

Boundary of the Sky: Environmentalism, Daoism, and the Logic of Increase

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Abstract

There are three good reasons why Daoism is a bad candidate for addressing contemporary environmental issues. First, the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* do not contain a concept of “nature” akin to ours today. Second, the philosophies of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* are anything but revolutionary in spirit—and we need some revolutions. Finally, we need big changes from the top, and early Chinese thinkers did not conceive of political institutions in the way that we have them. Despite these reasons, or perhaps precisely because of them, early Daoist attitudes can provide insightful resources for reflecting on some of our most unreflected upon attitudes. In particular, the need for growth in nearly all areas of society is taken as a given, or even necessity, for our way of life. And while environmentalism and climate change are complex and tricky issues, growth has been identified by many as a common denominator when figuring out exactly what needs to change. This paper argues that if we shift our focus from seeking to find environmental concerns in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* to philosophizing with these texts, then we can reflect on our environmental issues in interesting ways. To this end I will present “not contending” (不爭) “awareness of contentment” (知足), “not acting for” (無為) and “according to itself” (自然) as key Daoist attitudes which steer our thinking away from growth and along trajectories which can help human systems be better synchronized with non-human ones.

Keywords: environmentalism, climate change, Daoism, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*

Meja neba: okoljevarstvo, daoizem in logika naraščanja

Izvleček

Obstajajo trije dobri razlogi, zakaj je daoizem slab kandidat za reševanje sodobnih okoljskih vprašanj. Prvič, *Laozi* in *Zhuangzi* ne vsebujeta koncepta »narave«, kot ga razumemo danes. Drugič, filozofiji *Laozija* in *Zhuangzija* sta vse prej kot revolucionarni po duhu – mi pa potrebujemo nekaj revolucij. Nazadnje, velike spremembe potrebujemo od zgoraj, zgodnji kitajski misleci pa si političnih institucij niso predstavljali tako, kakor so poznane nam. Kljub tem razlogom ali pa morda prav zaradi njih lahko zgodnje daoistične drže zagotavljajo pronicljive vire za razmislek o nekaterih naših najbolj nereflektiranih

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držah. Zlasti potreba po rasti na skoraj vseh družbenih področjih se nam zdi samoumevna ali celo nujna za naš način življenja. In čeprav sta okoljevarstvo in podnebne spremembe kompleksni in kočljivi vprašanji, so mnogi pri ugotavljanju, kaj točno je treba spremeniti, prepoznali rast kot skupni imenovalec. V tem prispevku zagovarjamo tezo, da lahko o naših okoljskih vprašanjih razmišljamo na zanimive načine, če se preusmerimo od iskanja okoljskih vprašanj v *Laoziju* in *Zhuangziju* k filozofiranju s pomočjo teh besedil. V ta namen bom predstavil »nekonfliktnost« (不爭), »zavedanje zadovoljstva« (知足), »odsotnost delovanja« (無為) in »samo po sebi« (自然) kot ključne daoistične drže, ki usmerjajo naše razmišljanje stran od rasti in po poteh, ki lahko pomagajo človeškim sistemom k boljši usklajenosti z nečloveškimi sistemi.

Ključne besede: okoljevarstvo, podnebne spremembe, daoizem, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*

Introduction

We should begin by noting that climate change is a most, if not the most, serious issue facing today's world. Academic reflections, political discussions "blah, blah, blah". Hopefully, not so much, but perhaps. Greta Thunberg's verbal lambaste of politicians, leaders, and those who have the power to actually change things as amounting to no more than "blah, blah, blah", is worth keeping in mind. Hopefully, we are not just spinning so many wheels. Hopefully, some of our reflections have real world consequences. Graham Parkes is an excellent example of someone whose cross-cultural concern for climate change is not just so much "blah, blah, blah". His devotion to this issue is admirable, and his contribution to the current volume contains much advice for action. We should all pay attention to his words.

Nevertheless, philosophical Daoism,¹ which this special volume promises to emphasize, is a bad candidate for addressing environmentalism for at least three reasons. First, in early Chinese thought there is no concept of "nature" akin to what we common mean by this word today. This topic has been written about already, and is largely uncontroversial.² Though not completely damning, rec-

1 In the context of this article "Daoism" will refer to the received versions of the *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 莊子. For this discussion textual issues related to authorship and various versions, as well as the use of the label "Daoism" will be ignored because they are not pertinent to the arguments. As will be defined below, this paper is "tradition-focused" and emphasizes philosophical interpretations of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as they developed in the Chinese commentarial tradition. Similarly, religious Daoism will not be discussed. Truly, this tradition might have different resources and perhaps more familiar notions of nature and the environment. For more on this see Chen, Chen and Chen (2010).

2 For a detailed discussion of relevant concepts, including *ziran*, *tian*, *wanwu*, *dao* and others, see D'Ambrosio (2013). By "lack of controversy" I mean that while some people have glossed the abovementioned terms as "nature" in a contemporary sense, there is no good argument for that

ognizing that early Chinese thinkers did not view the “environment” the way we do means that our approach should be altered—and that is probably a good thing. Rather than suggesting that establishing a connection with nature, or a concern for the environment, was on the minds of early Chinese thinkers, we can switch our approach to see how we can think *with* them in productive ways.³ Second, the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* are not exactly the best resources for mobilizing revolutions or enticing people to act in certain ways. Faced with the climate crisis, we need people to take a firm stand, to demand changes of others, to be upset with institutions, to voice their resentment, and put-up noble fights. As will be demonstrated below, these trajectories are, in some ways, not exactly congruent with key Daoist ideas.⁴ Third, these texts never imagined the political schemes we find the world over today. The *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* may be read as advice for political leaders, have been influential for hermetic tendencies, and contain keen coping mechanisms for anyone living within society. However, the role Daoism has to play in democratic policy-making in liberal systems is a strange and difficult (if not far-fetched) question.⁵

These issues notwithstanding, and at the real risk of being just more “blah, blah, blah”, this article explores climate change and Daoism from a very particular angle. There are many avenues which could be productively explored when philosophizing *with* the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. The ideas contained in these texts are far-reaching and can help us think about a wide variety of issues. Like any great guides for reflection, this does not always mean the outcome will be what we expect, or what we want. But if we want to think about particular issues, we can

claim—in fact, they often refer to “nature” in early Daoism without any discussion of what this means, or how it is different or similar from “nature” today. Others who promote Daoism as environmentalism, including the special editor of this volume, Eric Nelson (2022), readily admit that these early Daoist terms and contemporary notions of “nature” are significantly different. However, as noted above, in religious Daoism we might find alternative understandings that better fit today’s conceptions of nature. For a broader discussion focused on the *Zhuangzi* and directly targeting the idea of “Eastern wisdom” being able to unlock some key to nature, see Goldin (2005).

- 3 This point has been elaborated on in terms of technology and knowledge, see Allen (2010).
- 4 It has long been argued that Daoism, even in its most socially and politically affirming interpretations, does not suggest people make specific requests of modifying socio-political institutions, Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (1983; 2020) and Yang Guorong 楊國榮 (2009), for example, both describe the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as relatively “passive” in this regard, especially when compared to Confucian texts such as the *Lunyu* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子, or *Xunzi* 荀子. Indeed, Daoism has often been synonymous with hermetic thinking. But even Wang Bi 王弼 (d. 249) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312), who wrote the most influential commentaries on the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, respectively, and who see these texts as thoroughly political, do not think they inspire people to make demands about specific socio-political policies or institutions.
- 5 Discussion of Confucianism and democracy have been quite popular in recent years, while discussions of Daoism and democracy are relatively rare.

turn to these texts and see what they might provide in the way of tools for philosophizing and reformulating them. With environmentalism in mind, we might hone in on growth, or “the logic of increase”: the necessity of acceleration in nearly all social systems, which bows only to the dollar. Daoist texts explicitly reject the desire to increase in many areas. They expound alternatives and poetic warnings of the dangers associated with “increase” in all its nefarious forms: in contention, in feeding desires, in acting for predetermined goals which one is overly attached to, and in ignoring the innate contentment of following one’s natural tendencies.

To this end, this paper will take “environmentalism” and climate change in a broad sense, and will take the problematic aspects revolving around growth, acceleration, and the logic of increase as worthwhile when communicating with Daoist sources. The main argument is that if the logic of increase is a major factor in climate change, then Daoism can be a great resource for thinking about reconstructing our social systems, our interactions, and ourselves in ways that will entail better relationships among humans, and between humans and nature. Climate change is an incredibly complex issue, and while most agree that it is a huge problem there are various ways to classify exactly what has gone wrong, what needs to be changed, and how. It is not possible, nor would it even be useful, to tackle this issue in a single research paper. On this side, I will thus rely mainly on Hartmut Rosa’s notions of acceleration and the “logic of increase” and Clive Hamilton’s related “growth fetish” (be careful when you google that term). Rosa touches upon environmentalism in some places, but is not focused on it. Hamilton directly addresses environmentalism, and his work helps draw Rosa’s into a productive dialogue with Daoism. The treatment of Daoism will be populated by discussions of the following five concepts or attitudes: *buzheng* 不爭 or “not contending”, *zhizu* 知足 or “awareness of contentment”, *wuwei* 無為 or “not acting for”, and *ziran* 自然 or “according to itself”.⁶ In discussing Daoism, I will rely heavily on the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. Major commentators, both traditional and contemporary, will be referenced as insightful and authoritative voices. They are valid insofar as they are useful in appreciating context, drawing out unanticipated connections, and presenting the unfamiliar.

A Methodological Note

Plainly speaking, before environmentalism was brought to Daoism no one else in the long and illustrious history of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* studies found

6 There are many other viable renderings of these terms, and my translations are curated to fit the aims of this paper.

environmentalist concerns in these texts. Contemporary academia, especially in the West, does not really allow this to be a “reason”. But this kind of thinking is exactly how academia functioned and continues to function in China. Despite signalling the virtues of diversity and inclusion as loudly and as capaciously as possible, actually including another way of philosophizing is certainly not welcome in many academic circles in the West. The theme of this special issue—ecology and the environment in Asia—has been read into the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* hundreds of times in the last seventy or so years, and the fact that no one else had done so in the over 2,000-year history of commentary, scholarship, and various types of art inspired by these texts is not only ignored, but actually not even known by many who boast specialization in “comparative/Chinese philosophy”.

If we decided to take the tradition seriously, or to expand our method of philosophizing beyond valorization of unique individual interpretation, we might just see that the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* do not think about the environment or environmental issues the same way we do today. The respect, the listening, and the humility involved here would already be a great boon to academia. In fact, it would actually be an example of the very attitude we should take in thinking about the relationship between humans and nature—however we might decide to define the two, including their inseparability. Less of an emphasis on one’s own self, in all sorts of forms, and in an economic context especially, but also in terms of the use of objects, less competition in some areas, less Promethean drives for mastery over others, things, and the world.⁷ Additionally, we need less obsession with growth or acceleration, and less hubris overall. In terms of philosophical methodology, these orientations would lead us to say something along the lines of: “since the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* have never been discussed in terms of environmentalism, then it probably is not a good idea to think we can find environmentalism in them”. This method would not only say this, but would actually allow that this is a valid “argument” in and of itself. And it would be a great attitude to take in various aspects of life for all sorts of reasons, not the least being a much better relationship with the natural world. In other words, the same type of hubris and self-focused attitude which has come to characterize the human abuses of the natural world are found in methods which ignore tradition when reading ancient texts. We will not solve the former problem by doubling down on the latter.

Relatedly, Western scholarship on Chinese philosophy often complains of being the subject of prejudice and unfair bias. “Our colleagues in Western thought do

7 The detrimental effects of a “Promethean drive for mastery” have been discussed in insightful ways by many authors. See, for example, Michael Sandel’s (2007) critique of genetic enhancement; Clive Hamilton’s (2017) discussion of the Anthropocene, and Graham Parkes’ (2021) work on climate change.

not take us seriously” is a tenor in papers, conferences, and discussions over coffee. For Chinese philosophy to develop as a legitimate philosophical tradition it needs to both gain confidence and stop hiding behind proprietary veils of expertise. We need to stop saying “Dao is just so difficult, you cannot really understand it unless you read classical Chinese” and the like. Like our colleagues who can have discussions on the history of philosophy *and* actually philosophize, specialists of Chinese philosophy need to describe the texts and also work *with* them. There are plenty of papers on Daoism and environmentalism. There are not many which claim to find environmentalism already in Aristotle or the Stoics, though there is no shortage of scholars who utilize Greek thought to vitalize environmentalist discourse. To be taken seriously, Chinese philosophy needs to act seriously. Let us thus philosophize *with* the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, and reflect on environmental issues without supposing they already exist in these texts.

Boundary of this Paper

As expressed above, I am in no way suggesting that we can find environmentalist concerns⁸ in the *Laozi* or *Zhuangzi*. However, if we philosophize *with* these texts, then we can reflect on environmentalism in interesting ways. This is the type of philosophical endeavour found, for example, in modern Aristotelians. Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum and Michael Sandel talk about everything from identity, economics, emotions, and technologies without explicitly referencing the works of Aristotle. They are *inspired* by the great Greek thinker, and work on issues *with* his thought in mind. Similarly, this project is *inspired* by Daoist texts, and seeks to work *with* them—and this also means that I will not seek to defend my classification of Daoism, or enter into any explanation of authorship.⁹

As noted in the introduction, environmentalism is not something early Chinese thinkers engaged with in a way that resembles our discussions today. Proving a negative like this means providing positive evidence for what exactly early Chinese thinkers were talking about when they used terms we might take as “nature”—most notably *tian* 天, *wanwu* 萬物, *ziran*, and the like.¹⁰ Furthermore,

8 By this I mean environmental concerns directly related to those that we have today. This will be fleshed out below.

9 Who today would say to Nussbaum “well, that’s not really what Aristotle wrote, those are more like notes”?

10 Research in this area has been done, see D’Ambrosio (2013) and Chen (2016). The eighth chapter of the latter work is particularly focused on *tian*, and provides an in-depth discussion of its connotations, and why it is not “nature”.

instead of trying to show how something akin to “nature” was thought about—a nearly inexhaustible project which would garner robust disagreement—we could rely on imagination.

For readers familiar with early Chinese thought, or even history in general, it is not difficult to suppose that the views on “nature” and the natural world were quite different hundreds and thousands of years ago. Our drive for mastery has been largely successful. It is not just fire—we have found ingenious ways to dominate the world, and to generally ensure safety. Earlier conceptions of the distinction between the human and nature would undoubtedly include the latter as dangerous, full of uncertainty, and representative of exile (and death). Only with certain levels of technology, strength in numbers, and the like would nature become associated with more romantic notions.

For many early Chinese thinkers the natural world was not apart from the human world. To the extent that the “natural world” was thought of, it was part and parcel of the social. For instance, managing floods or overseeing the change of seasons were examples of human authority at the highest levels. Zhuang Zhou himself might have been an official “pond keeper” of sorts, and there were many types of positions pertaining to the “natural world”. Looking at specific concepts we find even more complex notions, which are difficult to relate to our current views.

The word *she* 社 begins as meaning *dizhu* 地主 or “ruler of the earth/soil” (*Shuowen jizi* 2.2.64; ctext.org), or *tushen* 土神 “god of soil”, it later comes to mean gathering, and eventually makes up the word “society”: *shehui* 社會. In a literal sense *shehui* is “gathering” and can be understood as originating from “gathering at the *she*”. In addition to being the ruler or god of the soil the *she* could mean shrine. This shrine was often the centre of a village and might be a tree. When deciding on a settlement the *she*-tree would be found first, and then the village would grow around it. During different festivals, rituals, or special events, the people from the village would gather at the *she*. For fortuitous events, such as the growth of population represented by marriage, the *she* could be decorated. Unlucky events might see the *she* punished.

There is a complex interplay between the human and the non-human here. In large part the complexity is directly attributed to our being somewhat alienated from this type of thinking. The *she* simultaneously recognizes the natural, and its importance as natural, while also seeing it as a point of convergence for the human. Indeed, this natural *she* is the starting point for human society. Today, our natural landscapes are for the most part natural or social (or at least often thought of this way). The development of a society, such as in a city or even the suburbs, necessitates a corresponding decrease in the natural. Or, at the very least, what

the *she* represents is a rather poignant contrast between the way societies were formed and developed in early China and how they do today. We may see the natural as a point of convergence today, such as when tourists gather to explore the Grand Canyon. But they are strangers who come together for a short period of time. The natural today does not constitute the establishment of a community, as in the case of the *she*.

Exactly how this relates to our contemporary conceptions of the relationship between nature and the human is not only complex, but highly disputable as well. Various explanations could draw interesting points of similarity and difference. No matter how the communication happens, there will surely be those who disagree, or who find “better” (different) ways to think about the *she* and contemporary thought. Overarching any details is the significant difference between this type of thinking about the *she* and “nature” for us today. For most living in cities and suburbs today the *she* is simply a different world of thought. Relatable, yes. Understandable, probably, albeit with significant limitations. But in that *she* world there were not, and in some sense perhaps could not be, the types of distinction, interactions, and problems we think of today when we discuss the relationship between the human and the natural.

Sky's the Limit!

Hartmut Rosa, who is not exactly known as an activist for “green” policies, proposes an interesting take on climate change. According to Rosa, we should think about the climate issue as “being out of sync” with the world. In other words, when certain human processes go too fast for the corresponding natural processes to keep up, changes to ecosystems, environments, and the climate, can occur. So one way to think about the climate problem is to recognize not so much that burning fossil fuels is evil, but that burning them at a rate which cannot be absorbed and thereby impacts our climate might become a serious problem. And we can apply this thinking to many other ecological issues: eating meat, releasing greenhouse gases, even littering and other types of pollution.

A large part of the reason why we damage the environment, and continue to do so despite the increasingly apparent evidence of effects we do not like, can be understood on the human level as the result of (selfish) desires: We struggle to get what we want, to outdo others, and make life as convenient and comfortable as possible. Amazon is an obvious example of this, as are apps that deliver food and groceries. Why is it okay to allow so much waste—in packaging, in gasoline, in time spent—for next day delivery of a notepad or five pens? Or, why is it so

acceptable to order a burger and have so much waste? These examples exemplify not only desire and convenience, but what Rosa thinks is the root problem as well—the logic of increase.¹¹ Simply put, we want more. Personally, but also on larger scales. Nearly all of our social institutions rely on what Rosa calls “dynamic stabilization” to function. Dynamic stabilization means that the system must “move”—which really means “grow”—in order to remain stable. An economy that does not grow is essentially considered to be “shrinking”, despite its actual stagnation and thus staying more or less the same. As academics, our CVs work the same way. If you do not add to your CV, it does not really “stay the same”, but functions, within the academic system, as demonstrating your lack of productivity. Universities always need more, journals seek to produce new knowledge, and most companies can only run—including huge ones like Meta (Facebook) or Google—if they continuously grow.

Once we recognize the logic of increase or dynamic stabilization as the underlying and necessary pattern of our societies, we cannot help but to see it everywhere. In some cases it has become so natural that it is difficult to acknowledge. There are some rather serious questions we can ask ourselves following these lines of thought. For example: Why must we constantly publish papers to demonstrate some “new knowledge”, as if passing down old knowledge was not good enough? (Perhaps we would have a lot fewer problems today if we learned more seriously from the past—as this special issue attempts to demonstrate. Relatedly, while we might like increase of knowledge in areas like medicine, it is not always useful in other areas such as building foundations for houses or plumbing.) We can also ask: Should it really be accepted, natural and obvious to everyone that businesses, including US universities, must constantly increase their profits? This is, of course, the root of much of our climate problems, since fossil fuels offer so many cheap shortcuts to making money (think again of all those delivery services).

Clive Hamilton, a self-styled “provocateur”, explains the need for growth in even more negative terms. Describing his work on the “growth fetish” in today’s world, Hamilton writes:

For decades our political leaders and opinion makers have touted higher incomes as the way to a better future. Economic growth means better lives for us all. But after many years of sustained economic growth and increased personal incomes we must confront an awful fact: we aren’t any happier. This is the great contradiction of modern politics.... far from

11 Rosa is not the only or even the first thinker to note this issue. However, for the sake of this article we will focus specifically on his work as that is what the author is most familiar with. Additionally, it is not really necessary to delve too much deeper into this characterization in this article.

being the answer to our problems, growth fetishism and the marketing society lie at the heart of our social ills. They have corrupted our social priorities and political structures, and have created a profound sense of alienation among young and old. (Hamilton 2004)

Not only does growth leave us unfulfilled and corrupted, it is exactly this type of obsession that has led to the “*monstrous* anthropocentrism” that causes our processes to outrun natural ones—one of the consequence of which is climate change. As a result, Hamilton argues that we must actually take responsibility for our anthropocentrism, which he calls a “fact”, and use our technologies correctly. He writes:

The problem is not that humans are anthropocentric, but that we are not anthropocentric enough. This might sound like the kind of transgressive statement concocted to startle but which with repeated use feels like an authorial ploy. But it is in fact the essential claim of this book: we refuse to face up to the profound importance of humans, ontologically and now practically, to the Earth and its future. Instead of accepting responsibility for the power we possess, we continue to exercise it rashly as if nothing else mattered. (Hamilton 2017, 44–45)

For those familiar with Chinese philosophy, it is straightaway evident that the way Hamilton discusses our relationship with the Earth is worlds away from how any pre-Qin thinker would think of our technological abilities. Perhaps with ritual we would find some similar assumptions, but never with the force, scale, or sheer power Hamilton speaks of. And when we look at many voices from climate issues we find that human technological reach is viewed as the problem, and must in some ways engender the solutions. In other words, short of advocating moving back to more primitive lives,¹² we will need to include our technological abilities in our solutions to climate issues. On this point Daoist thought is extremely limited in what productive contributions it might make. Indeed, it is pertinent to include a note on methodology before we continue.

A Daoist Lexicon and Focusing Tradition

In what follows we will look at four major notions in early Daoism, namely: 1) *buzheng* 不爭 or “not contending”, 2) *zhizu* 知足 or “awareness of contentment”,

12 Some groups do advocate this, for example some strains of XR (Extinction Rebellion) call for small communal living as a solution.

3) *wuwei* 無為 or “not acting for”, 4) *ziran* 自然 or “according to itself”. These ideas are intimately interwoven, or we may take them as not so much distinct concepts as various perspectives on an underlying attitude. As attitudes and as avenues of philosophical reflection we will examine these terms with nods to environmental considerations, as outlined above. Our discussion will be purposefully open-ended, both because philosophy itself can be a type of reflection that does not demand detailed conclusions,¹³ and because Daoism emphatically resists specified prescriptive advice, rejects ideals, and is cautious about language. The opening lines of the *Laozi* emphasize a major theme in the tradition: “the way that can be spoken is not the constant way, the name that can be named is not the constant name (道可道非常道，名可名非常名)”. In an even more succinct fashion, one of the most famous lines in the *Zhuangzi* simply says “a path is made in the walking, things are so due to their being called so (道行之而成，物謂之而然)” (2.6). Accordingly, with regard to prescriptive advice, ideals, and exacting language, this project will not force these texts into areas they overtly reject.

The manner in which these four concepts will be discussed, as well as the gloss of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as relatively coherent texts, and even the label “Daoism” itself, represents a slight departure from contemporary Western academic standards. Recent fashions in journals and presentations ask scholars to first admit that the dating and authorship of these texts is highly contestable, and that for many, very important reasons the label “Daoism” is misleading. In China, where commentaries were the major medium for philosophical development, broad strokes were used when appropriate. Ideas were often expressed with a nuanced focus on practical (socio-political) applicability and the cultivation of persons and communities. To this day, much of Chinese academia functions with a nod to commentaries, practice, cultivation, and authority; and insofar as it does, it often differs from Western standards. Contrasted with the latter, we might describe Chinese philosophy as “tradition-focused”.

We can understand “tradition-focused” in a dual sense: 1) tradition itself plays a central role in expressing ideas, developing arguments (such as, “environmentalism

13 One can argue, however, that recent academia disagrees. Not only are solutions often called for, or specific answers and detailed responses, but even the very line of thinking and discussing do not favour reflection. Instead many scholars interrogate one another about the final answer to whatever question is being posed. For example, when presenting on moral ideas one will almost inevitably be asked how can one be sure that no one can use the said ideas for anything bad. In other words, academics will ask, more or less directly, “How can you guarantee Nazis won’t use this thinking?” It is a ridiculous line of inquiry, supposing both that there could be anything that would inherently be protected from being misinterpreted or otherwise abused, and that discussions in a conference hall or academic paper are not best suited for reflection, and will somehow directly result in X or Y actions.

does not appear in the tradition, so ...”), and maintaining coherence; 2) texts, persons, and ideas are not divorced from their traditional context—so, for example, while Western scholars obsess over whether we can use the label “Daoism”, Chinese scholars do not. They tend to understand “Daoism” in terms of how it functions in a particular discussion, not as some abstract exact description devoid of contextual factors.¹⁴ Relatedly, a significant standard for evaluating philosophical thought in China has been *tong* 通, as in “*shuo de tong* 說得通”—which finds some degree of coherence with “what you said makes sense” in English. *Tong* can mean “through”, “unimpeded”, “open”, and “without obstacle”, “communicate”, “link”, or be “well-versed in”. Saying someone’s thought is *tong* means that it does not contradict itself, that it speaks to the entire context (e.g. works for this debate or rings true with the entire *Laozi*), and that it finds reflection in the tradition. It does, however, not indicate some adherence to the “true meaning” of the “original text”.

The “tradition-focused” approach rejects the “urtext”, which has also become quite a fashionable target in Western academia. But while the latter moves toward creativity and individual interpretation, the tradition-focused methodology requires coherence to the past in its support of “new” interpretations. Or, while Western academia demands a new contribution (growth), tradition-focused research requires a command of past understandings—which of course can only result in “I only transmit, I do not make (述而不作)” (*Lunyu* 7.1).

Tradition-focused methodology is not “better” than what contemporary Western academia encourages. It is simply a different form of doing scholarship, one which is valid and leads to different understandings. Allowing “Chinese thought to have a seat at the table” or “promoting diversity and inclusion” should mean being open to this method as well. As we all know, form is content and content is form. Western academia should remember this as well when it self-congratulatorily celebrates diversity and inclusivity—all the while remaining exceedingly narrow in the type of research it allows. Moreover, we should not pretend that when we force certain texts into certain discussions with certain methods we will not certainly get a very certain result, and one that certainly might have little to do with the text or its tradition.

14 For example, a “tradition-focused” study might advance conclusions about the *Laozi* based on Wang Bi’s version of the text, and completely ignore excavated versions. This type of study is accurate in terms of describing how the *Laozi* was traditionally read, and how it influenced countless people. As long as a study thus positions itself, discrepancies between Wang Bi’s *Laozi* and Mawangdui versions are neither here nor there—the latter did not impact the tradition. Of course, in another arena comparing Wang Bi’s *Laozi* with Mawangdui strips is completely valid, and we might even give overwhelming priority to “King Ma’s Mound”.

Not Contending 不爭

Bu zheng 不爭, which can be translated as “not struggling”, “not contending”, “not competing” and the like, is identified by numerous Chinese thinkers as a major theme in the *Laozi* (e.g. Chen 2020; Fu Peirong 傅佩榮 2012). Relatively speaking, this concept garners much less attention in English language scholarship—which is not to say that *bu zheng* is ignored, only that it is often merely mentioned in passing. When looking to early Daoism for resources to reflect on contemporary environmental issues, *bu zheng* provides an excellent inroad. Starting here we can draw out a host of tools for reconsidering some of our most unreflected-upon perspectives.

Like other major concepts—including *zhizu*, *wuwei*, and *ziran*—*bu zheng* is best understood as an attitude. According to Chen Guying, who follows a scholarly consensus, *bu zheng* includes these other notions as well. At its heart, *bu zheng* rejects “struggles for fame, fortune, success” (Chen 2020, 405) and seeks to counter ceaseless struggles for selfish desires, personal gain, and what we can call “egoism”. Chen notes that *bu zheng* specifically encourages people to “‘act,’ to develop their abilities to the utmost while following what is natural and self-so [*ziran*]” (ibid.). Even so, it is not about the development of the individual themselves, it includes a “spirit of devotion to others” as well as “not vying with others for success or fame”, and this “constitutes one of the greatest forms of moral conduct” (ibid.).

One of the more critical sections in the *Laozi* that directly mentions *bu zheng* is found in chapter 81. This can be translated as follows:

Credible words are not beautiful, beautiful words are not credible.
 Those who are good do not quarrel, those who quarrel are not good.
 Those who know are not erudite, those who are erudite do not know.
 The sage does not accumulate, because he acts on behalf of others, he has more; because he gives to others, more will be his share.
 The Dao of Heaven brings benefit without harming; the Dao of human beings acts without contending [*bu zheng*]. (Chen 2020, 403)

There is much here readily relatable to our ecological troubles—quarrels, accumulation, acting for others rather than oneself, and not harming or contending are all attitudes which the *Laozi* (along with countless other texts) thinks would help individuals in their own lives, in their interactions, and potentially in human-nature relations.

Specifically, *bu zheng* can be understood as following natural patterns. Heshang Gong 河上公 (d. 1st or 2nd century BCE) says that *bu zheng* is related to modelling (*fa* 法) Heaven (*tian* 天) and not contending for merit, fame, or reputation (*gong-ming* 功名) (c_{text}.org). Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (d. 669) more or less echoes Heshang saying the sage “models *dao*” and “achieves merit but does not dwell on it. He relinquishes the merit to the beings; therefore the text says he does not compete [*bu zheng*]” (Assandri 2021, 365). The modesty and humility expressed here is a core *ethos* which simply would not allow for an obsessive fixation on one’s self, competition, growth, and other aspects of contemporary society which have led to human activities overloading natural processes.

The *Zhuangzi* relates a similar sentiment, again encouraging a psychology of respect and humility in the face of social and natural contingencies:

And he whose knowledge is sufficient to fill some one post, or whose deeds meet the needs of some one village, or whose personal virtues please some one ruler, or who is able to prove himself in a single country, sees himself in just the same way. (1.3)¹⁵

The critical message here hinges on an expansive awareness of one’s own natural endowments, of social systems, and of the world writ large as all being completely contingent. That things line up to support a person, or that they do not, should not elicit overattachment. As the text says, “even if the entire world praises one they should not be goaded on, and even if the whole world criticizes one they should not get upset”. The passage ends with notes about how to conceive of these issues: “The utmost person has no self, the spirit person has no merit, and the sage has no name/reputation”. Here “no self”, “no merit” and “no name/reputation” do not mean that the type of person the *Zhuangzi* praises actually lacks these—that would not be possible—rather they do not rely on, or commit themselves to, self, merit, or reputation. That many people do, the *Zhuangzi* notes, is problematic.

Social arenas are often populated by people contending with one another. Over the past century countless psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists have sought to prove the basic observation we find in nearly all human groups: hierarchies exist, and are spontaneously created as soon as people come together. Asking that people try and take on a *bu zheng* attitude means moving away from certain neo-liberal and free market conceptions of the individual and their relations to others. Becoming a hermit or shunning society is not the goal, but rather balancing a healthy distance from social norms is advocated. Overcommitting is dangerous. Overattachment is the main target of criticism.

15 Translations not otherwise noted are my own. The chapter verse numbering refers to c_{text}.org.

Various descriptions of this attitude can be found in the works of, for example, Wang Deyou, who advances the idea of “social hermits” (2012), or in Brook Ziporyn’s notion of a “wild card” (2020) or Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul D’Ambrosio’s somewhat problematic “genuine pretending” (2017). A more positive conception would say Daoists ask what might be “beneficial to the surrounding world and people in it” (Chen 2020, 43). As Chen Guying further notes: “The goal is to balance out social inequalities, which otherwise foster more conflict and struggle, through *bu zheng*—that is, acting in a self-so manner that benefits all of humankind, not just oneself” (ibid.).

Whether one emphasizes social hermits, wild cards, or benefiting humankind, the type of thinking related to *bu zheng* has consequences that can be contoured to fit contemporary environmental concerns. *Bu zheng* can be construed in various ways, the majority of which would certainly change how we think about ourselves, others, and our relationship with the natural environment along lines which many would consider positive.

Awareness of Contentment 知足

The first chapter of the *Laozi* contains the line: “*gu chang wu you yi guan qi miao; chang you you yi guan qi jiao* 故常無欲以觀其妙；常有欲以觀其徼”. In a famously obtuse text, this is one of the most contested set of characters. Depending on how one parses it, it can read either “Thus, constant non-presence, [one] wants to look at the subtlety; constant presence, [one] wants to look at the fringes”, or “Thus, constantly having desires [one] looks at the subtlety; constantly not having desires, [one] looks at the fringes”.

Yang Lihua 楊立華, explicitly following Wang Bi and Jiang Xichang 蔣錫昌 (d. 1974), and referencing the Mawangdui slips, follows the second reading. Early Chinese thought, he says, is never about “extremes”, and so there is no idea of actually not having desires (Yang 2020). For Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Confucius, people have desires and could never extinguish them. So rather than trying to get rid of desires the great pre-Qin thinkers suggest methods for dealing with them. The reference to desires in the first chapter of the *Laozi* is thus about various attitudes people can take when looking at the world—it is not about completely ridding oneself of desires or not.

This difference in attitude, between focusing on human desires and not, affects how we view the world. Looking at the development of things, Yang argues, will be heavily influenced by whether or not they are seen through the lens of human desires. Although he does not use the word “mechanistic”, Yang basically says

as much in his examples of how human desires change our world. Desires change what we see, they change how we see things, our interactions with them, and how we treat them as well. He notes that all sorts of foods today are now so heavily modified by modern technologies that most of us have never really eaten an apple or meat—even if we get the most organic or grass-fed versions. Broadening his discussion Yang says, “If you take the perspective of no desires [not having overly mechanistic goals], only then can you see the development of things in a natural way, otherwise you destroy the natural development of things”. “And this is,” he adds “a basic attitude towards nature in the Chinese tradition”. (Yang 2020, 32:12). Today, especially in the West, Yang thinks that there are not only innumerable desires (mechanistic goals), but, even worse, many think that further technological developments can solve everything.

While there is no shortage of debate about the above-mentioned line from chapter one, Yang’s discussion of desires is generally agreed upon as an overarching perspective in the *Laozi*. The most commonly referenced term to express what Yang describes is *zhi zu* 知足, or “awareness of contentment”. It is about being aware of one’s desires, satisfying them, and then moving on. (Another common translation for *zhi zu* is along the lines of “knowing satisfaction”. The general idea is the same: know what one desires, and be conscious of when one is satisfied.) Overindulging in desires is problematic, but so too is not fulfilling them to the right degree.

We can take spicy food as an example. If one likes spicy food, then it is fine to have spicy food. But once one begins desiring to have spicier and spicier food—when a person becomes too mechanistic about their desire, about themselves, the world, and the relations of them all—problems arise. One might try, but in the end it is not possible to satisfy the desire for “spicier” food. There is always something “spicier”, so one can never get the “spiciest”. However, if one keeps their desires limited to “I want spicy food” then they can easily be satisfied, and then can easily move on. (We can change “spicier food” for a faster car, making more money, more likes/views on social media, a bigger house—nearly anything works here.)

Zhi zu is only referenced four times in the *Laozi*, but it is, as Yang notes, an underlying theme that is represented in numerous places (regardless of how one reads chapter 1). The first mention is in chapter 33, which includes the line “*zhi zu zhe fu* 知足者富”. This can be translated “one who is aware of contentment is rich”. Wang Bi glosses this as meaning one does not “want for anything” (Lynn 1999, 111). In the other sections where *zhi zu* is mentioned, chapters 44 and 46, Wang does not elaborate on the meaning of *zhi zu* at all. Indeed, looking at his

commentary as a whole one might conclude that for Wang Bi the meaning is quite apparent. Simply fulfil one's desires and do not let them grow. This is a point that is quite easily understandable but difficult to put into practice. For instance, a good friend once lost a lot of weight. Many asked "How were you able to lose so much weight? An extreme diet? Lots of exercise?" My friend said "No, I just stopped eating when I was full". Most people had trouble believing him. He would then add—"I didn't eat when I wasn't hungry, either".

Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (d. 669) offers a more robust account of "one who is aware of contentment is rich". Cheng writes: "Accepting one's lot and knowing to be content with oneself, one does not crave and strive anymore. And then one not only will not crave material wealth, but also Dao and Virtue will be plentiful" (Assandri 2021, 176). Being content with one's "lot" or "*fen* 分" is a common theme in the *Zhuangzi* as well. It refers to everything from natural dispositions, including talents and all sorts of capabilities, to social recognition of them, and all other types of contingencies.

In chapter 44 the *Laozi* says that being aware of satisfaction will help one not be disgraced or humiliated. Again, Cheng invokes the idea of natural and social contingencies to explain this: "If one knows from one's own experience that precious goods and possessions are empty and vain, one keeps to one's allotted part and does not covet more. If one is honest and upright and knows to be content with one's lot, then because of this one will suffer no disgrace" (Assandri 2021, 223–24). Within the context of chapter 44 Cheng's comment can be read as just a further explication of what is already given. The meaning of *zhi zu* is very much worn on its sleeve.

Zhi zu appears twice in chapter 46. The entire chapter reads:

When the world has the Dao, que 却 [retreat, return] the riding horses (走马) go to fertilize the fields [instead of being used in war]. When the world does not have the Dao, army horses born on the outskirts [farm horses are used for battle]. There is no greater disaster than desiring to obtain, there is no greater calamity than not knowing satisfaction. Therefore, the satisfaction of knowing satisfaction is lasting satisfaction. (Chen 2020, 271; translation modified)

Not knowing satisfaction is the worst thing, and knowing satisfaction ensures satisfaction lasts a long time. In agreement with Yang's comment about "extremes" and desires in general, Hu Jichuang 胡寄窗 (d. 1993) argues that "knowing satisfaction" basically means "having few desires". The two notions "cannot be clearly separated". Referencing chapter 33, Hu notes that "knowing satisfaction" is itself a type of wealth. A person might be poor, but if they can know satisfaction

they can feel rich, conversely a rich person can (and often does) easily feel poor when then focus on getting more (Hu 1962, 209). (Indeed, modern economic theory and psychology have come to the same conclusion.)

We can easily wax theoretical or romantic about *zhi zu* and modern society. We are too focused on bigger, more, and the like. Our societies are overly capitalistic, Christmas and birthdays are all about money, and so on. *Zhi zu* is an attitude. It applies just as much to an over-emphasis on GDP as it does to eating too much. According to its own advice, it is probably best to think of *zhi zu* starting from small, mundane examples. It is not so much about a “revelation” or “enlightenment”, as about adjusting one’s perspective on the world.

Not Acting For 無為

In the context of this paper we can understand *wuwei* 無為 as “not acting for”.¹⁶ It is another perspective on the attitude the *Laozi* promotes, or an attitude itself. *Wu* 無 negates *wei* 為, which means action, but most often includes the connotation of acting for some purpose, reason, or goal. Again, the more romantic depictions of *wuwei* sometimes suggest we can live in an entirely spontaneous manner, floating seamlessly in the world around us. However, as Yang Lihua notes, once again borrowing from many others, there is no way humans could somehow be completely devoid of purposes, goals, or preconceived notions. To add a modern twist, human thinking operates according to cause and effect. Even in terms of small details, or our best attempts at “going with the flow”, we do in fact think that what we do will have certain results. *Wuwei* is then about an openness to the contingency of our world, ourselves, and interactions. And while we may all appreciate some level of unpredictability and uncontrollability, *wuwei* asks us to keep this space relatively large, and to remain calm in doing so. From this angle, appreciating *bu zheng* and *zhi zu* already informs much of what we might call the “content” of *wuwei*.

In addition to already encompassing the attitude of *bu zheng* as well as *zhi zu*, *wuwei* allows for recognizing the broader potentials of each. *Bu zheng* can mean not contending, and is often considered in a social sphere. *Zhi zu* asks for one to be satisfied with themselves and in relation to others and society. The emphasis on *action* per se in *wu wei* extends what it might mean to not contend and to be satisfied in even more mundane contexts. It can inform how we think of acting,

16 While there are many very excellent ways of conceptualizing *wuwei*, our goal here is not to come up with the “best” or “most complete” but rather a discussion that fits well the context of this paper, and has coherence (*tong 通*) with the *Laozi* and traditional scholarship.

i.e. instead of saying “I am going to run for X minutes or X km” we could think instead, “I will go out and enjoy a run”. Although the latter too can be subject to overly *wei* or “acting for” thinking as well: “I must enjoy this run!” or “How do I ensure that I enjoy this run?!”¹⁷ *Bu zheng* and *zhi zu* can thus act as buffers to keep *wuwei* in check, or to help balance *wuwei* so it does not slip too far into *wei* or “acting for”. In other words, these three notions or attitudes can operate in sync, allowing for different points of reflection for when one is too heavily invested to notice one’s own slide into extremes.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into too much detail about *wuwei*. This cognate appears many times in the *Laozi*, and there are particularities to each that can warrant detailed analysis. When concentrating on the detrimental aspects of growth, the occurrence of *wuwei* in chapter 48 is most pertinent. This chapter can be translated as:

For learning daily increasing, for the Dao daily decreasing. Decreasing and decreasing, to the point of *wuwei*. *Wuwei* and thereby nothing is not done. Taking up the world always relies on *wu shi* 无事 [no affairs], when it comes to *you shi* 有事 [have affairs] (6) it is not enough for taking up the world. (Chen 2020, 279; translation modified)

Jiang Xichang connects “learning” with the opposite of *wuwei*, namely *youwei* 有為 or “acting for”. Activities related to *dao* involve decreasing the “for”, in other words, decreasing our goals and purposes (Jiang 1981, 89). Or, we may say that activities related to *dao* are more in line with the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the world. Regardless of when one dates the *Laozi*, the learning it responds to is connected to rituals, music, and other sorts of social institutions that seek to codify interaction into predictable and controllable patterns. Remembering Yang Lihua, we should not expect to get rid of these entirely, but we can certainly seek to rely on them less. In his comments to this section Heshang Gong says “learning” means learning about government, ritual, and music (<https://ctext.org/heshanggong/48>).

Writing on this chapter of the *Laozi* Wang Bi singles out “acting for” (*youwei*) as particularly problematic. What he writes is striking in its simplicity: Acting

17 It is precisely for this reason that Wang Bi and Guo Xiang, in their development on these ideas as well as those found in other texts, dislike following “traces” or “footprints.” Richard John Lynn writes: “Fundamental in Guo’s commentary is his concept of “footprints” [ji 迹]—that is, the recollections in legends and accounts of sagely thought, action, behaviour, and pronouncement that, since these always fall short of the realities involved, falsely establish standards for people to follow, which then corrupt natural inclinations to the good and damage original personal nature.” (Lynn 2022, lxx)

for can result in failure, whereas *wuwei* cannot, because it is not overly attached even to its implicit goals (<https://ctext.org/dao-de-zhen-jing-zhu>). Commenting on *wu shi* 无事 [no affairs], which is related to *wuwei*, Wang says that it means “constantly moving in accordance [with things]” (ibid.). The “accord” or *yin* 因 will be further discussed below as it relates directly to *ziran*.

Chapter 57 contains another instance of *wuwei* which helps us understand what being in accord with things might look like. The paradoxical logic the *Laozi* often expresses, especially as found in chapter 2, is elaborated on in detail in the second part of chapter 57, here we find:

The more prohibitions and taboos there are in the world, the more impoverished the people will become; if people have many sharp instruments, the state and families will become more and more shrouded in darkness; if people use many clever techniques, strange things will arise ever more often; the more conspicuous laws and decrees become, the more bandits and robbers there will be. (Chen 2020, 316; translation modified)

The more positive side of this, which relies on a certain notion of human beings as basically being “okay”,¹⁸ is immediately laid out:

And so the sage says: “I am *wuwei*, and the people self-transform (自化); I delight in tranquillity, and the self *zheng* 正 [upright, correct, align, rectify]; I do not undertake anything, and the people self thrive; I am without desires, and the people self-simplify.” (ibid.; translation modified)

Being *wuwei* allows those around the sage to act according to their own selves—something we might often associate with being “natural”. The general argument here is reflected in *Zhuangzi* 11.4 as well, where it is extended to all things: “If you rest in *wuwei* then all things can self-transform (汝徒處無為，而物自化).” Allowing people or things to “self-transform” means not interfering too much with how they are. Transformation is something that constantly happens, so the emphasis is not on them *changing* in natural ways, but rather in them being natural in their constant changing. This is tightly intertwined with *ziran* 自然 or “according to itself”.

According to Itself 自然

Ziran 自然 or “according to itself” or “self-so” can be explained differently based on specific contexts. At the core these two characters express “something itself”

18 For a further discussion see D’Ambrosio (2022) or Fu (2012).

(*zi* 自) and “going by” (*ran* 然). Often *ziran* is translated as “nature”, and can mean the natural world—but again the entire conception of this is different in early Chinese, as the *she* example discussed above shows. In modern Chinese the word for “nature” is *ziranjie* 自然界 or “the natural realm” which is meant to express some distinction from humans.¹⁹

Just as *wuwei* is intimately interwoven with *bu zheng* and *zhi zu*, there are no shortage of scholars who note the connection between *wuwei* and *ziran*. Guo Xiang, for example, connects them:

Unselfconscious action [*wuwei*] does not mean to fold one’s hands and just keep silent. As long as everyone is allowed to do what is innately doable, each natural endowment [*ziran*] shall be at ease. (Lynn 2022, 210)

Things being allowed to go by their own natural dispositions, endowments, or nature, means not interfering with them. However, there is no way things cannot be constantly interfered with or constantly influenced by everything else. No one thing is thought of as existing, potentially or actually, in a way that is not always already intimately interconnected with all other things. For example, not only do the words you read right now affect your thoughts, but there are countless other factors involved as well. The medium through which you read hugely changes how you read: On a screen or printed (and if it was handwritten things are different once again), and there are many other variables too, if printed then in the form of a journal or just a printed PDF or Word document—because this again will influence how you read, how much information you retain, and the like.²⁰ Moreover, the temperature of the environment you are in, and everything from what you had for breakfast and how you are digesting it to your culture and genetic makeup will all inform, in some way or another, how you read this paper.²¹ Everything is constantly interconnected and constantly transforming due to its interconnectedness. So letting things go “of their own accord” can be broken down into two different orientations of understanding.

First, *ziran* is an attitude, second it can be seen concretely in governance. There have long been two major orientations in traditional readings the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. One can take them as mainly political, and this is quite easy to understand in the *Laozi* (and greatly informs Guo Xiang’s *Zhuangzi*) or one can read them as advice for individuals. Of course, many readings of these texts see them as both, and differ only in degrees of one reading or the other. Indeed, we

19 For a detailed discussion see D’Ambrosio (2013).

20 Some literature on this issue is summarized by Nicholas Carr (2010).

21 In his book *Behave* (2017) Robert Sapolsky provides a fascinating study of these influences.

may simply understand the reflections on individual lives to be similarly echoed in political realms—or *vice-versa*. In other words, the texts make observations and provide some advice, and the only difference between a more existential or socio-political reading has to do with slightly different applications. Again, most of the “messages” or advice or points of reflection are then generally overlapping. Commenting on the opening lines of chapter 11 in the *Zhuangzi* Guo Xiang neatly interweaves individual considerations with political ones:

Letting it be [you] allows it to exist freely on its own [zizai], which results in order, but if one tries to put it in order, disorder [luan] results. Human life is inherently simple and straightforward [zhi], so if nothing tries to lead it astray, one won't attempt to exceed one's natural endowment [xingming], and natural desires and aversions won't be distorted. If those in authority don't practice unselfconscious action [wuwei], actions taken by them will result in everyone conforming to them. This is why having been seduced into liking and desiring things people are wont to exceed the limits of their natural endowment. Therefore, what is valued in the sage king is not his ability to put things in order but the fact that by practicing unselfconscious action [wuwei], he allows people to behave spontaneously [ziwei]. (Lynn 2022, 207)

The simplicity and straightforwardness of life Guo Xiang focuses on is reflected throughout both the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. The former speaks directly of being simple, plain, uncarved, and not getting too caught up in evaluations (chapter 2) or desires (as we saw with *zhi zu*). The *Zhuangzi* consistently seeks some “equalizing” methods, which note differences, for example between the big and the small, and rejects devising general standards for thinking about them. We find this throughout the *Zhuangzi*. One of the more famous passages reads:

To be truly unskewed just means not to lose the uncontrived condition of the inborn nature and its allotment of life [彼正正者，不失其性命之情] The long is not excessive and the short is not deficient. The duck's neck may be short, but lengthening it would surely pain him; the swan's neck may be long, but cutting it short would surely grieve him. When we see that what is long by inborn nature [*xing* 性] is not to be lengthened, all the worries that go with trying to remove them disappear. (Ziporyn 2020, 78)

When Guo Xiang says that the sage king should be *wuwei* and allow things to develop in a *ziran* manner, he is speaking of not extending or shortening things. Again, describing this in too much detail is not really possible since *ziran* is

indicative of an attitude. Being *ziran* or not does not directly correspond with any particular behaviours. The *Zhuangzi* passage quoted above actually ends by listing people who were quite opposite from one another, such as Robber Zhi and Bo Yi, and notes that though they represent different ideals, they are the same in “perverting and distorting” themselves (Ziporyn 2020, 79). It might be *ziran* for someone to go for a 14-mile run, for another person that would be absolute agony, or a challenge or a goal. If we take *ziran* as a measure, or as a guideline for action, we are left with little to say outside of particular contexts, and broad considerations of many things involved. The *Laozi* reminds directly of this in a passage which has often been misinterpreted by those hoping to find environmental and ecological themes in early Daoism, namely, chapter 25.

Many scholars appeal to *ziran* as “nature” in their attempts to read environmentalism in early Daoism. Ann Pang-White provides a representative example of the trajectory taken in such arguments:

The Laozi addresses the moral significance of Nature as follows: “Man models himself after Earth. Earth models itself after Heaven. Heaven models itself after Tao [Dao]. And Tao models itself after Nature (*ziran*)” (Daodejing 25). It adds: “Why is Dao esteemed and virtue honoured? ... [I]t is due to the fact that they always follow the natural/nature (*ziran*)” (Daodejing 51; my translation). An ideal person, therefore, “is one with Nature. Being one with Nature, he is in accord with Tao” (Daodejing 16). (Pang-White 2009, 71)

We can focus on the last line of chapter 25 in the *Laozi*, which is often held up as an important example for those who wish to argue for a concept of nature in Daoism. This line simply reads: “*ren fa di, di fa tian, tian fa dao, dao fa ziran* 人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然”. A fairly literal translation could be “human models/follows the earth, the earth models/follows the heavens, the heavens model/follow *dao*, *dao* models/follows *ziran*”, although the first character already requires some clarification. *Ren* 人 or “human” is often mistakenly glossed as a mere biological label. In fact, it is more complex. Some texts use it to indicate a moral person, or person of a certain moral status. In the *Mencius* for example, a human being can be considered *fei ren* 非人 or literally “not human”. Relatedly, *ren* 人 can be indicative of “community” in the sense that it denotes people in a certain socio-political sphere. (The contrast here is with barbarians, who are not *ren* 人 because they are not part of the cultured socio-political sphere.)

The Earth and Heavens maybe be taken somewhat straightforwardly as indicating the seasons, weather, and the like. In an agricultural setting it would be quite

natural to observe the way humans model the Earth, and the Earth models the Heavens. *Dao* can mean quite a number of different things, but here we may gloss it as the “way” and take it to be some sort of underlying pattern that all things are in accord with. *Ziran* is then the tricky term. Ann Pang-White, like some other contemporary scholars, has attempted to read this as “Nature”. Speaking of early Daoism Meng Peiyuan 蒙培元 for instance, says that “Nature [*ziran jie* 自然界] is the mother-entity [*muti* 母体] of *dao*” (Meng 2004, 28). While a host of other scholars, from Heshang Gong and Wang Bi to Tong Shuye 童書業 (d. 1968) and Chen Guying have taken *ziran* to mean “self-so” or “according to itself”, Meng rejects this reading on a linguistic basis. The phrase contains a series of nouns, which would make *ziran*—as an adjective or adverb—a strange anomaly. Smoothing these tensions out Wang Yan 王炎 and Wang Bo 王博 have both suggested reading *ziran* as a noun, adjective and adverb (Wang 2010; Wang 2004). In other words, *ziran* indicates the basic natural tendencies or dispositions of things. In this way modelling *ziran* is something everything does. There is nothing higher or outside of humans, the Earth, the Heavens, or *dao*.

In his commentary to this section Wang Bi provides a concise discussion for how we should think about *ziran*:

Dao does not go against *ziran*, thus it obtains its nature disposition (*xing* 性) following/modelling *ziran*ness. As square thus following/modelling square, as circle following/modelling circle, not going against *ziran* in any way, expressionless in speaking of it, boundless in referring to it. [In other words, language cannot describe it.] (<https://ctext.org/dao-de-zhen-jing-zhu>)

Conclusion

When Xunzi criticizes Zhuangzi for being “blinded by the Heavens, and not knowing humans (莊子蔽於天而不知人)” (Xunzi 21.5) he means that the *Zhuangzi* does not promote ritual, music, and studying as means for cultivating the person. Instead, the *Zhuangzi* critically reflects on how these things can be both useful and harmful. The focus on the heavenly or natural in the *Zhuangzi* is relative, especially compared to Xunzi and other Confucian texts where humans are central. The *Zhuangzi* does not conceive of the environment or “nature” in the way we do today, nor does the *Laozi*. And it is precisely because of this that these texts offer great points of reflection. Truly, they are blinded by the “sky”, but the sky has a limit. We can engage *with* these texts when thinking about environmental issues, but it is mistaken to look for concerns similar to ours *in* them.

We also find phrases such as “unifying humans and the natural/Heavens 天人合一” and “the natural/Heavens and humans are distinct 天人之分” in Chinese tradition. The first asks humans to be united with the Heavens, or “nature” in some sense, while the second notes the distinct roles humans and “nature” have in their interactions. What these phrases might mean in our age is unclear. When focusing on growth as a problem, they might encourage us to make sure our processes are in sync with natural ones. This is, however, something we all know. Environmental problems today are not so much a matter of people not knowing what they should do. Most people know exactly what they should do, they just need to do it.

At this point in the ecological crisis, I do not think popularizing Daoism is a timely approach. To be sure, I doubt it will make things worse, but I also am hesitant to imagine that it would make things all that much better. Problems with systems require appropriate systemic transformations. In other words, *bu zheng*, *zhi zu*, *wuwei* and *ziran* might encourage people to do what they already know they should do: drive electric cars, bring one’s own shopping bag, eat less meat. Yes, that would be great, but even if everyone the world over acted this way it likely would not be enough. Only when political leaders and business owners shift their priorities can our environmental problems be solved. According to those who identify growth as the main problem, we need nothing short of an entire overhaul of our capitalist systems. If somehow *bu zheng*, *zhi zu*, *wuwei* and *ziran* had an impact on capitalism itself—which would thereby no longer be capitalism as we know it—then things for us and our environments would actually change.

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