

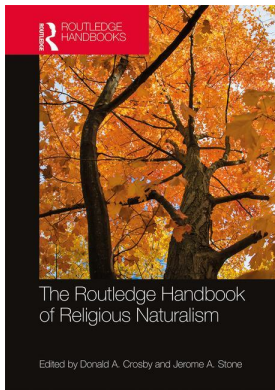
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19

DAO AND WATER

Rethinking Daoism as naturalism

Jea Sophia Oh

In *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 1, Lao Tsu teaches, “the *Dao* that can be told is not the eternal *Dao*” (Feng and English 1985: 9). Perhaps this sounds vague and mysterious. Nature is the manifestation of the *Dao* while the condition of its manifestation is its inner stillness (*xing*), the power within. It is the Way (*Dao*) of nature. It is not strange to say that nature comes out of nature. The *Dao* is everywhere and flows through everything. Therefore, the *Dao* is everything. It is not awkward to use naturalistic terms to describe *Dao* as the ultimate mystery that is manifested in nature natured (*natura naturata*) via nature naturing (*natura naturans*).

In *Dao De Jing* Chapter 8, Lao Tsu teaches, “The highest goodness resembles water. Water greatly benefits myriad things without contention. It stays in places that people dislike. Therefore it is similar to the *Dao*” (1985: 23). Reading *Dao De Jing* Chapter 8, this essay rethinks Daoism as religious naturalism. I dive into the water of *Dao* and find how *Dao* and water resemble each other to say that nature is *Dao* inasmuch as *Dao* is nature. Then, I will ask an analytic question: “If *Dao* is like water, what is *Dao* of water?” The water metaphor in *Dao De Jing* signifies nature naturing as a gender neutral word, whereas water has been interpreted by many feminist scholars as a feminine metaphor and identified as the Primal Mother. Water in the *Dao De Jing* is non-binary and neutral and means neither female nor male. In contrast with the feminist essentialist notion of Daoism, I will suggest “fecundity” as the inner power of nature in myriad things, including human males and more-than-human nature, which cannot be reduced to femininity alone. Finally, the *Dao* of nature will be presented as the basis for an ethic of nature that humans should follow in their relations with other humans and with nature as a whole.

Dao and nature

*The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao.
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
 The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth.
 The named is the mother of myriad things.
 Thus, constantly free of desire.
 One observes its wonders.
 Constantly filled with desire.*

*One observes its manifestations.
These two emerge together but differ in name.
The unity is said to be the mystery.
Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders.*

(1985: 9)

Dao is ineffable according to *Dao De Jing* Chapter 1: “The *Dao* that can be spoken is not the eternal *Dao*” (1985:9). In other words, *Dao* can be understood negatively as what never appears as such nor ever can be exactly apprehended and defined.

Likewise, Nicholas Cusa in his final work, *De apice theriae* (1464), presents *posse ipsum* (possibility itself) as the most appropriate name for God: “that without which nothing whatsoever can be, or live, or understand” (Cusa and Bond 1997: 58). *Posse ipsum* is Nicholas Cusa’s favorite name of God, which the ecotheologian Catherine Keller applies to creation as *chaosmos of posse ipsum* in her recent book, *Cloud of the Impossible*:

For the nuance of beginning, for the fly in the abyss, for the mindful, wrenching and collective materializations of the im/possible now: is there time? Is there space? Only in an unknown that does not terrify us, the practice of an apophatic entanglement.

(Keller 2015: 49)

The ineffability of *Dao* and such Western apophatic discourse are comparable in their radical inability to describe what the ultimate reality is.

The ineffability of *Dao* lies at the base of nature. Nature for Daoism is the mysterious sanctuary that humans should not ruin because of its sacredness: “The universe is sacred. You cannot improve it. If you try to change it, you will ruin it. If you try to hold it, you will lose it” (1985: 49). We read about the aesthetic quality of nature in Daoism throughout the chapters of *Dao De Jing*. The beauty of nature in *Dao De Jing* is simultaneously manifested and hidden. These two faces of *Dao* are mysteriously interwoven through nature’s folding, unfolding, and enfolding just as the moon waxes and wanes but still remains one and the same, just as the mountains wear the colors of four seasons and in this way express the beauty of nature. The beauty of nature is celebrated throughout the 81 chapters of the *Dao De Jing*.

Dao of water

*Supreme good is like water.
Water greatly benefits the myriad things, without conflict.
It flows through places that multitudes detest.
Thereby it is close to the Way.
A good dwelling is on the ground.
A good mind is deep.
A good gift is kind.
A good word is sincere.
A good ruler is just.
A good worker is able.
A good deed is timely.
Where there is no conflict, there is no fault.*

(1985: 23)

In *Dao De Jing* Chapter 8, Lao Tsu states, “The highest good is like water. Supreme good is like water. Water greatly benefits the myriad things, without conflict. It flows through places that multitudes detest. Thereby it is close to the Way” (1985: 23). In this passage water is equated with the *Dao* and proclaimed the highest good. Water is described as “the deep valley spirit that never dies. It is woman, the primal mother, the gateway of the sky and the earth” in *Dao De Jing* Chapter 6 (1985: 17). It is the power of nature, therefore, *yin*. Nevertheless, *yin* is not just femininity but “fecundity.” Beyond the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, everything is endlessly creating myriad things in the process of becoming. In this sense every entity, both at the micro and macro levels, is depicted as “a maternal body: birthing, dying, and renewing itself” (Oh 2011: 50). This deep hidden power exists in nature and works not only between women and men but also in and through every living and non-living aspect of nature.

The numerous becomings of life as multiplicities of multiplicity are written in *Dao De Jing* as myriad things (*wan wu*, 萬物). *Dao de Jing* Chapter 51 teaches that myriad things arise from *Dao* and are manifested in myriad things. *Dao* is metaphorically depicted as water that is the mother of ten thousand things in Chapter 25 (1985: 57). The Daoist water is like the chaotic *tehom* in the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible that Keller describes as an oceanic and female-associated *chaos*:

The poems of the *Dao De Jing* were composing of the primal water a nothingness that is a cornucopia that never runs dry. It is the deep source of everything – it is nothing, and yet in everything. The *Dao* invokes a flowing, formless infinity that nurtures all things without lording it over anything.

(Keller 2003: 14)

Keller’s interpretation might be applied to *Dao De Jing* Chapter 25:

Something mysteriously formed. Born before heaven and earth. In the silence and the void, standing alone and unchanging, Ever present and in motion. Perhaps it is the mother of ten thousand things. I do not know its name. Call it *Dao*. Being great, it flows. It flows far away. Having gone far, it returns.... Humans follow the earth. Earth follows heaven. Heaven follows the *Dao*. *Dao* follows what is natural.

(1985: 57)

Dao of nature

The term nature, *zìrán* (自然) in Chinese is a combination of *zì* (自, self) and *rán* (然, as it does). Thus, the idea of nature is “becoming-so” or “of-itself,” the natural state. The closest translation of *zìrán* is “self-so-ing.” This term is used to refer to “spontaneity” as well as “spontaneous act as against artificiality” (Oh 2015: 108). Thus, nature has both intentionality and spontaneity. Life is everywhere in everything, as we see with weeds growing in between cement blocks of sidewalks that barely contain soil. Life extends and grows in quantity and evolves and seeks to be better, that is, to be qualitatively abundant and happy.

Most of us have seen dandelion seeds flying in the air at one time or another. When you blow them into the air, the unfolding of dandelion seeds does not seem to move only vertically but also horizontally like parachutes move through air. This can be called a “rhizomatic movement” in the language of Gilles Deleuze. Dandelion seeds blow rhizomatically without a program or a plan and create multiplicities. Deleuze and Felix Guattari assert that multiplicities are rhizomatic

and expose arborescent pseudo-multiplicities for what they are (Deleuze and Guattari 2007: 6).¹ Deleuze and Guattari present the “rhizome” as a nomadic and fluid movement that rejects a pivotal center. With this figure of the “rhizome,” they envision structure-free-movements that spread towards multiple exteriors and become unpredictably permuted by coming into contact with whatever lies at their exteriors. The rhizome is an achronological system where non-categorizable singularities and multiplicities traverse the fixed boundaries without being arranged and schematized by any central order (2007: 7). The dandelion seed is a good analogy for Deleuzian rhizomatic movements, given the fact that Deleuze and Guattari observe that there are neither points nor positions but only lines in a rhizome such as those found in the structure of “tree or root” (2007: 7).

A dandelion flower is born of a seed among thousands of seeds and creates numerous seeds that again blow away to the air through the continual process of convergence and dissemination. A singularity creates a multiplicity that is composed of configurations of fuzzy, flexible, and vibrating lines with indeterminable trajectories. In other words, a multiplicity is necessary for regeneration. Because nature is differentially interrelated rather than unified in any absolute sense, it continually produces itself through new combinations with heterogeneous elements. Yet, there are particular finite elements and interrelations of elements produced in the continuous movements of becoming (Hayden 2008: 26).

*The Dao begot one.
One begot two.
Two begot three.
And three begot the ten thousand things.*

(*Dao De Jing*, Chapter 42, 1985: 89)

The endless fecundity of nature in Daoism is similar to Robert Corrington’s concept of nature. According to him, in the aspect of nature natured we can speak of nature as the sum of all complexes. In the other aspect of nature naturing, nature is the active source of all of the complexes. He states, “The innumerable complexes manifest as nature natured are themselves located and ordered by the sheer power of nature in its naturing” (Corrington 1991: 349). Corrington recognizes nature natured as equivalent to the orders of creation. Corrington’s nature natured has a certain autonomy from the creative impulses that sustain its orders. “Nature in its naturing can be understood as the continuing acts of creation by and through which the world is sustained against the recurrent threats of nonbeing.” While “self-so-ing” is the positive sense of nature (自然, *zìrán*), the negative sense of *zìrán* might be “self-othering” which can be expressed in Lao Tsu’s concept of non-doing (無爲, *wú wéi*). The positive side of this negative aspect of non-doing is yielding, helping others, and encouraging others on the ways to their own “self-so-ing.” Therefore, it is “self-othering.” In this aspect, nature as “self-so-ing (自然, *zìrán*)” and as *wú-wéi* (無爲) are closely related and deeply interconnected.

Dao De Jing Chapter 40 teaches, “Returning (反, *fǎn*) is the motion of the *Dao*. Yielding is the way of the *Dao*. The ten thousand things are born of beings. Being is born of not being” (1985: 85). The *Dao* of nature is non-doing rather than doing. It suggests the active passivity of negation of violence against life’s spontaneity. Therefore, it is negation of negation, double negation, because doing non-doing is the negation of violence that is negation of nature’s Way (*Dao*). Non-doing means not doing intentionally but doing spontaneously in a natural way. Change and spontaneity reflect the nature of life. When one follows its own nature, one does not need forceful interaction to intervene and support its action. Non-doing (無爲, *wúwéi*), therefore,

refers to “doing non-doing” (爲無爲, *wei-wuwei*), which proceeds freely and spontaneously from one’s own nature.

The negative practice of doing non-doing can be comparable to Corrington’s selving when he points out that “nature struggles to give birth to selves” (1991: 353). Nature’s self-transcending power is the theme of Corrington’s ecstatic naturalism. He writes, “Selving is a gift of that dimension of God that drives toward the future and the manifestation of greater actuality and consciousness” (1991: 354). For Corrington, selving is god-ing, for it manifests *Dao* in myriad things. Corrington envisions an eschatology of “autonomy as *theonomy*” that is practical rather than merely abstract. The divine lure is most fully manifest in the eschatological core of personal and social transformation. Corrington hopes for a movement of God toward the community of selves in which all heteronomy (alien law) is transformed into a true *theonomy*:

God is still finite in this dimension of God’s nature.... God can provide a lure within which the finite self may find strength to overcome its previous limitations, but God cannot force the self toward a transformed and deepened autonomy.... The divine lure is persuasive rather than coercive.

(1991: 356)

Thus, *theonomy* is indeed closely similar to *Dao* of nature.

Understanding Daoism as religious naturalism, we should recognize that religious naturalism is older than its twentieth-century forms and is anticipated by Daoism much earlier on. Daoism was formed in 550 BCE, and *Dao De Jing* was written sometime in the third or fourth century BCE, while Corrington’s *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* was published in 1994, and Donald Crosby’s *Living with Ambiguity* was published in 2008. Even though religious naturalism has its historical roots in Spinoza (1632–77), Daoism already existed in his lifetime. It would also be wrong to claim that only contemporary religious naturalists have brought to light the naturalistic aspects of Daoism since Daoism is the Way of nature.

In September 2016, the Obama administration temporarily blocked the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Native Americans and environmental activists protesting the DAPL supported by the US Army Corps have argued that the 1,172-mile pipeline would damage sacred lands and could contaminate the tribe’s water source.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe won a major victory on Sunday (December 4, 2016) in its battle to block an oil pipeline being built near its reservation when the Department of the Army announced that it would not allow the pipeline to be drilled under a dammed section of the Missouri River.

(Healy and Fandos, *The New York Times*, Dec. 2016)

However, Donald J. Trump has supported finishing the 1,170-mile pipeline, which crosses four states and is almost complete. The DAPL threatens our climate, water, and land.

Dao De Jing Chapter 8 teaches that the *Dao* is like water. We humans are a part of nature on earth, the largest part of which is water. Nature’s sufferings are undeniable, and among them are many caused by human interventions. Thus, confronting the predictable water crises in the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Standing Rock Protest by indigenous people and environmental activists involves a lot more than protecting water. Water gives life to everything without any effort. Therefore, “Water is the *Dao*.” Ruining water means going against the *Dao*.

At this juncture, we need to ask, what is the *Dao* of nature? *What Would Nature Do?* We need to shift the pipelines to the Way of nature, that is, *Dao*. *Dao De Jing* Chapter 48 offers a profound lesson for confronting our ecological crisis:

*In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.
In the pursuit of Dao, every day something is dropped.
Less and less is done.
Until non-action is achieved.
When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.
The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering.*

(1985: 100)

Note

- 1 According to Deleuze and Guattari, puppet strings as a rhizome or multiplicity are tied not to the supposed will of a puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which from another puppet in other dimensions are connected to the first. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari (2007) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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Further reading

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