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Ecological Questions for Daoist Thought: Contemporary Issues and Ancient Texts

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Introduction

The term Daoism applies to many kinds of beliefs and practices, including those that now might be differentiated as religious, philosophical, and proto-scientific. My concern here is to examine how some of Daoism's ideas and values may be used to respond to issues of contemporary ecological discussions, especially with a focus on the environmental implications of the ideas. Despite the ancient and uncertain origins of many of its texts, certain aspects of Daoism appear to be still viable in Chinese culture—although clothed in new forms and identities. This discussion thus aims to make explicit some of the relevant beliefs both of Daoism and Chinese culture. My analysis joins previous efforts, mostly Western until recently, to probe cultural views for their environmental ramifications. Although many aspects of Daoism are recognized as favorable to the environment, others are problematic. This latter kind of idea must not be ignored, however, for it helps demonstrate how cultural beliefs that engender destructive activities remain powerful by “hiding” in other ideas.

As Western thinkers and activists in the twentieth century have become increasingly concerned with ecology, they have developed a variety of positions, many of which are still evolving. The views articulated have depended on how conditions and problems in all areas of life have been analyzed, not only in those areas specifically relating to the environment. Reflecting different emphases, some of the important stances consist of deep ecology, social ecology, ecofeminism,

ecothology, spiritual deep ecology. Earth First!, Greenpeace, environmentalism, and (comparative) environmental ethics.¹ These positions have disagreements, but most accept certain assumptions—for example, that human beings are not separate from the natural world, that all aspects and areas of the earth are interconnected, that environmentally destructive activities are related to, and supported by, a wide range of beliefs, and that human beings now face an ecological crisis.

Two primary aims have motivated their varied analyses: to analyze cultural and philosophical ideas in order to show how ideas about nature and the environment are intertwined with other cultural ideas and with often-unrecognized assumptions, and to propose new, less destructive, ways to conceive of the world. It is assumed that people need to change their views if they are to change their behavior, but people don't always know what they believe! Karen J. Warren, an ecofeminist, has suggested, for instance, eight kinds of links that have existed, and still do exist, between the domination of nature and the domination of women.² Others, such as Aldo Leopold, one of the first ecologists, and Arne Naess, a deep ecologist, have proposed new conceptions of the world that aim to overcome the deficiencies commonly attributed to the (Western) mainstream traditional philosophical position.³ Many have pointed out that we need not only better knowledge about the earth, but better knowledge about our knowledge itself, including the behavioral implications of our assumptions, categories, and values.

Religious and philosophical thinkers have discussed ecology in many ways, often choosing topics and methods that have previously been fruitful in other fields of concern. Here I have selected four issues that are particularly important, and I examine how some early Daoist texts might respond to them. All involving matters of perspective and the implications of particular positions, these four issues consist of: 1) grand narratives and little narratives; 2) centrism and domination; 3) the particular or local and the general or universal; 4) the human story and the cosmic story. Since there are considerable differences among the texts, it is risky to make generalizations about them as a whole, and thus I have limited my comments to specific texts, particularly those whose ideas are most easily translatable to modern times.⁴ I have focused especially, but not exclusively, on the *Zhuangzi* because it has been one of the most influential texts in Chinese culture. My conclusions find that this text and early Daoist thought (pre-

Han and Han dynasties) leave a mixed legacy in regard to ecological thinking. This conclusion should be helpful, however, for it can serve to remind us of the difficulty in identifying problematic assumptions and their wide-ranging ecological effects.

Grand Narratives and Little Narratives

The issue of whose story gets told and accepted by a society and whose stories are suppressed or simply not told, is important, for those who "tell the story" are able to shape people's actions, ideas, values, and identities in all sorts of significant ways. A culture's grand, or master, narrative does not simply present an account of the historical development of that culture; it justifies why things are as they are. Containing implicit and powerful values in the very categories it uses, a grand narrative represents the perspective of the dominant groups (although others usually accept it too), and it generally eliminates, without acknowledgment, other views.

Whether larger or smaller, narratives are important in that they contribute to forming an identity, they help give meaning to life, and, even more, they appear to be critical to the existence of a viable society. Here, "identity" should not be understood in the sense of an eternal, unchanging essence, but rather as something that is constructed as part of a historical process involving many kinds of relationships. This conception of identity entails seeing one's self or one's group as part of a specific history and specific place, it recognizes that the self or group is socially and linguistically constructed, and it accepts that people have some capacity for acting intentionally.

Realizing the ecological importance of "who tells the story," ecologists have analyzed how the grand narrative of the modern West has supported the ecological destruction associated with capitalism and state socialism.⁵ Although most now reject this grand narrative, they do not agree on what should take its place. One major issue is whether the construction of a new grand narrative should be attempted, or whether little narratives might be more effective in changing people's views and actions.

Western thinkers have not seriously integrated the experiences of other major civilizations into their analyses, however. For instance, massive ecological destruction has also occurred in China, and long

before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but for different reasons and in different ways from ecological destruction in the West.⁶ Consideration of the narratives of other cultures may enhance current analyses, including those that ask what values are dominant in a culture, what views help to provide its identity, and what concerns serve to motivate the actions of the leadership group and ordinary people.

Early Daoist texts contain both grand narratives and little narratives. Those of the former type are mostly “countercultural” narratives, in that they reject the grand narrative of the Confucian view. Here I shall use as examples two selections from the *Zhuangzi*, although there are other similar stories, both in the *Zhuangzi* and in other texts.⁷ By attacking the ostensibly harmful results of the Confucian way and by offering their own alternative vision, these stories attempt to establish a nondestructive human relationship with the surrounding environment. Constructing a different cultural identity, they emphasize close relations between humans and nature, here conceived in terms of the earth, living things, and the Way (*Dao*) and its Virtue (*De*).

My first example is a story from chapter 9, “Horses’ Hoofs.” It describes an ancient, utopian time of “Perfect Virtue,” a period when people were not rushed or agitated and when mountains and lakes were not marred by such human constructions as trails and bridges. All living things lived with their own kind, developing to their full potentials, and the various species lived peacefully in close proximity to each other. This was a time characterized by the Way and its Virtue, but it was destroyed when the (Confucian) sage appeared, with his concepts of morality. Confucian notions of rightness and benevolence served to divide and destroy the ancient harmony.

My second example, a story from chapter 14, “The Turning of Heaven,” tells about the rule of those early sage rulers the “Three August Ones” and the “Five Emperors.” It is claimed that their methods of rule brought confusion instead of order, and their so-called wisdom led to environmental chaos. The air became such that the sun and moon no longer shone brightly, hills were stripped of their trees and streams became sluggish (with silt), and even the regularity of the four seasons was upset. “Not a living thing was allowed to rest in the true form of its nature and fate.” Even worse, these rulers did not regard their actions as shameful, but “considered themselves sages!”

The Perfect Virtue story emphasizes a closeness that was believed

to have once existed between human beings and the natural world. It especially draws attention to the similar “principles” or patterns that characterize life—of humans, animals, and plants. These patterns include both the social nature of life, that of animals as well as humans, and the compatibility of all types of life-forms. That all existence is social is an important assumption, for it implies a priority for the group on the basis of the inborn characteristics of living things. Indeed, this story does not even entertain the notion of an individual identity separate from a group.

The compatibility of all life-forms is a second, equally important, assumption, for it rejects the view that humans can live well only if they can control or destroy other life-forms or the natural world that they inhabit. Like many of the stories, this story criticizes Confucian actions and justifications, put forth in the name of such virtues as benevolence and rightness, on the grounds that Confucians in effect reject the “compatibility” assumption and transform the “social” into a narrow range of experience, specifically only that of human beings. The *Laozi* also echoes these ideas in many of its passages, such as: “When the great way falls into disuse, there are benevolence and recitude”; and “Exterminate the sage, discard the wise, and the people will benefit a hundredfold.”⁸

With a few changes in language, the story of the Three August Ones could be a description of the effects of modern industrialization, as it speaks critically of air and water pollution, deforestation, and the destruction of habitat. While it is possible that such language was primarily metaphorical, other texts and passages refer to similar kinds of environmental problems. For example, there is the anecdote about the prehistorical Kua Fu (Bragging Father), which appears in several kinds of eclectic texts from the Han period, including the *Huainanzi*, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and the *Liezi*. Kua Fu’s thirst was so great that even though he drank the Yellow and Wei Rivers dry, he still died of thirst. As Mark Elvin has suggested, rather than view the story of Kua Fu as being about someone who misjudged his own strength, it can be interpreted as representing the Chinese “destruction of the systems of the natural infrastructure that support life—here symbolized by the exhaustion of the great rivers, insufficient to satisfy Kua Fu’s all-consuming thirst.”⁹

Whether metaphorical or descriptive or both, the Three August Ones story assumes vital connections between human beings and the condi-

tions of their habitat, which includes Heaven and Earth and all living things. Nonetheless, both in ancient China and the contemporary world, environmental destruction has often resulted incidentally from beliefs and actions concerned with some other specific problem. For instance, the Chinese often destroyed forests because they were viewed as “hideouts for bandits and rebels” and as places where uncivilized people lived.¹⁰ Problems of environmental degradation were, and are, related to a constricted view of human beings, one that discounts, and is often blind to, the varied interactions among humans and other living things and their places of habitation. By the time the early Daoist texts were compiled, moreover, massive reshaping of the environment was already underway, especially through water control projects.

Narratives like these two offer alternatives to the grand narrative of Chinese culture accepted by Confucian thinkers and many historians. Daoist stories reject a cultural identity that apparently entailed considerable destruction of the natural world, a phenomenon which even the *Mencius*, a Confucian text, refers to in its famous story of Ox Mountain, which had become stripped of its original vegetation. An important ecological issue that appears in many of these narratives is the method of ruling. Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, *Laozi*, and *Liezi* reject rulers’ efforts to shape and change people’s hearts, for such efforts eventually lead people to see themselves as separate from one another and ultimately separate from other creatures and the environment. This destructive type of ruling (carried out by the mythological sage rulers and culture heroes Huang Di, Yao, Shun, and Yu) is concerned with manipulating and thwarting the natural inclinations and actions of people as a way to control the world.

The Daoist alternative found in its grand narrative described here emphasizes the view that processes of change are inherent in all things; thus, the way to flourish is to accept and go along with change—to accord oneself with Dao (the Way). As the *Laozi* claimed, if the rulers hold fast to the Way, “the people will be equitable, though no one so decrees.”¹¹ The criticism of the *Zhuangzi*, *Laozi*, and other texts suggests that, because the Confucians have not recognized the many dimensions of the human habitat, their focus is too narrow and so their actions will eventually end in failure. The rejected Confucian grand narrative tends to discount the state’s violations of Dao in the realm of the earth and the myriad things.

Centrism and Domination

The issue of centrism concerns situations of domination, and so it takes many forms, including anthropocentrism, androcentrism, and ethnocentrism. Rejecting the claim of a universal viewpoint, those concerned with this issue attempt to identify the implicit perspectives from which theories and concepts are formulated. Here, the notion of anthropocentrism in relation to ecological thinking will be examined.¹² While some ecologists claim that anthropocentrism is necessary and unavoidable, others see it as a major contributor to environmental destruction. These kinds of disagreements can be attributed both to differences in the definitions of anthropocentrism and to differences in fundamental assumptions about human knowledge and the world.

Postmodern thinkers of all varieties hold that it is impossible not to have a human-centered approach, because there is no view without a perspective, no view “from nowhere.” All human knowledge is anthropocentric in some way. If anthropocentrism only entails this idea, it does not necessarily imply the human oppression of nature.¹³ Some deep ecologists disagree, claiming that all anthropocentrism is oppressive toward the environment. There are also those who maintain that it is possible for humans to view things from the perspectives of other things, to have a nonhuman perspective.¹⁴ However, a position that claims to disregard specific human interests and that presents itself as neutral or claims the ability to take another’s view is certainly suspect, for past experience has shown that it may easily entail unrecognized assumptions that support a pattern of abuses called “custom.”

Daoist texts offer a variety of comments on this issue, but only a few points can be considered here. The *Zhuangzi* in particular contains numerous conversations and stories about viewpoints and whether all things can agree on what is right. Although this concern may have been linked to other issues in the original historical context, such as the problem of making generalizations and thinking abstractly, later interpreters have regarded the issue of perspective as itself important. In order to discuss several different ideas, I shall cite three examples.¹⁵ In chapter 2, “Discussion on making all things equal,” Wang Ni points out that men, loaches, and monkeys each live in a different kind of place, and so he asks, who knows the right place to live? Since men, deer, centipedes, and hawks each eat different kinds of things, which

one knows the proper taste of food? The same question is also applied to standards of beauty, standards of right and wrong, and other such distinctions.

In chapter 7, "Fit for emperors and kings," Jie Yu, a madman (the type of person who is often considered a true sage in Daoism), compares the ruler's efforts to make people obey his "principles, standards, ceremonies, and regulations" to such feats as "trying to walk on the ocean, to drill through a river, or to make a mosquito shoulder a mountain!" In contrast to an emphasis on external behavior, the government of a true sage would involve, he claims, the self-cultivation of the ruler and then would aim to ensure that the proper conditions prevail so that all things, even a bird and a mouse, could develop and act according to their inborn capacities.

In chapter 17, "Autumn floods," Prince Mou narrates the conversation between a frog in a caved-in well and a great turtle of the Eastern Sea. The frog thought his world was the best, full of nicks and cran- nies, but the turtle got stuck before he could hardly get a foot into the well. The turtle then described the pleasures of the Eastern Sea, with its distance across of more than a thousand *li* and its depth of more than a thousand fathoms.

These conversations suggest several ways of considering anthropocentrism and ecology. The first dialogue supports the idea that living things all have their own requirements for life, and so there is no one standard for all. Thus, humans should not force their standards on other creatures if they wish other creatures to flourish according to their natural potentials. In addition, like all living things, humans themselves have their own standards and conditions of life that are based on their inborn nature. If rulers attempt to change these natural standards, humans will not flourish as they otherwise would. The conclusion is that humans must regard as important those concerns that are specifically human. Humans have no choice but to be anthropocentric to some extent, but ideally, that entails an appreciation of the variations in the requirements for life of all different creatures.

Also important for ecological thinking is the further assumption that things and their habitats go together; what a thing is cannot be separated from its habitat. The destruction of certain conditions would lead to the destruction of those life-forms intertwined with those conditions. The anthropocentric position presented here thus does not accept that humans should use their special abilities to de-

stroy other living things and habitats simply because they have the power to do so. Such actions would eventually destroy the very world on which their lives depend. This point was clearly recognized by Chinese officials by the late imperial period, if not earlier, but they lacked sufficient power and incentive to act effectively.¹⁶

The second dialogue above reaffirms the idea that all things have, according to their "species," their inborn natures that condition their existence. In offering impossible situations as counterexamples, this conversation mocks that kind of anthropocentric position that wants to reshape the conditions of life of all creatures, including human beings. Such efforts will ultimately fail. The anthropocentric position supported here actually goes one step beyond a "control" or "neutral" position vis-à-vis living things, for it claims that the sage should act so as to help all creatures flourish. This imperative does not mean superficial types of actions, such as occasionally feeding wild creatures, but rather making sure that the conditions of their existence continue to prevail—including the conditions for human existence.

The third dialogue, between the well frog and the sea turtle, makes the point that all living things (not just humans) view the world from the perspectives of their own situations. The perspectives of all things, even humans, are conditioned and limited. In addition, humans are sufficiently similar to other creatures, so that analogies can be made between animals and humans, and dialogues between animals can be substituted for dialogues between humans. Not ridiculed or rejected, such dialogues are accepted as realistic.

While humans may think that their position is closer to that of the great sea turtle than that of the little frog, such may not be the case. The belief of people in their ability to control nature may not be so different from the certainty of the frog. Moreover, the very limitations of one's viewpoint, human or otherwise, prevent one from seeing how restricted one's viewpoint is. Ordinary life does not enable one to get outside of one's perspective and assumptions. Thus, anthropocentrism is as inevitable for humans as the "turtle-centric" and "frog-centric" positions are for the sea turtle and the well frog. What human beings can do, however, is recognize that there are limitations to the human perspective, even though what those limitations are may not be known, and they can start caring for other creatures and habitats. These passages thus seem to say that, unless one makes other, unstated assumptions, a "centric" position does not necessarily entail domination.

Other Daoist texts reveal that unstated assumptions were made in different contexts, however, and so the anthropocentric position expressed above was not shared by all texts labeled "Daoist." For example, sections in the *Huainanzi*, such as chapter 4, "The Treatise on Topography," represent a Han dynasty form of Daoism, generally termed Huang-Lao.¹⁷ Taking a stronger anthropocentric perspective, a passage on the "beautiful things" of each region reveals a recognition and acceptance of the variation of the surrounding world, with each mountain or region producing products different from the others. However, the products of the outlying regions are regarded as exotic, and only those of the central region are seen as necessary for civilization. The standards for judging things, whether it concerns their beauty or their worth, are thus the standards of Chinese civilization and its ruling elite, not the standards of the things and regions themselves. A hierarchy of values is characterized by the allowance of only one legitimate perspective.

A passage describing the qi (matter-energy) of different kinds of places adds to the above position by providing a qi foundation, that is, an inborn relationship, between a region and the type of thing produced in that region. The sages are considered the best kind of thing and the central region produces many sages. Thus the central region, and the site of Chinese civilization, has better qi than other regions.

While passages from the *Zhuangzi* suggest that an anthropocentric position is not necessarily destructive toward the natural world, many of those from the *Huainanzi* lay the groundwork and justification for the exploitation of the environment. Key assumptions in the *Zhuangzi*'s perspective are: that all knowledge is from a specific, interested point of view, and thus no viewpoint is neutral; that different types of things can exist harmoniously in the same world and that the success of one type does not require the failure of another; that there is a natural fit between places and creatures and so diversity is a fundamental characteristic of the flourishing of life; that human knowledge has limitations, even if not recognized, and thus the importance of keeping an open mind; and that there is an imperative for human responsibility in nurturing the well-being of things and habitats. However, the addition of just one belief from the *Huainanzi*, that the perspective of the Chinese state and civilization takes precedence over all other things, thoroughly changes the meaning of the *Zhuangzi*'s anthropocentrism.

The Particular or Local, and the General or Universal

A third issue that concerns ecologists is the relation between the focus of people's interests and their development of a moral stance. The question of focus is generally understood in terms of whether people pay attention to local and particular conditions, or to general and universal conditions, or to both. At issue is what kind of focus best contributes to developing a moral position. Both ecofeminists and deep ecologists have had much to say on this issue.

Ecofeminists often, but not exclusively, emphasize the importance of personal relationships and particular emotional attachments for the development of a moral position, and so they tend to pay attention to the particular and the local.¹⁸ Deep ecologists generally emphasize the need to care for "the whole." Stressing the universal, they question how, and whether, a concern for human beings and for a local region can be developed into a concern for nonhuman beings and for the world as a whole. From an ecofeminist viewpoint, however, the deep ecologists' position continues, or is close to continuing, the abstract rationalism and the universalizing character of modern, Enlightenment thought. Still, some ecofeminists side with deep ecologists who fear the dangers of too much emphasis on the local, the regional, or "the tribal," without an accompanying larger view. Although there are different matters to resolve, the problem of developing a moral position seems to exist no matter the level at which one fixes one's interest.

The question has also been raised whether a focus on either the universal or the local inherently possesses a moral orientation, through the very construction of a story or formulation of a concern. Some, like Ynestra King, an ecofeminist, do not think that a local focus (or, bioregionalism) entails a moral stance.¹⁹ And, even if it does, it is not necessarily one that is conducive to caring for the whole. On the other hand, deep ecology has been charged with moral failure by not having a genuine concern for all humans, and for a while some people saw possible ideological links between it and the Nazi movements of the mid-twentieth century.²⁰

Before we consider some Daoist responses to the issue of focus, a few further comments about deep ecology and some comparisons and contrasts might be helpful. Deep ecology seems to offer a position that is compatible with many Daoist texts, for it focuses on the whole

by assuming the interrelationship of all life. According to Jim Cheney, an ecofeminist, the ethical stance supported by deep ecology emphasizes “interdependence, relationship, and concern for the community in which we [humans] are imbedded,” and it entails an opposition to ethical positions that emphasize “individual rights, independence, and the moral hierarchy implied in the rights view.”²¹ Michael Zimmerman has observed that deep ecology is opposed to “modernity’s atomistic, hierarchical, dualistic, and abstract conceptual schemes.”²² It is especially known for its advocacy of the notion of an “expanded self,” or “ecological self,” which incorporates the entire cosmos and which, for some, has ties with the Hindu notion of *ātman* (the eternal, unchanging, real Self).

The views of deep ecology and the early Daoist texts actually differ in many ways, including the positions to which they are opposed. Early Daoism does not support any of the moral alternatives that deep ecology faces, either those that stress community relations or individual rights. Atomism was not an issue in the ancient Chinese world, and their dualisms involve relationships more akin to polarity than metaphysical otherness. However, abstract conceptual schemes did begin to develop about the time of the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi* and became widespread slightly later, by Han times. Although Dao has many meanings, in the sense of a pattern of constant change inherent in all things, Dao does involve a type of abstract conceptual scheme, as do the yin-yang and Five Phases conceptions of the Han.

Hierarchy is also present in both deep ecology and early Daoism, although one must consider whether the oppression and environmental destruction that are often claimed to be a result of hierarchy are actually the result of hierarchy itself or of other beliefs linked to hierarchy. If the latter is the case, oppression and destruction would probably remain even if hierarchical relations were eliminated. Moreover, if we ask whether deep ecology and early Daoism both make the assumption that social domination and ecological destruction go together, the question is virtually a non-question for Daoism, since, for the Chinese, there is no world without social hierarchy and domination. Deep ecologists assume social domination and ecological destruction go together, but their solution may unwittingly continue the problem by “hiding” social domination in their new notion of the self, as some ecofeminists have suggested.

A troubling question raised about deep ecology is whether its ho-

lism involves a notion of the self that is a (Western) masculinist conception of self—that is, an atomistic conception of self, as opposed to a (Western) feminist, web-like, relational conception of self.²³ This difference is important because those who have formed one kind of self behave and think in different ways from those who have formed another kind. The concern is that deep ecology’s ecological (or expanded) self could be a transformed version of the old, universal self, the male, which served as the standard against which others (lessers) measured themselves. Advocating the self of deep ecology could thus lead to the continued exploitation of women and others (including the nonhuman world) who might be swallowed up by this expanded self or for whom a notion of expanded self makes no sense, given that their sense of self is already permeable, pliable, relational, responsive, and without strict boundaries.²⁴ In the case of the latter notion of self, there is, in effect, nothing to expand.

Given this suspicion, which all ecologists do not share, about the expanded self, an important question is whether the early Daoists’ conception of Dao ends up being functionally similar and so equally problematic ecologically. The concept of Dao in the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi* often focuses on and emphasizes the universal (pattern of change) while deprecating particular, individual experiences. For instance, in chapter 13, “The Way of Heaven,” the particulars of the sensory, natural world are not valued for themselves:²⁵

What you can look at and see are forms and colors; what you can listen to and hear are names and sounds. What a pity!—that the men of the world should suppose that form and color, name and sound are sufficient to convey the truth of a thing.

And from the *Laozi*:²⁶

I do my utmost to attain emptiness;
I hold firmly to stillness.

The *Zhuangzi*, *Laozi*, and *Liezi* further take the paradoxical position of valuing the female and so seeming to value women, but by identifying the female with the source of life and of all things, they end up not treating women as full human beings and so actually deprecating them. For instance, in a passage referring to ideas from the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi* says:²⁷

Lao Dan said, "Know the male but cling to the female; become the ravine of the world. Know the pure but cling to dishonor; become the valley of the world." Others all grasp what is in front; he alone grasped what is behind. He said, "Take to yourself the filth of the world." Others all grasp what is full; he alone grasped what is empty. . . .

From the *Liezi* there is this account, with a version also in the *Zhuangzi*:²⁸

Only then did Liezi understand that he had never learned anything; he went home, and for three years did not leave his house.

He cooked meals for his wife,

Served food to his pigs as though they were human,

Treated all things as equally his kin,

From the carved jade he returned to the unhewn block,

Till his single shape stood forth, detached from all things,

He was free of all tangles

Once and for all, to the end of his life.

Depreciating women outright, the *Liezi* also says:²⁹

I have very many joys. Of the myriad things which heaven begot mankind is the most noble, and I have the luck to be human; this is my first joy. Of the two sexes, men are ranked higher than women, therefore it is noble to be a man. I have the luck to be a man; this is my second joy. . . .

Depreciation of women as full human beings goes along with a depreciation of the particulars of nature (Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things) and of particular sensory and emotional experiences. The ultimate value is Dao, a primary understanding of which is the pattern of life and change. Although the early Daoist texts identify Dao with all things, large and small, they also identify Dao with what is inborn, as opposed to what is acquired; the inner, as opposed to the outer; and genuine qualities as opposed to superficial. In the *Zhuangzi* in particular, Dao is identified with Heaven. Heaven is above and in the male position; Earth is below and in the female position. From at least Han times on, moreover, Heaven was male and Earth was female. Thus, the set of associations that eventually developed linked the female to the group of acquired and superficial things, those not Dao.

Liezi's accomplishment of being able to forget social distinctions (the "carved jade") and return to Dao (the "unhewn block") is symbolized by taking over the position of his wife. The female role of staying at home and cooking meals was equivalent to his treating pigs as human and treating all things as equally his kin. These situations are all symbols of becoming one with Dao. As representatives of the unhewn block, Liezi's wife and the female role thus are part of the background for Liezi. Consequently, women have no way to achieve what Liezi did—to become "free of all tangles," for they already are at home and already cook the meals.

It is not claimed, moreover, that Liezi's wife has already achieved the state of the unhewn block by carrying out her assigned social role. To suggest that she could become free by a reversal in gender roles (as Liezi did)—that she take on the male role and find work in society—would make no sense, for the point is to escape from society's distinctions and rules. The path to achieving detachment from things and returning to Dao, by symbolically becoming the female, is not open to women.

A similar viewpoint appears in the *Laozi* reference from the *Zhuangzi* text, namely, that it is not a "human" perspective being represented, but a specifically elite male perspective. A woman already is "the female." There is no social instruction for her to "know the male" as there is for males. Despite the apparent honoring of the female, the associations with the female are such low things as the ravine of the world, dishonor, the valley of the world, what is behind, the filth of the world, and what is empty. Laozi can value these low things because he is not them, but he can choose a strategy of acting like them if it is beneficial to him to do so.

These ideas do not allow a woman the option of choosing alternative values and positions. Only someone in the elite male position has the possibility of acting deliberately or not following his inborn characteristics or his heart. Those in the female position, along with plants and animals, lack that freedom, for they are analogous to those aspects of the world that cannot act purposefully or initiate action. From an ecological viewpoint, the ideas associated with the surrounding natural world coincide with those associated with the female. They include such notions as lowness, dishonor, filth, and emptiness. Like the female, Earth's habitats and the myriad things are also not re-

guarded as actors in themselves. Not assumed to have significant life courses in themselves, both habitats (such as rivers and mountains) and the myriad things are the conditions in which elite men act.

The concern, whether justified or not, that deep ecology's expanded self is covertly a version of the atomistic, masculinist self thus has a parallel in certain Daoist texts, in that the ideal of becoming "fire" and "one with Dao" makes sense only for someone in the elite male position. By treating that position as the human and the female position as symbolic of Dao, early Daoism does not acknowledge women as fully human. Its stance tacitly entails social practices that are destructive to actual women as well as to actual parts of the natural world, for it is part of a view that sees particular things, events, and places as transitory and inconsequential moments in the larger process of constant change (Dao).

In other words, despite occasional comments in praise of the local and the particular, the ultimate focus of early Daoism is on the universal rather than on the particular. Although its androcentric value system favors inborn, natural capacities, the particulars of human experience do not have great worth. Things, places, feelings, and events in nature are not regarded as valuable "moments" in themselves. While the *Zhuangzi* and *Laotzi* may not speak directly to the ecological issue of whether a local or universal focus contributes better to developing a moral position, their positions imply that only Dao, as a universal process of change, is moral—moral in the sense of being the ultimate value. The particulars of Earth and of the myriad things are left without genuine moral protection.

The Human Story and the Cosmic Story

A fourth issue for ecologists is whether a moral position can be developed that joins humans with the rest of the cosmos, or whether moral positions require, at least to some extent, a separation between the "human story" and the "story of the cosmos." The conceptions of both human beings and the cosmos are important in this issue. In regard to humans and going beyond biological aspects, a fundamental question is whether it is sufficient, for ecological purposes, to view humans as individual entities with social dimensions or whether it is also necessary to acknowledge the reality of social groups.³⁰ In accepting the

latter position, social groups are not to be seen as either tangible or metaphysical entities, but as social entities, real in the sense that communities or ecosystems are real. The very formulation of a distinction between the cosmic story and the human story echoes the dichotomy between Heaven (or Dao) and human in the *Zhuangzi*, the uncarved block and vessels in the *Laotzi*, and nature and culture in Western thought.³¹

In speaking to this issue, deep ecologists emphasize the interrelatedness of all things and so do not want to separate the human and the cosmic. Ecofeminists are somewhat suspicious of the implications of this position, however, and advocate some degree of separateness. They are concerned that deep ecology does not sufficiently acknowledge the difference between humans as biological organisms and as members of a social community and so could support positions that are immoral or amoral.³²

Another difficulty focuses on the claim that one result of Enlightenment thought has been to disembody human beings, by separating mind and body and by valuing what stands for mind and denigrating what stands for body. This disembodiment has in turn led to separating human beings from nature. Charlene Spretnak, an ecofeminist, has further asserted that such foundational movements as Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment, as well as deconstructive postmodernism, have contributed to a diminished view of what is human and have "framed the human story apart from the larger unfolding story of the earth community."³³ The solution, she says, is not only to expose "the power dynamics inherent in the metanarratives of the modern world view," but also "to break out of the conceptual box that keeps modern society self-identified apart from nature and to reconnect with a fuller, richer awareness of the human as an integral and dynamic manifestation of the subjectivity of the universe."³⁴

The question here is how the views of the human in the Daoist texts compare to these Western conceptions that are fundamentally biological, or disembodied, or social. While the texts recognize the role of language in shaping experience, there is no evidence that they promote or even recognize the idea that human experience is socially constructed. That is, despite their recognition of different viewpoints and the arbitrariness of names, they accept that there are "givens" in the world not subject to human control or social convention. One such

given in the *Zhuangzi*. For instance, is the distinction between “what is of Heaven” (or Dao) and “what is of humans.” Other givens include Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things; the realm of the world (*tianxia*, “under Heaven”); the world or this generation (*shi*); and the family (variously defined). Comparable ones are found in the other texts, such as the distinction between the named and the nameless, the constant and that which is not constant, found in the first chapter of the *Laozi*. Most texts, Daoist and non-Daoist, further accept certain social givens, such as the ruler and the people (*min*).

Daoist texts contain accounts that may be compared to, although they are not the same as, the biological view, in that human beings and all things are seen as embedded, on the level of their bodies, in the processes of the natural world. The *Zhuangzi*, for instance, teaches people to accept the inevitable transformations of things (*wu*), even such transformations as becoming “all crookedly” or having an arm transformed into a rooster.³⁵ However, the particular transformations are not important; only Dao is. By valuing Dao as the creative, transforming cosmic process and by devaluing particular embodiments and physical characteristics, the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi* put forth their versions of the disembodied view of the human.

Along with their (biological-type) views of the embeddedness of all things in the cosmic processes and their (disembodied-type) views that all things are in constant transformation and are subject to Dao, neither the *Zhuangzi* nor *Laozi* accept that social groups are a type of thing (*wu*). That is, there is no claim that society, or “the world,” or any specific social group, is embedded in the cosmic process in the way that things are. The *Zhuangzi*’s teaching of constant transformation is not extended to society or to any social group, and the *Laozi* rejects changes in society by urging a return to primitive conditions of life, with no vehicles, weapons, or writing.³⁶

The world (*tianxia* or *shi*), a human social collective, is “self-identified” apart from Dao. Rather than recognize that it had become characteristic of the world to build bridges and roads and to write and value books, the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi* criticize these kinds of activities. Although not all of the world’s changes are environmentally destructive, these texts value the ancient time of simplicity and harmony and do not accept that all the changes of the world are simply more transformations in the constant process of cosmic transformation.

By rejecting that transformations can apply to the world as well as

to things, these texts ultimately view the human story as one concerning individual human beings who need to overcome their attachments to the social and sensory particulars of their lives. The human story is not one about the human collective as a whole or one about particular groups. Thus, like the Western foundational movements criticized by Spretak, and despite their countercultural narratives noted above, the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi* also frame “the human story apart from the larger unfolding story of the earth community.”

Although “the world” is not recognized as a thing, the social dimension of being a human being is assumed. The reality of relationships like father and son, husband and wife, is not challenged. However, the *Zhuangzi* in particular does teach that if one develops to the utmost all of one’s Heaven-given, inborn capabilities, including one’s social and physical abilities, one can end up being chained or destroyed—by the world. For instance, one passage equates a man’s studying the (Confucian) Dao and learning the principles of things with a monkey’s developing its quickness or a dog’s becoming a good hunter. They “end up chained.” Another passage tells how delicious fruit trees end up being abused and suffering an early death if they produce their fruit, while the gnarled oak tree lives its full life.³⁷

The position of the *Zhuangzi* and *Laozi* on this issue thus presents difficult problems from an ecological viewpoint. Their view “shrinks the human story” by opposing changes in the connections between the world—that is, humans acting together as a collective body—and the surrounding, natural environment and within social groups themselves. It opposes, but does not attempt to repair, activities that are judged destructive. In its rejection of both social activities associated with the Confucians and any ultimate value to sensory experience, these texts help support a position that actually denigrates both the particulars of the natural processes of the environment and many of the inborn capacities given to humans by Heaven.

In both the ancient Chinese and contemporary worlds, we see, however, that communal living and the formation of groups are as much a part of the human story as an individual person’s experiences. By viewing the flourishing of society as entailing the enslavement of people and the flourishing of individual human beings as requiring that they cultivate only some of their natural capacities while repressing others, including those that are sensory and socially related, the texts in effect say that one’s body and much that is associated with it

are not important. Although their position links individual humans with the rest of the cosmos, it avoids addressing critical aspects of the human condition by separating the collective human story from the story of the cosmos. Change is valued for the latter but not for the former. Consequently, the *Zhuangzi* and *Laotzi* lack a position on this issue that would be helpful for systematically addressing ecological issues.

Conclusion

Daoist ideas can be used to respond to contemporary ecological issues, such as those concerned with narratives, with centric positions, with tensions between the particular and the universal, and with the place of human beings in the cosmos. Although some ideas offer helpful perspectives on ways to conceive of the relationships between humans and the world, others are questionable and perhaps objectionable. The androcentric bias, for instance, must be given further analysis, so that the ecologically destructive effects of hidden associations and connections can be recognized.

Although more fully developed in texts other than the *Zhuangzi* and even the *Laotzi*, such groups of associations as Earth, the female, stillness, completing, and lowly—as opposed to Heaven, the male, activity, initiating, lofty—implicitly support a view that sees the realm of the earth as the stage for elite male performances, a site where political activities reach completion. Thus, while many passages are critical of civilization's destruction of the earth, including its rivers and mountains, fundamental cultural associations remain, buried in the thinking, that do not enable the earth and those things associated with it to be conceived as worthwhile in themselves, or as actors able to make choices. Recognizing such problems in texts like the Daoist ones, which also have ecologically favorable attributes, may help us in analyzing contemporary obstacles to the development of a strong ecological commitment.

Notes

1. For a discussion of some of these positions, see Michael E. Zimmerman, *Constructing Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); for selected readings, see *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 1996); *Rewriting the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990); *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); and J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994 and 1997).
2. Karen J. Warren, "Feminism and the Environment: An Overview of the Issues," in *Philosophy of Women: An Anthology of Classic to Current Concepts*, ed. Mary Briody Mahowald, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1994), 495–510. The eight (interrelated) types that she identifies are: historical and causal, conceptual, empirical and experimental, epistemological, symbolic, ethical, theoretical, and political.
3. Aldo Leopold, for instance, proposed that the concept of the ethical community be broadened beyond the sphere of human beings to include the land and all of the natural processes associated with it. See Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).
4. For an overall view on the various texts, see *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, comp. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2d ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
5. See Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *This Sacred Earth*, ed. Gottlieb, 184–93; Zimmerman, *Constructing Earth's Future*, 1–17; and Callicott, *Earth's Insights*, 1–43.
6. See *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History*, ed. Mark Elvin and Liu Ts'ui-jung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
7. See *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 105–6 and 165. Actually, it can be argued that even the countercultural narratives are not entirely countercultural, for they use many of the same "markers" of history, such as the ancient sage rulers and exemplary figures, even while they challenge conventional values. For instance, see the stories in *The Book of Lieh-tzu: A Classic of Tao*, trans. A. C. Graham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).
8. *Leo Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), chaps. 18 and 19.
9. Mark Elvin, introduction to Elvin and Liu, *Sediments of Time*, 2; also see Graham, *Lieh-tzu*, chap. 5, "The Questions of T'ang, 101; and John S. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huananzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), chap. 4, "The Treatise on Topography," 198.
10. Eduard B. Vermeer, "Population and Ecology along the Frontier in Qing China," in Elvin and Liu, *Sediments of Time*, 247–48.

11. Lau, *Lao Tzu*, chap. 32.
12. See Val Plumwood, "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics," in Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism*, 327–55; also Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future*, chaps. 6 and 7, especially pp. 261 and 280–81.
13. "Oppression" is an important concept in social analysis, with a set of specific, but multiple, meanings. Iris Young has analyzed "oppression" in terms of "five faces": exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. See her *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), especially chap. 2.
14. Zhangzi and Huiji argued this point as they watched fish swimming in the river. See Watson, 188–89.
15. See Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 45–46, 93, and 186–87.
16. Christian Lamouroux, "From the Yellow River to the Huai," and Helen Dunstan, "Official Thinking on Environmental Issues and the State's Environmental Roles in Eighteenth-Century China," in Elvin and Liu, *Sediments of Time*, 545–84 and 585–614, respectively.
17. See Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought*, 164 and 167–68, for the passages referred to below.
18. For instance, see Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
19. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future*, 310.
20. *Ibid.*, 172–83, and *passim*.
21. *Ibid.*, 285, quoting Jim Cheney.
22. *Ibid.*, 277.
23. I am not suggesting that the choice is an either/or dichotomy. I am sympathetic, however, with Ellen Kaschak's view that gender involves a range of actions and "is something that one does repeatedly." See her *Engendered Lives: A New Psychology of Women's Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 43.
24. See Charlene Spretnak, "Radical Nonduality in Ecofeminist Philosophy," in Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism*, 425–36, especially 428–29.
25. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 152.
26. Lau, *Lao Tzu*, chap. 16.
27. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 372, and see Lau, *Lao Tzu*, chap. 28.
28. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 372, and see Lau, *Lao Tzu*, chap. 28.
29. Graham, *The Book of Lieh-tzu*, 24.
30. See Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 84.
31. See, for example, Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 182–83, and Lau, *Lao Tzu*, chap. 28.
32. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth's Future*, 286.
33. Spretnak, "Radical Nonduality," 433.
34. *Ibid.*
35. See Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 84.
36. See Lau, *Lao Tzu*, chap. 80.
37. *Ibid.*, 94 and 64.