the limitation of this dualistic conceptual framework and a certain brand of metaphysical realism. Linguistic mapping of reality as illustrated in the Aristotelian three laws of logic, when taken absolutely as the only norm of truth, is both limiting and human-centric. I argue that such an epistemological stance limits our perspective of the world and reduces the complexity of a thing-event to oversimplicity, the totality of reality to one-sidedness. To elaborate, there are at least three issues of concern in this context, as outlined below.

First, as Shigenori Nagatomo astutely points out in his discussion of the Diamond Sutra—a Buddhist text that shares important affinities with Daoist philosophy and is valued by many Daoist practitioners—that in stating categorically that “A is A; therefore, it is not not-A”, Aristotle has cut “A” off from time and context. In this cutting-off, “A” becomes an a-temporal and decontextualized object, frozen in time (Nagatomo 2010, 201). “A” stays inertly in an abstract conceptual-linguistic space as an immaterial form. Surely, such an “A”, confined in linguistic-conceptual space, is eternally “A” because it is extracted from time. However, “A” is also “not-A” when we consider time and A’s concrete embodied existence. A flower in full-bloom, for example, is both full of life (A) and withering (not-A) at the same time in the same aspect and in the same part in its in-between-ness as time is passing by. Aristotle’s preference for immaterial form rather than a composite of form and matter as the primary substance illustrates a linguistic-conceptual move, an approach to the essence of beings that misses natural beings’ suchness and their existential situatedness.3

Secondly, as illustrated earlier, the laws of non-contradiction, excluded middle, and identity are fundamentally dualistic and exclusive. Such an either-or epistemology is ultimately ego- and anthropo-centric, for it denies inter-being, inter-subjectivity, and the intrinsic relationship between self and other. In substituting the variable “A” with the first-person pronoun “I”, the law of non-contradiction stipulates “I am I; therefore, I am not not-I” where the not-I references

3 It’s worth-noting that Aristotle speaks of temporal composite substance of form and matter as the primary substance in Categories 2a11-13. However, in his Metaphysics, Aristotle changes his view and remarks that “[b]y form I mean the essence of each thing and its primary substance” (Metaphysics VII, 1032b1 in Aristotle1941a, 792).
“you, he, she, it, and they”. So too, the law of excluded middle declares that either the “I” perspective or the “others” perspective is true but not both. From the “I” perspective, the “others” always stand in opposition to the “I”. However, this insular I-thinking is divisive and fallacious. It neglects the fact that without the world (the “they”, the non-I), there is no I. It forgets that the I-subject is a being-in-the-world, not a being-outside-of-the world.

Thirdly, the dualistic-realist theory of truth coupled with the Aristotelian three laws of logic eliminates the possibility of ineffable truth; it renders the reality of indeterminacy useless. Dialectic paradoxical propositions such as “S is both P and not-P” or “S is neither P nor not-P” are often used to overcome linguistic limitations so as to describe the ineffable, where all existing terms and categories lose their descriptive power. “One chooses dialectic only when one has no other means”, as Nietzsche says (Kaufmann 1968, 467). In focusing merely on what can be parcelled out by categorical terms, the whole is reduced to the clear-cut, the either-or, and one-sidedness. Rigid binary thinking and categorical logic limits our experience of the world.

Keeping these concerns in mind, in what follows I wish to examine some alternative conceptual frameworks by looking at two traditions, Neo-Platonism and Classic Daoism, and briefly discuss their implications. There are three goals in such a comparative analysis: 1) to explore how Hellenistic and Chinese philosophies offer a shared critique of categorical-dualistic thinking from different angles, 2) to investigate how each tradition materializes non-dualism in its own system, and 3) to gather lessons on the self-other relation and environmental practices that emerge from this analysis.4

Plotinus: The One, Emanation, and Nature

The One and Emanation

Plotinus’s Neo-Platonic philosophy uniquely blends mysticism with Platoism, Stoicism, and Aristotelianism. In terms of its vocabulary and contents, Plotinus’s Enneads also shares some interesting parallels with the Daoist classic the Daodejing, which will be explored shortly in the section on Daoism. Generally speaking, the most direct entry point to Plotinian mysticism is by means of its descriptions of the One.

4 Both Kwong-loi Shun (2009) and Jana Rošker (2021) have cautioned us not to use Western models as the paradigm to read, interpret, or understand Chinese philosophy. I am mindful of such advice both in this paper and in my other comparative works.
The One is unity-in-itself and the one-and-only origin of all beings. The One (also known as “the First Primal”, the non-being preceding being, duality, and multiplicity) emanates the \textit{Nous} (the Intelligence), i.e., “the Second Primal”, which corresponds to Plato’s Demiurge, Aristotle’s Thought-Thinking-in-Itself, and the world of Being/Forms. The Intelligence (\textit{Nous}) in turn emanates the World-Soul (“the Third Primal”, the aggregate of all souls). Herein, the Three Primal Hypostases (the Divine Triad) constitute the intelligible realm that in turn emanates nature (the physical world), comprised of myriad beings (including humans, animals, plants, etc.) and matter.

Plotinus opts for an emanation account of the One in an attempt to give a less dualistic and more holistic interpretation of the origin of existence and the physical world than what his predecessors Plato and Aristotle had offered. From the non-dual One, everything emanates. As Plotinus writes:

\begin{quote}
The One is everything and not everything. It is not everything because it is the source of everything. \ldots The One \ldots has within it no multiplicity or duality whatsoever \ldots In order that being be, The One must be not being but being’s begetter. This, then, it may be said, is the primal begetting: perfect – seeking nothing, having nothing, needing nothing – The One “overflows” and its excess begets an other than itself; \ldots Image of The One, The Intelligence produces as does The One, with—like its prior—a mighty show of strength. This activity is The Soul welling up from Being, The Intelligence \ldots Contemplating its source it [The Soul] is filled and “goes out” \ldots and begets its own image: Sense and, the vegetal principle, Nature. (\textit{Enneads} V.2.1 in O’Brien 1964, 106–07)
\end{quote}

The One, like the Sun necessarily radiating its rays, emanates the Second Primal (the \textit{Nous}-Intelligence), the Third Primal (the World-Soul), and the post-primal (Nature). The World-Soul is the link between the realm of divinity (the Divine Triad) and the natural world: while the high-phase of the World-Soul contemplates its source (the One and the \textit{Nous}), the lower-phase of the World-Soul generates the entire natural world and gives life and vital powers to living beings in descending order from the higher to the lower: humans, animals, and vegetation (\textit{Enneads} IV.8, V.2). This emanation is an eternal, constant, and impersonal process. Plotinian emanation theory reminds one of chapter 42 of the \textit{Daodejing}, where one reads: “\textit{Dao} produces one. One produces two. Two produces three. Three produces the ten thousand things. (道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。)”—though important differences exist, as will be discussed in the section on Daoism.
Why must the One transcend duality and multiplicity? Enneads VI.9.1 argues: “It is by The One that all beings are beings. …, for what could exist were it not one? Not a one, a thing is not” (O’Brien 1964, 73). The logic is clear if the inquirers would begin with a reflection on the most visible objects to the human eyes—physical entities. In order to be, each physical object must possess some sort of unity that binds its composite parts together, but such unity is a derived unity, a composite unity relying on some external conditions as its cause: it is not unity-in-itself. If unity or oneness were the inherent essence of a physical object, such an object would always be one and always have existed. But such a composite entity once was not; even in its present state of being, it always exhibits the possibility of disintegration into non-being. Thus, no material substance is unity-in-itself, and its unity is derived from another. Moving up on the ontological hierarchy of beings, from bodily to non-bodily beings, neither the immaterial souls or the World-Soul (with its various faculties of desire, perception, reasoning, etc.) nor the Nous-Intelligence (the dialectic intuition accompanied by the World of Forms) is unity-in-itself, because they exhibit multiplicity in their state of being. Even “thought-thinking-in-itself” (Aristotle’s unmoved mover), Plotinus argues, is not unity-in-itself because intellection necessarily requires a consciousness that does the reflecting and a consciousness that is being reflected on: thus, Plotinus reasons, “Duality is implied if The Intelligence is both thinker and thought; it is not simple, therefore not The One” (Enneads VI.9.2 in ibid., 76). “The One, then, is not The Intelligence but higher” (Enneads VI.9.3 in ibid., 77).

Rejecting a naïve endorsement of Aristotelian logic, Plotinus states paradoxically that “being” and “non-being” are both correct predicates of the One. On the one hand, the One is “being” because it is the emanating origin of all existence and the cause of their continued state of being. Without the One, nothing exists. On the other hand, the One is also “non-being” because it is not Being in the traditional Platonic-Aristotelian sense nor is it limited as an individual particular being in the ordinary sense. Rather, the One is Being’s begetter. Thus, “The One is everything and not everything” (Enneads V.2.1 in ibid, 106): it is immanently in everything by emanation and yet not confined or equalled by anything.

**Ineffableness of the One**

Similar to Daoist critique of forms, Plotinus argues that the One is formless. A form in the traditional Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, while it actualizes a being, also limits and circumscribes the being that it forms. Form’s specificity and determinateness would undermine the One’s unlimitedness as the origin of
all that exist. The One is what it is precisely because of its indeterminacy and formlessness. Thus, Plotinus questions the adequateness of applying Aristotelian logic and categories (or any cognitive category) to The One. He writes:

The One is without form, even intelligible form. As The One begets all things, it cannot be any of them—neither thing, nor quality, nor quantity, nor intelligence, nor soul. Not in motion, nor at rest, not in space, nor in time, … it is the “without-form” preceding form, movement, and rest. (Enneads VI.9.3 in O’Brien 1964, 77)

The One is formless. Moreover, because forms as categories and names are the medium of language, the One is nameless. Strictly speaking, any label, even the word “one”, is burdensome. Plotinus cautions that names must be used with extreme care. Enneads V.5.6 warns:

It would be better not to use the word “one” at all than use it here in the positive sense, for only confusion would come of that. That word is useful solely in getting the inquiry started aright to the extent that it designates absolute simplicity. But then even this designation must be promptly eliminated, for neither it nor any other designation can be applied to what no sound can convey, what cannot be known on any hearing. (O’Brien 1964, 18)

Transcending all categories, forms, and names (all tools for conceptual knowledge), the One is unknowable. Moreover, because the very nature of conceptual knowledge is necessarily built upon a dualistic cognitive framework between the subject that knows (that which applies the concepts) and the object that is known (that which is being conceptualized), such an epistemological stance already postulates duality, thus severing the knower from the known (Enneads VI.9.11). Hence, Plotinus admonishes, “awareness of The One comes to us neither by knowing nor by the pure thought that discovers the other intelligible things”, “but by a presence transcending knowledge. … Therefore, we must go beyond knowledge and hold to unity. We must renounce knowing and knowable, every object of thought” (Enneads VI.9.4 in O’Brien 1964, 78). Only through virtue and dialectic, the purified soul—purged of all traces of the ego-self that fixate on the “I” and duality—by its divine love can experience the final rapture like a lover becoming “oned” with the beloved, the One (Enneads I.2, I.3, VI.9.9 and VI.9.11).

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5 See, e.g., Enneads V.1.7.
6 See also Enneads VI.9.5.
The Problem of Matter and Body

As demonstrated above, Plotinian emanation theory advances a less dualistic ontology when compared with Plato’s rigid two-world metaphysics and Aristotle’s categorical logic. Another philosophical point is worth noting. Plotinus also strongly rejects Gnosticism’s teaching that matter and the material world are evil by nature, which is critically important in one’s ecological attitude toward nature.

To combat the Gnostic teaching on matter, Plotinus describes matter as that which is “potentially anything” and “everything” though not yet (Enneads II.5.1 in Armstrong 1966b, 155; II.5.5 in ibid., 167): it is the “absolutely formless” (Enneads I.8.3 in ibid., 285), the “simple” (Enneads II.4.8 in ibid., 123), the “ind finiteness” (Enneads II.4.11 in ibid., 133, 135; III.4.1, Armstrong, 1967, 143), and the “receptacle” of forms (Enneads III.6.13 in ibid., 263–65). Matter in its inchoate state is devoid of all quality and form. But if matter is devoid of all quality and form, Plotinus asks, how can matter be evil? For if “evil” is a quality, formless quality-less matter cannot be evil by having such a quality. Alternatively, perhaps, “it is Evil not in the sense of having Quality but, precisely, in not having it” (Enneads I.8.10 in MacKenna 1991, 66). In other words, we call something “evil” not because it has certain inherent quality but because it is not properly formed. If so, then evil is not some sort of substance; rather, evil is the lack of properly constituted form. If this line of logic holds—that evil is understood as “absence” (privation or negation of form) rather than some self-standing quality or substance, then “there will be no self-existent evil” (not even matter). For the reason that absence or negation cannot exist on its own, it can only reside in something that allows negation, just as blindness cannot exist on its own but is the absence of sight in the eye (Enneads I.8.11).

Apart from analysing the nature of evil, Plotinus also provides a causal argument in defence of the goodness or at least the neutrality of matter. Since matter emanates from the One, the Good, and the effect must resemble its cause in some degree, Plotinus argues that matter cannot be an evil substance because it shares some characteristics of the One (the Good). Figuratively speaking, matter represents where the dimmest light was present (Enneads I.6, V.2; VI.9). While distancing itself from both atomistic materialism and Gnosticism, Plotinus’s Neo-Platonic account of matter gave arguably one of the more positive assessment of matter and nature in ancient Hellenistic traditions (Pang-White and White 2001). It has profoundly influenced Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas in later times.
Nonetheless, Plotinus made a fateful turn in his transition from ontology to ethics. Still bound by dualistic thinking, he divides virtues into two categories: the lower and the higher. Lower virtues refer to Aristotelian civic virtues. Civic virtues consider the proper relation between the soul and the body and aim to make a human being a better person by moderating desires and passions and avoiding vices. By contrast, higher virtues refer to the Platonic-Stoic virtues. High virtues consider the soul-in-itself apart from the body. Higher virtues aim to make a person like the divine by completely separating the soul from the body and suppressing all bodily desires, for “the soul is evil to the extent that it is ‘mingled’ with the body, in sympathy with it and judges in accord with it” (Enneads I.2.3 in O’Brien 1964, 113). Take the example of temperance, the difference is between “a [lower] temperance that provides bounds only to the desires” and “a [higher] temperance that suppresses them completely”. Hence, for a person who possesses the higher virtue,

[H]e does not limit temperance to the control of pleasure, but, to the extent that it is possible, he is completely isolated from the body. In a word he does not live the life of one who, according to civic virtue, is a good man. He forsakes that life and chooses another in its place, the life of the gods, for his wish is to become like to the gods and not to good men. Likeness to good men is likeness of one image to another image that comes from the same model. But likeness to God is likeness to the model itself. (Enneads I.2.7 in O’Brien 1964, 117)

A Plotinian sage is one who takes “the flight of the lone to the Alone”, turning away from the world in a solitary flight marked by “detachment from all things here below, scorn of all earthly pleasures” (Enneads VI.9.11 in ibid., 88).

Such an assessment of the physical world, body, and matter reveals Plotinus’ ambivalent attitude toward the natural world. In fact, he noted, “[l]ife here below in the midst of sense objects is for the soul a degradation, an exile, a loss of wings”. The soul falls when it enters human birth, resides in a human body, and “exchanges (as if deceived by the false promises of an adulterous lover) its divine love for the one that is mortal” (VI.9.9 in ibid., 85–86). Although in his ontology of matter Plotinus takes a relatively positive stand toward nature, nonetheless in his virtue ethics the bodily is still regarded as a temptation and a hindrance to enlightenment. Such is the Plotinian contradiction.

Moreover, this paradox continues when we juxtapose the vocabulary used in describing matter and the One in the Enneads. We find some interesting parallels, as shown in the following table.
The difference between matter and the One is duly noted. For example, matter is non-being in the sense that it is not yet formed and is posterior to form, whereas the One is non-being in the sense that it precedes/transcends all forms. Nonetheless, if indeterminateness is what distinguishes the One from all other existents and it is by means of indeterminateness that the One is fertile, why could not the indeterminacy of matter be useful in training the mind in preparation for one’s ascent to the One? Nothingness/no-thingness or indeterminacy—whether taken physically, as in formless matter, or spiritually, as in the formless One—can be a fruitful link that provides a unified holistic view of the Universe, a world that operates in a circular motion of emanation and return (from the One to nature, and from Nature back to the One). Such a logic of “indeterminacy” or “nothingness/no-thingness” creates a space where possibilities/becomings can take place. However, Plotinus did not take this route. Incapable of fully escaping dualism’s grip, Plotinus’ stand on non-duality and indeterminacy suffers from inconsistency—it perpetuates an unhealthy condescending attitude towards matter, nature, and the physical world. Could Daoist philosophy, which shares some resemblance with Plotinian emanation, as noted earlier, provide us with some insight on this front?

### Daoism: Dao, Emanation, and Nature

**Dao: Formless and Nameless Origin of all Things**

Like the *Enneads*, many scholars have regarded the *Daodejing* 道德經 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, two classic Daoist texts dated back to the fourth to sixth centuries BCE, as classics of mysticism. Similar to the Plotinian One, the ineffable dao is at the centre of Daoist philosophy and practice. In chapter 25, one reads:
Something unformed and yet complete,  
Exists before Heaven and Earth.  
Soundless and formless,  
Standing alone and unchanging,  
Pervades all thing without stopping,  
It is like the mother of all under Heaven.  
I don’t know its name.  
I call it dao.  
If forced to give it a name, I call it the Great. (My translation)⁷
有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，
可以為天下母。吾不知其名，字之曰道，強為之名曰大。

This formless and nameless dao is the origin of all existents. Burton Watson notes  
that in Daoist writings dao refers to “a metaphysical first principle that embraces  
and underlies all being, a vast Oneness that precedes and in some mysterious  
manner generates the endlessly diverse forms of the world. Ultimately, as the Tao  
Te Ching [Daodejing] stresses, tao [dao] lies beyond the power of language to  
describe” (Addiss and Lombardo 1993, xiii).

How does this dao generate the myriad things? In terms reminiscent of the Plo-  
tinian ontology, the Daodejing (= DDJ) speaks of the Daoist emanation process  
in chapters 1, 40, and 42:

_Dao_ called _dao_ is not the constant _dao_.  
Names can name no lasting names.  
Non-Being [the Nameless] is the beginning of Heaven and Earth.  
Being [the Named] is the mother of all myriad things.⁸  
Hence let there always be non-being so as to observe its subtlety;  
let there always be being so as to see its effect.  
The two come from the same source but have different names.  
Both are called mysterious.  
Mysterious and further mysterious,  
the gateway to all subtlety. (DDJ, chapter 1) (my translation)

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⁷ I have benefited from consulting Addiss’s and Lombardo’s translation (1993) and Chan’s translation (1963).

⁸ Depending on whether the punctuation is placed after the first characters "wu 無" and "you 有" or  
after the first two characters "wu ming 無名" and "you ming 有名", these two lines of text (無名  
天地之始，有名萬物之母) may also be translated as “The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and  
Earth. The Named is the mother of all things.” Here, I adopted the first way of punctuating the text.
道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。無名天地之始。有名萬物之母。故常無欲，以觀其妙；常有欲，以觀其徼。此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，眾妙之門。

All myriad things under Heaven originate from being.
Being originates from non-being. (DDJ, chapter 40) (my translation)
天下萬物生於有，有生於無。

Dao produces one.
One produces two.
Two produces three.
Three produces all myriad things.
All myriad things carry yin and embrace yang,
Blending their qi to achieve harmony.
(DDJ, chapter 42) (my translation)
道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

Three observations may be drawn from the above passages:

(a) The Daoist description, “Non-Being [the Nameless] is the beginning of Heaven and Earth. / Being [the Named] is the mother of all things”, resonates with the Plotinian idea that the ineffable ONE (the formless, nameless Non-being) is the origin of Being (Nous and forms) and the rest of the world. For both Neo-Platonism and Daoism, the formless and nameless is superior to that which has form and name.

(b) Chapter 42’s descriptors, “one”, “two”, “three”, and “ten thousand things”, suggest a phased emanation process of the world flowing from the first principle, dao. It has a prima facie similarity to the Plotinian emanation of the One, The Nous-Intelligence, the World-Soul, and the Post-Primal Nature.

(c) However, unlike the transcendent Plotinian One, the Daoist “One” in chapter 42 refers to the undifferentiated qi, immanent in the world that branches out to yin and yang, as evidenced by the latter part of the verse. Thus, the Daoist emanation process, with its marked emphasis on immanence, reads more like: “Dao produces one (qi). One (qi) produces two (yin and yang). Two (yin and yang) produces three (blending of yin and yang). Three (blending of yin and yang) produces all myriad beings. All myriad beings carry yin and embrace yang, blending their qi to achieve harmony.”
Dao and the World

What is qi? There are a number of English translations of the term including “material force”, “vital breath”, and “psycho-physical energy”, among others. None of these translations, however, fully capture the complexity of qi.9 The picto-ideogram of qi offers us some clues. Qi 氣 consists of two radicals: “氣” on the top depicting layers of clouds/mist, “米” at the bottom symbolizing the plants of rice in the field. When the two radicals (氣 + 米) are coupled, 氣 conveys the image of dimly visible steam produced from cooking rice and its subtle existential meaning of the energy that sustains life. When used with other adjectives, qi denotes multiple interrelated phenomena. For example, yun qi 雲氣 means clouds or mist in the sky, kong qi 空氣 the air, tian qi 天氣 weather, di qi 地氣 earth energy, sheng qi 生氣 life-energy, jing qi 精氣 refined spirit-essence, etc. The multiple uses of the word qi in diverse contexts ranging from meteorology to life-energy suggest that qi is an important link between dao and all beings, both living and non-living.10

In its unfolding, qi further differentiates into yin qi 陰氣 and yang qi 陽氣. Thus, chapter 42 of the Daodejing continues with the following verse: “All myriad things carry yin and embrace yang. / Blending qi to achieve harmony”. All things come into being through the interaction, blending, and harmonization of qi. While the Daodejing does not provide a further description of yin and yang, the characteristics of yin and yang are further elucidated in the Zhuangzi.11 In “The Way of Heaven (Tian Dao 天道)” chapter, Zhuangzi identifies yin with the quiet, soft, and darker energy, and yang with the active, strong, and bright force (Zhuangzi, chapter 13). One also reads in the “Sir Square Field” (Tian Zi Fang 田子方) chapter, “The ultimate yin is austere; the ultimate yang is dazzling. Austerity comes from Earth and dazzlement issues from Heaven. When these two are in communication, harmony is achieved, and things are born (至陰肅肅，至陽赫赫；肅肅出乎天，赫赫發乎地；兩者交通成和而物生焉)” (Zhuangzi, chapter 21; Mair 1994, 202).

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9 As Chung-ying Cheng points out, “all existing translations conceal and obscure the rich experiential structure of meaning in the concept of ch'i [qi]” (Cheng 1986, 362).
10 For more, see e.g., Ann A. Pang-White (2009). I have benefited greatly from Chen Guying’s 陳鼓應 (2005) excellent article on Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s contribution to the development of the philosophy of Dao and qi in Chinese philosophy.
11 The “Ten Commentarial Texts (Shiyi 十翼)” of the Yijing 易經 (Classic of Changes) also discuss the meaning of yin and yang. However, because the Yijing is often regarded as one of the “Five Classics (Wujing 五經)” in the Confucian tradition and the complexity of the text is far beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, in order to better focus my discussion in this paper I will bypass the Yijing and only use classic Daoist texts.
12 The Tian Dao chapter quotes Zhuangzi (aka Chuang Tzu) as saying, “In stillness, he shares the same virtue as yin; in movement, he shares the same current as yang (靜而與陰同德，動而與陽同波)” (Mair 1994, 121).
“Knowledge Wanders North (Zhi Bei You 知北遊)” chapter summarizes the coming together of *yin* and *yang* as the beginning of all existence, including human life, and the relativity of life and death, beauty and ugliness, as the natural rhythm of the world that is respected by the wise:

Human life is the coalescence of vital breath [*qi*]. When it coalesces, there is life; when it dissipates there is death. Since life and death are disciples of each other, how should I be troubled by them? Thus, the myriad things are a unity. What makes the one beautiful is its spirit and wonder; what makes the other loathsome is its stench and putrefaction. But stench and putrefaction evolve into spirit and wonder, and spirit and wonder evolve once again into stench and putrefaction. Therefore, it is said, “A unitary vital breath [*qi*] pervades all under Heaven.” Hence the sage values unity. (*Zhuangzi*, chapter 22; Mair 1994, 212)

To speak of *dao* as a unitary *qi* that “pervades all under heaven” leads us to an important point regarding how the Daoist *dao* differs from the Plotinian One. As *qi*, *dao* is intimately related to nature and the physical world in a deep way. Because *dao* as *qi* “pervades all under Heaven”, there is a mutual resonance between nature, humans, and the spirit world. Nature is not simply a standing reserve, a lifeless being, but a dynamic living source that is coextensive with world and essential to the physical and spiritual health of humanity.\(^{13}\) As the last verse of chapter 25 in the *Daodejing* says emphatically:

- Humanity models after Earth.
- Earth models after Heaven.
- Heaven models after *dao*.

And *dao* models after nature/the natural. *(My translation)*\(^ {14} \)


\(^{14}\) *Ziran* 自然 may be interpreted in multiple ways: the natural, the self-so, or nature. Here I adopt Wing-Tsit Chan’s translation of *ziran* as “nature.”
Note how a non-hierarchical circular pattern is described here in chapter 25. To further break down the dichotomy of the spiritual versus the mundane, human versus nature, being vs. non-being, usefulness vs. uselessness, the Daodejing deploys abundant metaphors, symbols, and similes from the physical world and the ordinary to illustrate paradigmatic Daoist virtues. Vacuity, valley, female, animal, water, ravine, grass, etc.—the elements traditionally viewed by society as the weaker ones in binary oppositional pairs of opposites—are all invested with potent symbolism in the Daodejing. One reads:

Is the space between Heaven and Earth not like a bellows (tuo yue 袋籥)? Vacuous yet inexhaustible.
In movement it generates even more. (DDJ, chapter 5, my translation)
天地之間，其猶橐籥乎? 虛而不屈，動而愈出。

Note how by conventional norm a lowly insignificant bellows is elevated to symbolize the generative force of Heaven and Earth. The usefulness of seemingly useless empty space is repeated in chapter 11:

Clay is moulded to make a utensil.
It is in its emptiness
That it has the use of a utensil. (DDJ, chapter 11, my translation)
埏埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。

In a similar vein, in chapter 6 the hiddenness of a valley and the female womb (as opposed to the ostentation of a mountain-top or the male phallic organ) is brought to the foreground as metaphors of enigmatic generative force of the universe.

The spirit of the valley (gu sheng 谷神) never dies;
It may be called the mysterious female (xuan pin 玄牝).
The gate of the mysterious female is the root of Heaven and Earth.
Its existence is dimly visible.
Yet its use is never exhausted. (DDJ, chapter 6, my translation)
谷神不死，是謂玄牝。玄牝之門，是謂天地根。綿綿若存，用之不勤。

Note too how the Daodejing takes pain in using “xuan pin 玄牝” here (pin 牝 = a female ox) to represent the all-encompassing female generative power (again in chapters 55 and 61), rather than using the word “mu 母” (a vocabulary often used in human context) from chapters 1, 20, 25, 52, and 59, in order to break down the
hierarchical “human vs. animal” dichotomy. Another noted female symbol is “ci 雌” (a female bird), appearing in chapters 10 and 28.

In addition to being like the female, the Daodejing also makes use of water, another important symbol from nature, to advise how humans can come close to the dao by humbling themselves:

Best to be like water (shui 水).
   Water benefits all things but does not compete.
   It dwells in [lowly] places that all people despise.
   That is why it is so close to dao. (DDJ, chapter 8, my translation)

上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭，處衆人之所惡，故幾於道。

Colourless, tasteless, inconspicuous, and ordinary, water does not compete with other liquids for the spotlight, and yet it is essential to sustain life. Like the dao, water naturally flows downward, taking a humble place. It sustains and nurtures all beings non-discriminatory, staying in the background without boasting its merits. And yet, this is exactly where its greatness lies.\(^{15}\)

Utilizing the symbol of grass (cao 草), another humble and often overlooked element from nature, to highlight the Daoist lesson of the reversal of opposites and the strength and use of weakness (e.g., chapter 40), the Daodejing reminds us that:

All things, grass as well as trees, are soft and tender when alive;
   They are withered and dry when dead.
   Therefore, the hard and the strong are the companion of death;
   The soft and the weak are the companion of life.
   The army that is strong will not win.
   The trees that are sturdy will be cut down.
   The strong and the big are inferior.
   The soft and the weak are superior. (DDJ, chapter 76, my translation).

萬物草木之生也柔脆，其死也枯槁。故堅強者死之徒，柔弱者生之徒。是以兵強則不勝，木強則共[兵]。強大處下，柔弱處上。

Only when one resonates with nature’s subtle lesson of flexibility and gentleness and let go of the habitual domination of the world will one enjoy a long life and is in accord with the dao. In the same vein, we read in the “Heaven and Earth (Tiandi 天地)” chapter of the Zhuangzi:

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15 According to the Chu bamboo-slip text “The Great One Births Water” (Taiyi sheng shui 太一生水), dao (the Great One) hides (thus reveals) itself in water. (Nelson 2021, 7)
Being one with the beginning, one becomes vacuous (hsü, receptive to all), and being vacuous, one becomes great. One will then be united with the sound and breath of things (he hui ming合喙鳴). When one is united with the sound and breath of things, one is then united with the universe. The unity is intimate and seems to be stupid and foolish. This is called profound and secret virtue; this is complete harmony. (Zhuangzi, chapter 12; Chan 1963, 202, emphasis added).

Zhuangzi often personifies natural elements (e.g., Kun fish, Peng bird, Shadow Jing, Uncle River, the Spirit of the North Sea Ruo, the Wind) as important conversation partners in his parables, many times as unexpected teachers of dao. Similarly, here Zhuangzi purposely uses “hui ming 喙鳴”—“hui 喙” literally means “the beak of a bird or the snout of an animal” and “ming 嘯” the sound of birds—to convey the sound and breath of all beings (not just humans), in an attempt to knock down our habitual human-centric way of thinking.\(^{16}\)

Observations and Preliminary Conclusion

As demonstrated above, both Daoist and Plotinian philosophies value the nameless. Both effectively problematize a certain realist theory of language and concomitant linguistic mapping of reality that together narrow our perspective of the world. Yet, at the same time, we find that Daoism is more consistent than the Plotinian theory in its rejection of the polar opposition of the spiritual vs. the physical. After all, if emanation entails that the cause is immanent in its effects, then even the least effect of the One, e.g., matter and the physical world (however remotely it is from its source), ought to be considered as manifestations of the One, endowed with positive functions, not just something recalcitrant—an evil best to be avoided or grudgingly tolerated if unavoidable.

The consistency of the Daoist ontology and ethics may be attributed in part to its thoroughgoing rejection of the either-or dualism. Daoism’s trademark philosophy of “mutual production of opposites” is expressed in several places in the Daoist classic Daodejing. One reads, for example, “being and non-being generate one another (有無相生 youwu xiangsheng)” (DDJ, chapter 2) and “reversal is the movement of dao (反者道之動 fanzhe daozhidong)” (DDJ, chapter 40, my

translation), to cite just two examples. It is not simply that non-being produces being, or being produces non-being, unidirectionally. Rather, it is that being and non-being (like yin and yang) mutually generate each other in a non-hierarchical bi-directional cyclic process of change. Since every and each thing-event is situated in this all-encompassing cyclical network of change that affects all, a being is never a static thing that has actualized itself once for all. Rather, every being is an event that always exists in a state of both A and not-A, in a process of becoming. Such becoming is not merely diachronically in a linear sense of coming-into-being and going-out-of-existence, but also synchronically in its totality of being-in-relations, intrinsically tied to all other beings and conditions. The non-I is in the I and the I is in the non-I. From a multi-perspectival (non-ego-centric) view, there is neither a permanent self nor a permanent other. We are both the self and the other (A and ~A) simultaneously. There is not one permanent centre but many centres in this great net of beings. As paradoxical as it may seem, Zhuangzi elucidates:

There is nothing that is not the “that” and there is nothing that is not the “this”. Things do not know that they are the “that” of other things; they only know what they themselves know. Therefore, I say that the “that” is produced by the “this” and the “this” is also caused by the “that”. This is the theory of mutual production. … Because of the right, there is the wrong, and because of the wrong, there is the right. Therefore, the sage does not proceed along these lines…. The “this” is also the “that”. The “that” is also the “this”. … When “this” and “that” have no opposites, there is the very axis of Tao [dao]. Only when the axis occupies the centre of a circle can things in their infinite complexities be responded to. The right is an infinity. The wrong is also an infinity. Therefore I say that there is nothing better than to use the light (of nature). (Zhuangzi, chapter 2; Chan, 1963, 182–83)

物無非彼，物無非是。自彼則不見，自知則知之。故曰：彼出於是，是亦因彼。彼是方生之說也。… 因是因非，因非因是。是以聖人不由… 是亦彼也，彼亦是也。… 彼是莫得其偶，謂之道樞。樞始得其環中，以應無窮。是亦一無窮，非亦一無窮也。故曰「莫若以明」。

In this non-dualistic logic (“this” = “that”, A = ~A, self = others), when coupled with the ontology of qi, neither dao nor humanity can regard itself as being-outside-of-nature (the centre lies beyond and outside of the net of beings) because nature (the physical world, the other) is an intrinsic part of the self in the totality
of relations. In contrast, the Plotinian problem stems from construing the One (as well as the other Primal Hypostases) as being-outside-of-nature rather than being-in-nature. Dualistic logic is at bottom exclusive and oppositional. The Plotinian problem of matter and nature remains irreconcilable in an emanation theory that is mired in dualism.

Therefore, although both Plotinian and Daoist philosophies are successful in showing the problem of categorical logic and naming, an intellectual critique is itself insufficient in reverencing a thing-event as a thing-event in its totality, in its concrete “suchness”. What is also needed is an attitudinal change that views a thing-event not simply as an abstract extracted entity frozen in time, but as a phenomenon-in-the-making, constantly transformed by time, nature, and matrices of meanings of multiple worlds. In materializing such a de-centred non-dualist multi-universe stance in its respective ontology and ethics, the Daoist philosophy fares better than the Plotinian philosophy and has much to offer us in contemporary ecological considerations.

The eco-feminist Karen Warren, in her “Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections”, argues forcefully that hierarchical dualism produces “a logic of domination” that oppresses both the non-human natural world and women. She writes,

Eco-feminists take as their central project the unpacking of the connections between the twin oppressions of women and nature. Central to this project is a critique of the sort of thinking which sanctions that oppression…. A patriarchal conceptual framework is characterized by value-hierarchical thinking…. Such patriarchal value-hierarchical thinking gives rise to a logic of domination, … Eco-feminists assume that patriarchal value-hierarchical thinking supports the sort of “either-or” thinking which generates normative dualisms, i.e., thinking in which the disjunctive terms (or sides of the dualism) are seen as exclusive (rather than inclusive) and oppositional (rather than complementary), and where higher value or superiority is attributed to one disjunct (or, side of the dualism) than the other. It, thereby, conceptually separates as opposites aspects of reality that in fact are inseparable or complementary; e.g., it opposes human to nonhuman, mind to body, self to other, reason to emotion. (Warren 1987, 6–7)

To redeem the Earth and women, “Eco-feminism, therefore, encourages us to think ourselves out of ‘patriarchal conceptual traps,’ by reconceptualizing ourselves and our relation to the nonhuman natural world in nonpatriarchal ways” (ibid., 7).

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17 The terminology of “being-in-nature” vs. “being-outside-of-nature” are borrowed from Nagatomo (2010, 206–07).
Moreover, to correct the modern West’s technological domination and instrumental conception of nature that have hastened climate change and triggered worsening environmental crises, the deep ecologist Arne Naess credits Daoism along with other religions for their insights and advocates an “Ecosophy” with eight principles that would require a total overhaul of an anthropocentric thinking paradigm in favour of a bio-centric consciousness that would embrace the intrinsic values of nonhuman life and the ecosphere (Naess 1986). In line with Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions address the importance of this philosophical and attitudinal change in the following terms:

In keeping with the spiritual traditions of many of the world’s religions, the deep ecology norm of Self-Realization goes beyond the modern Western self which is defined as an isolate ego … This socially programmed sense of the narrow self or social self dislocates us … Spiritual growth … begins when we cease to understand or see ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans … But the deep ecology sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world. (Devall and Sessions 1985, 66–67)

Eric Nelson, in his recent book, *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life*, traces the notion of the good and argues that Daoist philosophy, in contrast with Hellenistic philosophy, gives rise to an anti-moralist and nature-centred view of the good. Such a perspective of the good is a fruitful ground for developing a new, non-coercive Daoist-inspired therapeutic restorative ecology that connects cosmological, bio-spiritual, and bio-political considerations, a new ecology that is able to address the devastating contemporary environmental crises that arise from the problematic “Anthropocene”. As he observes:

A preliminary indication is found in the *Daodejing*, chapter eight, where the highest good is not described as a form or an idea: it is like water (*shangshan ruo shui* 上善若水) in that it benefits (nourishes) the myriad things without contention (*shui shanli wanwu er buzheng* 水善利萬物而不爭). … In this vision of the good attributed to Laozi, one works with the myriad things and turns none away …, and, without needing to do so or coercing them, supports the functioning of their own nature or that which is as it is … As is evident in this preliminary sketch of the nature-oriented and anti-moralistic language of the good in the *Daodejing*, the attempt to answer the Socratic question by turning to Daoist
sources … could potentially, … , (1) lead to an alternative understanding of the natural world and practice than the ones articulated in dominant Western philosophical discourses and (2) indicate exemplars and models that could address problems arising from our precarious ecological situation and the intensifying contemporary environmental crisis-tendencies – generated by human social-economic activities – of catastrophic climate-chaos, the relentless overuse and destruction of entire habitats and species, and the detrimental effects of massive quantities and deadlier forms of pollution. (Nelson 2021, 7)

The Anthropocene is an ecological and existential dead end. Environmental abuse and destruction, like any other form of oppression, has its root in the dualistic either-or top-down “logic of domination”. Let us think: why are we unable to slow down the massive environmental deterioration that is still ongoing despite more than 100 years of conservation efforts since the late 19th century? It is evident that we must change our conceptual framework. Instead of perpetuating the either-or (dualistic, anthropocentric, patriarchal) logic of exclusion as an unquestionable truth, let us replace it with an inclusive, non-binary, non-oppositional logic of “both-and”. To put a stop to the rapidly worsening ecological conditions and their devastating impacts on all forms of life, it is time to engage in deep reflection and questioning, and Daoist philosophy provides us with a good alternative model for moving forward in this context.

References


