

Wei Ziran: A Daoist Ecological Ethic to Ground an Ethics of the Environment

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Abstract

This study will propose an environmental or ecological ethic that de-emphasizes our self-exalted place in relation with the natural environment, and realizes the human person – as an intrinsically relational being – as a co-creative participant in the ongoing processes of the natural world. In our attempt to locate this ecological ethic, we will draw upon the wealth of wisdom of Daoist philosophy. We explore how a Daoist ecological ethic, as expressed in the Daoist philosophical text, *Daodejing*, can help us gain a more holistic approach to the question of environmental ethics – a perspective that is much closer to the Filipino’s relation with the natural environment. The human person is not the master of the natural environment. Rather, she is part of the organic process, the “Way-making” or *Dao*, which permeates all things. We will have to change our value structures. An “ethics” of the environment begins from an “ethic that is ecological.” This ecological ethic we call: “*Wei Ziran* – acting with and for the sake of self-so-ing.”

Keywords: Daoism, environmental ethics, *Wei ziran*, Dao, De

Environmental Degradation and Ethics of the Environment

Climate change is a serious threat to the global community and, of late, this issue has been on the agenda of environmentalists and policy makers alike. More recently, it was brought to the consciousness of the average person by the widely acclaimed film, *An Inconvenient Truth*.¹ This and a host of other environmental problems continue to threaten our

¹ Laurie David, Lawrence Bender and Scott Z. Burns, prods., *An Inconvenient Truth* (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2006).

planet. Global warming has been blamed on the emission of greenhouse gases by the burning of fossil fuels by industry and automobiles, while soil and water pollution has been traced to industrial waste, and the loss of natural habitats in the wild has been attributed to the ongoing expansion of human beings into the virgin forests, thereby bringing about the loss of much flora and fauna. The environmental crisis is a global concern. However, the question of environmental ethics was first raised in the west, in countries facing the consequences of industrialization and modernization.² The industrialized countries of the west were the first to experience these effects for the simple reason that they preceded others in the process of industrialization. Today, these same questions are becoming significant in other regions of the world. For example, rapidly developing China is facing a rise in incidences of air and water pollution, especially in industrial centers such as Shijiazhuang, Taiyuan, Datong and Jilin, and in the heavily populated northeast.³ Here in the Philippines, we have felt the effects of climate change in the alteration of weather patterns resulting in devastating floods and droughts in recent years.

Regardless of where we are, though, we will not be wrong to say that many of these environmental ills were brought about by human action. Take for instance the problem of climate change, of the pollution of rivers and lakes, and of floods caused by the denudation of mountainsides. We have, it seems, brought disaster upon ourselves but one wonders why we can be so callous in our treatment of the natural environment. What is at the heart of the myriad environmental problems? I believe the problem is that we have lost our sense of our oneness with the natural environment, and with this we have also lost our sense responsibility for the natural environment. But, how did this come about? One source of this problem is in the way we view the natural world—a view brought about by a “scientivistic bias.”

This “scientivistic bias” is evident in the way that science has taught us to comprehend and express the world in quantitative categories – the world can be expressed in numbers. We have learned to relate to the world in abstraction. In our post-industrial information age, our lives have become disconnected in many ways from the world in which we live.⁴ The world that used to be home, a habitat, is now a measurable entity, quantifiable in terms of centimeters, cubic meters, degrees centigrade and knots. When once we stood atop a mountain and marveled at the splendor of the forests and valleys below us and the sky above us, we now stand atop

² David Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism* (London: Croom Helm, 1984; reprint, 1993), 14-19.

³ See Jasper Becker, “China’s Growing Pains,” *National Geographic*, 3 March 2004, 68-95.

⁴ Marion Hourdequin and David B. Wong, “A Relational Approach to Environmental Ethics,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2005): 28.

the same mountain and calculate how many cubic meters of lumber we can harvest from the mountainside, what possible ore deposits there are that lie in the valley and where we can construct our transmission towers to carry our electricity generated by the hydro-electric plant on the other side of the mountain to the cities some hundred kilometers away. As a result, we are no longer as much affected by the loss of a tree or a natural habitat for a rich variety of flora and fauna because we do not see the flowers, the squirrels, the butterflies that will die and that may eventually go into extinction. We only see the world in terms of numbers, and projections—our relation to the natural world has become an abstract relation. We have learned to count the cost and benefit of our exploitation of a world that we see to be full of “natural resources,” and have placed a valuation of economic and scientific gain upon all that we survey. But, what has become of value? What do we value, what has value and why? Is the natural world merely of instrumental value? Or, does it, perhaps, have some value other than instrumentality? Can we establish that the natural environment has inherent value independent of human desires and uses, and further can we identify the rational ground for ascribing inherent value to the natural environment?⁵

Necessity of an Ecological Ethic

I believe the answer to the question of inherent value is connected to the question of the human-nature relation, the question of the place of the human person in relation to the natural environment. It is a question of our basic worldview, or world conception. The way we treat the natural environment is a consequence of this worldview. Our contemporary view of the natural environment betrays an anthropocentric bias, one that we have inherited from the scientific advances of modernity. Even the conservation ethic that many environmentalists have adopted reveals such a bias, which found ready support, in modern times, in René Descartes' separation of the conscious subject from the mechanistic world around him. Descartes' dualism provided ready support for the nascent scientific revolution. However, his influence was not limited to the metaphysical realm. In articulating the epistemological shift of focus upon human consciousness, he paved the way for the subsequent manner in which the human person learned to see and act upon the world via frameworks centered upon human consciousness—a perception of the world that could be described as a “grasping knowing.”⁶ Descartes provided support for

⁵Kathie Jenni, “Western Environmental Ethics: An Overview,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2005): 7-8.

⁶This “grasping knowing” runs contrary to the knowing that the *Daodejing* espouses, namely, *wuzhi*—noncoercive knowing. We will discuss *wuzhi* in a later part of this discussion.

the notion of a geometrical world. The world, then, through the eyes of the scientist was a world of objects that could be quantified—an abstract, mathematical world. For the capitalist, the world might be represented as a “natural resource” to be tapped and that, again, was quantifiable—in this case, in the conversion of so-called natural resources into dollars and cents, or pesos and centavos. This view of the natural environment has led us to a global environmental crisis.

A Different Perspective

In pursuing the question of environmental ethics, we need to ask ourselves: can we look at the natural environment from a different perspective? Biocentric philosopher Paul Taylor saw that the challenge of environmental ethics would require “nothing less than a revolution. . . in our ordinary ethical vision.”⁷ Perhaps, we need to develop what Walter O’Briant calls a “consistent, adequate, and unambiguous view of [the human person’s] relation to nature.”⁸ The call of environmental ethics, I believe, is a call to rethink our metaphysical convictions, to effect a complete change of our worldview—the way we understand ourselves, the natural world and our place and role in relation to the natural environment. I believe that a viable and enduring environmental ethics must be grounded upon an enduring ecological ethic—that is, the philosophical consideration of moral conduct in relation to the environment ought to be grounded on a community’s basic understanding of what that relation means and their way of living that relation. We need to recover that oneness with the natural environment that we have lost.

In this endeavor, I propose that we draw from the well of wisdom that can be found in Daoist philosophy, specifically from the text of the *Daodejing*. We find in the *Daodejing* a vision of a world that is continually becoming. In this dynamic world, each element that makes up the world is a “co-creative” participant in sustaining the whole, where “integrity”—wholeness—“is something becoming whole in its co-creative relationships with other things.”⁹ In such a world, the human person is not master or subjugator of the natural environment but an intrinsic part of a whole that functions optimally when all the parts are contributing to the “co-

⁷ Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 156.

⁸ Walter H. O’Briant, “Man, Nature, and the History of Philosophy,” in Frederik A. Kaufman, *Foundations of Environmental Philosophy: A Text with Readings* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 53.

⁹ Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” in *Daodejing: Making This Life Significant*, trans. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003), 16.

creative process in which one shapes and is shaped by one's environing circumstances."¹⁰ From this, we can draw an environmental ethic that responds to the continual becoming of the natural world—an ecological ethic of continual becoming, which we call: *wei ziran* (為自然).¹¹

Wei Ziran: Daoist Ecological Ethic of Continual Becoming

Wei ziran is a way of living and relating to the world by cultivating the disposition of *wu* (無)—the disposition of noncoerciveness or deference.¹² This noncoerciveness, we will find in our succeeding discussion, is a mirroring of the mutually deferential arising of all things and events in the natural world that finds expression as *dao* (道) and *de* (德).¹³ In order to appreciate the full meaning and implications of *wei ziran*, this ecological ethic of continual becoming, let us first examine several key principles of the *Daodejing* – *dao*, *de*, and the *wu* forms, namely, *wuwei* (無為), *wuzhi* (無知), and *wuyu* (無欲).

Dao (道)

Dao (道) literally means road or way. In *Daoist* thinking it is not merely the physical road or way; it is more fluid and dynamic. It implies a process, an ongoing efficacious functioning; it is the potentiality and possibility within each thing and each situation. It is also that which moves, the “energy of transformation” in the natural world that is behind the processes of nature.¹⁴ *Dao*, therefore, is not “way” but, as Roger Ames and David Hall put it, “way-making.”¹⁵ We may gain a better appreciation of its verbal and active nature by examining the Chinese character *dao*. Etymologically, the character *dao* (道) is a compound character made up of two separate characters.¹⁶ The first character, *zhou* (辵), means to go. It is

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Wei ziran* is my rendering into the Chinese language of the maxim, “Always act with *tzu-jan* (*ziran*),” coined by David Hall in his essay, “On Seeking a Change of Environment,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 109. This rendering of mine into Chinese expands on the idea of Hall’s by drawing on the dual meaning of the Chinese word, *wei* (為)—it means both “to act, or to do” and “for the reason, or for the sake of.” Thus, *wei ziran* takes on the meaning: acting with (*wei* 為) and for the sake (*wei* 為) of self-so-ing (*ziran* 自然).

¹² Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 32, 38.

¹³ Ibid., 33-36.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 57-59.

¹⁶ The Chinese language is more of a visual than an aural language, it “appeals to the eye rather than the ear.” Written Chinese is composed of pictographs and ideographs, which are “stylized drawings of concrete objects and symbolic representations of abstract concepts,” respectively. “[E]ach Chinese character is conceived of as a whole, with

made up of the ancient character that also means foot, thus the connotation “to go.” The other character is *shou* (首), a primitive character that means head. These root characters contribute to the meaning of *dao* as “to lead” or “to go ahead” since *dao* (道) is to go (*zhou* 走) at the head (*shou* 首).¹⁷ *Dao*, then, as way-making refers both to the way the natural world is constantly in flux, in process and to the agency of the human person making her way in the world in such a way that *dao* is never fixed; it cannot be captured in concept or entity. The opening lines of the *Daodejing* express this meaning very well:

Way-making (*dao* 道) that can be put into words is not
really way-making,
And naming (*ming* 名) that can assign fixed reference to
things is not really naming.
The nameless (*wuming* 無名) is the fetal beginnings of
everything that is happening (*wanwu* 萬物)
While that which is named is their mother.¹⁸

There are several implications of this. The first is that *dao* as way-making is a “presencing,”¹⁹ which allows us to experience and be aware of the constantly happening processes of life at a basic, existential level. On this level, *dao* cannot be named, it cannot be put into words because to

distinctive shapes and intellectually intelligible patterns.” “The characters appeal very powerfully to the mind through the eye” (*The Chinese Heritage: Some Articles for the Seminar on China Studies for Sino-American Youth* [n.p.: Youth Culture Enterprise Co. Ltd., n.d.], 115, 124, 127). G.D. Wilder and J.H. Ingram, in the introduction to their work, *Analysis of Chinese Characters*, point out that these written characters are “the products of Chinese fancy and imagination and to some extent show the workings of the Chinese mind.” Compound characters, such as *dao* (道) above, are characters made up of two or more components, each of which “has a meaning relevant to the meaning of the character as a whole” (George D. Wilder and James H. Ingram, *Analysis of Chinese Characters* [n.p.: College of Chinese Studies, 1934; New York: Dover Publications, 1974], iii, vi).

¹⁷ Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 58; Wilder and Ingram, *Analysis of Chinese Characters*, 39; Alan Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975; reprint, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), 40. Alan Watts notes that the character, *zhou* (走) connotes “moving step by step,” a ‘going and pausing’ that exhibits a ‘rhythmic movement,’ where going is *yang* and pausing is *yin*,” demonstrating the equilibrium of *dao* (Watts, 39-40).

¹⁸ *Daodejing* 1. Unless otherwise stated, all citations from the *Daodejing* are taken from the translation of Ames and Hall. Subsequent citations will carry the abbreviation *DDJ* followed by the chapter number, for example, *DDJ* 1.

¹⁹ A note about the use of the term “presencing.” The term is often associated with the thought of Martin Heidegger. In our discussion, we do not use the word in the Heideggerian sense. Rather, we borrow the term to help us express the dynamic nature of *dao*. Here, it refers to the dynamic manner in which *dao* is constantly manifested in the processes of the natural world, in all that is happening (*wanwu* 萬物).

name is to assign a fixed reference to something. Thus, *dao* is not anything, it is “no-thing” precisely because it is the possibility of everything, it is the dynamic process in everything.

Second, *dao* as way-making allows us to be aware of and participate in life without our reducing it to our subjective view or conceptual framework of what life is, or what it is for. In other words, *dao* as way-making is “presencing” and not “representing,” the latter being the tendency we have of controlling via concepts—a “grasping knowing.” One fundamental means with which we try to grasp the world is through the use of language, in giving names to things. In the classical Chinese worldview, to give a name to something signifies one’s control over it. Ames and Hall note that “to name (*ming* 名) is ‘to command (*ming* 命).’ If you have the name of something, you not only know it, but can contain it and hold it subject to your will. To invoke a name brings power and mastery with it.”²⁰ The anthropocentric view is precisely such a grasping knowing—we try to fit the natural world into our conceptual frameworks by privileging our rationality, while viewing the natural world as a sort of mechanism that can be manipulated to satisfy our purposes. Thus, the unnamable *dao* challenges us to become aware of this limiting character of language, and through that the lens with which we view the natural world and subsequently the way we treat it.

The nature of *dao* is further elucidated in the *Daodejing* with the use of metaphors such as water (*shui* 水), the nameless scrap of unworked wood (*pu* 樸), the female (*ci* 雌), the infant (*er* 兒), and the valley (*gu* 谷).²¹ These metaphors allude to *dao* as fluid way-making that is: life-giving and efficacious, noncoercive and transformative, and all-pervading (water); potent and inexhaustible possibility, or potentiality (unworked

²⁰ Ames and Hall, *Daodejing: Making This Life Significant*, 134-35. We find this also in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the second creation story found in the Gen. 2:18-23, God decides to “make a helper” for man. God proceeds to “fashion all the wild animals and all the birds of heaven,” which man was given the power to name. Some environmental ethicists, such as Lynn White, claimed that this was the cause of the “dichotomy between the people and nature” and called for either a re-reading of Genesis or even a rejection of the “Judeo-Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (Nash, *The Rights of Nature*, 88-89; see also 87-120). Kenneth Inada comments on this by pointing out that the “narrow, self-limiting, selfish nature of human experience is caused by the obsessive psychological force in all beings. In the human realm, this force can be depicted as the ‘ontological imperative,’ a basic imperative to live in terms of grasping and holding on to what one has attained or gained by either physical or non-physical (mental) means or both. Simply put, it is attachment to things or objects despite the ongoing process that does not permit such an attachment” (Kenneth K. Inada, “The Cosmological Basis of Chinese Ethical Discourse,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32, no. 1 [2005]: 45).

²¹ See the following chapters of the *Daodejing*: water (*DDJ* 8, 35, 43), unworked wood (*DDJ* 19, 28, 32, 37), female (*DDJ* 6, 28), infant (*DDJ* 28, 55), and valley (*DDJ* 4, 6, 11).

wood); receptive, fecund and nurturing (female); boundless potency (infant); and bottomless fecundity and potentiality (valley). They also help bring to light the mutual entailment of opposites of *dao* in that it is characterized as soft and yet strong, simple and yet potent, useless and yet full of potentiality, passive and yet brings things about, empty and yet fecund. *Dao* is everywhere and in all things, it is always transforming and full of possibility because *dao* as way-making is always in process, acting, and presencing. However, as we shall soon see, it is not through *dao* alone that the presencing of the natural world occurs. It is brought about by the mutual working of *dao* and *de*.

De (德)

De is usually translated as “virtue” or “power.” But, a more appropriate translation of *de* is virtuality, which expresses the active efficaciousness of *de*. Let us refer to chapter 51 of the *Daodejing* to draw out this richer meaning of *de*:

Way-making (*dao* 道) gives things their life,
 And their particular efficacy (*de* 德) is what nurtures them.
 Events shape them,
 And having a function consummates them.
 It is for this reason that all things (*wanwu* 萬物) honor
 way-making
 And esteem efficacy.
 As for the honor directed at way-making
 And the esteem directed at efficacy,
 It is really something that just happens spontaneously
 (*ziran* 自然)
 Without anyone having ennobled them.²²

In this chapter, we see that *dao* gives rise to things while *de* nurtures them. What does it mean to say that *de* nurtures? Roger Ames, in his analysis of the etymology of the character, *de*, sheds some light on its meaning:

The character, *de* (德) is comprised of three elements: *chi* (彳) “to move ahead”; [*zhi* (直)] which most etymologists take as a representation of the human eye; and *xin* (心), the “heart-and-mind.” The eye and heart-and-mind elements suggest that the unfolding process of *de* is disposed in a particular direction. *De* then is the transforming content and disposition of an existent: an autogenerative, self-

²² DDJ 51.

construed “arising” [Thus,] *de* . . . denotes the arising of the particular in a process vision of existence.²³

De is, thus, an “arising,” or “presencing” (*sheng* 升).²⁴ *De*, as “arising,” is the realization of *dao* in the particular as its particular efficacy. *De* is the particular consummation of *dao*, the manifestation of “nameless,” “elusive,” “inaudible,” and “intangible” *dao*²⁵ in actual, concrete instances of nameable, observable, audible, tangible experiences. *De* nurtures all that arises through *dao* in the ordinary events of the natural world—the falling rain, the quiet sprouting of a seedling, the gentle breeze, and the unnoticed wilting of a flower. We, who are wont to look for the spectacular and unusual, often overlook this presencing of *de* by reason of its ordinariness.²⁶ Much like the nameless scrap of unworked wood (*pu* 樸) that is unattractive, *de* as presencing of *dao* often goes unappreciated. Recognition of this can have important implications upon our view of the natural environment and of the value of the seemingly ordinary and the useless.

The second meaning of *de* is that of “power.” In our common understanding, to have power is to be able to influence another person, to manipulate events in order to attain a desired outcome, or to be able to exert force upon a subordinate physical world. In the *Daodejing*, the notion of power is not that of force or control, or domination. Rather, its power is “power exercised without the use of force and without undue interference with the order of surrounding circumstances,”²⁷ which is best described as “creativity”—the ability to bring forth something noncoercively.²⁸

Thus, *de* as arising, as virtuality, and as power can be said to be the realization, the expression or the manifestation of *dao* in the way that it nurtures the possibility by non-interference and by noncoercive action, and, in so doing, brings about the presencing of all things in the natural world.

²³ Roger T. Ames, “Putting the *Te* Back into Taoism,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 125. Alan Watts interprets the ideogram to mean “going along with unity of eye and heart (mind),” which is similar to Ames’s reading, “the eye and heart-and-mind elements suggest that the unfolding process of *de* is disposed in a particular direction” (Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 121).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁵ *DDJ* 1, 14.

²⁶ Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 108.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁸ Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 17. Ames and Hall distinguish power from creativity thus: “Power is to be construed as the production of intended effects determined by external causation. Real creativity, on the other hand, entails the spontaneous production of novelty, irreducible through causal analysis. Power is exercised with respect to and over others. Creativity is always reflexive and is exercised over and with respect to ‘self.’”

Dao-De (道 德)

In this presencing, *dao* and *de* are related in a mutually entailing and mutually benefiting relationship. In this dialectical relationship, “[t]he world emerges as a collaboration between foci and their fields, between particular events and their contexts, between one’s effective character and one’s way in the world, between *de* and *dao*.”²⁹ This relation of *dao-de*, then, as field-focus plays itself out as a unity and continuity by way of the whole and the particulars. The whole (*dao*) is the continuity, that is, the underlying context that “holds together” the particulars (*de*). On the other hand, each particular element (*de*), each presencing of *de* taken in context of the whole is woven together through this continuity (*dao*) into a dynamic unity, which is expressive of the ongoing processes of the natural world. The forty-second chapter of the *Daodejing* speaks of this:

Way-making (*dao* 道) gives rise to continuity,
 Continuity gives rise to difference,
 Difference gives rise to plurality,
 And plurality gives rise to the manifold of everything that is
 happening (*wanwu* 萬物).
 Everything carries *yin* on its shoulders and *yang* in its arms
 And blends these vital energies (*qi* 氣) together to make
 them harmonious (*he* 和).³⁰

This relationship of *dao-de* is characterized by a mutual deference,³¹ in which each allows the other to operate with greatest efficacy, according to the ongoing presencing of the event—a blending of *yin* and *yang*, and of “vital energies” that results in the “harmonious” presencing of *dao-de*. This mutually entailing, benefiting and deferential relationship in and through which the natural world occurs is expressed in the *Daodejing* as *ziran* (自然), often translated as spontaneous, but more appropriately as self-so-ing. In our relation with the world, we become more aware of one or the other (of field or focus) depending on what we direct our attention upon but, in each case, we never lose the other, for the two are inseparable for they are mutually entailing. In the *Daodejing*, “the activity [that] integrates the particular *de* with *dao*” while allowing for the spontaneous presencing of *dao-de* “is described as *wuwei*.”³²

²⁹ Ibid., 157.

³⁰ DDJ 42.

³¹ Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 38.

³² Ames, “Putting the *Tē* Back into Taoism,” 129.

Wuwei (無為)

Wuwei (無為), according to Ames and Hall, are “noncoercive actions in accordance with the *de* (‘particular focus’) of things.”³³ In keeping with the dynamic presencing of *dao-de*, *wuwei*, then, is action that does not compromise the spontaneity or self-so-ing (*ziran* 自然) of the natural world. Therefore, instead of being a passive non-action, *wuwei* is a constant participation of the human person in relation to the presencing of *dao-de*. Yet, it is a participation that is, at the same time, active and passive, because as one acts in the world, one does so in a deferential manner with respect to *dao-de* as field-focus, by allowing the presencing of *dao-de* to take place in all its richness. *Daodejing* 64:

Those who would do things ruin them;
 Those who would control things lose them.
 Hence because the sages do things noncoercively (*wuwei* 無為)
 They do not ruin them,
 And because they do not try to control things
 They do not lose them.³⁴

And again, in another chapter:

The softest things in the world ride roughshod over the
 hardest things.
 Only the least substantial thing can penetrate the seamless.
 This is how we know that doing things noncoercively
 (*wuwei* 無為) is beneficial.
 Rare are those in the world who reach an understanding of
 the benefits of teachings that go beyond what can
 be said, and of doing things noncoercively.³⁵

Wuzhi (無知)

Wuzhi (無知) is a manner of knowing that does not reduce or limit our experience of the world to conceptual frameworks. It is, in the words of Ames and Hall, “a sort of knowing without resort to rules or principles,”³⁶ these rules or principles being the limiting concepts that we

³³ Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 38.

³⁴ *DDJ* 64.

³⁵ *DDJ* 43.

³⁶ Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 38.

form of reality. Chapter 37 of the *Daodejing* reads:

Way-making (*dao* 道) is really nameless (*wuming* 無名).

Were the nobles and kings able to respect this,
All things (*wanwu* 萬物) would be able to develop along
their own lines.

Having developed along their own lines, were they to desire
to depart from this,

I would realign them

With a nameless scrap of unworked wood.³⁷

Just as *wuwei* is a noncoercive acting—a doing and living in the world that respects the ebb and flow of the presencing of *dao-de*, *wuzhi* is a way of knowing that arises from the basic conviction that the world is more than my conceptions or quantifications of it. This is a knowing that defers to the presencing of *dao-de*. In calling us to *wuzhi*, the *Daodejing* raises the questions: Does the way that we know the world take us away from the more immediate experience of it? Is it helpful, and does it capture the richness of the experience? Does it, by mediating the experience through the use of concepts, lead to an over-emphasis and over-reliance upon “representation” at the expense of the “presencing” of *dao-de*? Do our “representations” hide an anthropocentric attitude that seeks to control and manipulate? *Wuzhi* is a call to humility in relation to the possible knowledge of the world, as expressed in chapter 71:

Knowing that one does not know is knowing at its best,
But not knowing that one knows is suffering from a disease.
Thus, the reason the sages are free of disease
Is because they recognize the disease as a disease.
This is why they are not afflicted.³⁸

The second line dispels the notion that *wuzhi* is an eschewal of knowledge. It points to the ignorance of one’s knowledge as a disease. Wisdom, according to the *Daodejing*, can therefore be understood as knowing what one does not know, but also knowing what one knows in order to be able to participate more efficaciously in the world, in the presencing of *dao-de*.

³⁷DDJ 37.

³⁸DDJ 71.

Wuyu (無欲)

Wuyu (無欲) is “desiring which does not seek to possess or control its ‘object,’”³⁹ which involves cultivating a deferential desiring, a positive indifference that seeks the best not for oneself alone but for the all persons and elements involved in each situation. It is a manner of desiring in which one desires that which corresponds to the way of things, the presencing of *dao-de*. In other words, it is an attitude of “letting things be,” but not in an apathetic manner. Rather, it is a “passive desiring” that runs contrary to the grasping attitude that we spoke of earlier. *Wuyu* is the *Daodejing*’s antidote to the controlling, manipulating attitude that compels us to overdo things as well as the avarice that is often associated with the contemporary problem of materialism and consumerism. We read from the *Daodejing*:

It is better to desist
Than to try to hold it upright and fill it to the brim.
Pounded to a point
Its sharpness cannot be long maintained.

When treasure fills the hall,
No one is able to keep it safe.
Those who are arrogant because of station and wealth
Bring calamity upon themselves.

To retire when the deed is done
Is the way (*dao* 道) that *tian* (天) works.⁴⁰

Dao (in unison with *de*) works and brings things about, and when the deed is done retires. That is the way the natural world functions—it goes about its course and all things flourish, the sun rises and sets, the waters flow into the sea, the flowers bloom, the natural cycle runs for the sake of all things, living or otherwise. We read in chapter 7 of the *Daodejing*:

The heavens are lasting and the earth enduring.
The reason the world is able to be lasting and enduring
Is because it does not live for itself.
Thus it is able to be long-lived.

It is on this model that the sages withdraw their persons
from contention yet find themselves out in front,
Put their own persons out of mind yet find themselves

³⁹ Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 38.

⁴⁰ *DDJ* 9.

taken care of.

Isn't it simply because they are unselfish that they can satisfy their own needs?⁴¹

One who is *wuyu*, therefore, will be able to mirror the working of *dao-de* in her participation in the world and in so doing, will be able to experience fulfillment. Chapter 15 echoes this: one is more cognizant of one's potency and fecundity and able to tap that wealth within oneself when one is not "full of it." The *Daodejing*:

Those who prize way-making do not seek fullness;
It is only because they do not want to be full
That they are able to remain hidden and unfinished.⁴²

This "unfinished" potency and fecundity, as we saw earlier, is symbolized by the unworked wood, *pu* (樸). Thus, to be *wuyu* is to be like that nameless scrap of unworked wood, to be simple and thus be able to achieve equilibrium in our relation with the natural world.

Realigned with this nameless scrap of unworked wood,
They would leave off desiring.
In not desiring, they would achieve equilibrium,
And all the world would be properly ordered of its own
accord.⁴³

Ecological Ethic of Continual Becoming

Our discussion has led us to see that the natural world is a world in process, with each element engaged in a constant interplay with one another as well as with the context that sustains and enables each one to become what it is. This we have seen as the expression of the relation of *dao* and *de*, the spontaneous (*ziran*) presencing of *dao-de*, that underlies all that is happening (*wanwu*). The natural environment is made up of a complex system of inter-relationships and mutual influences. Thus, nature is involved in a continuous balancing act, an ongoing process of attaining "equilibrium-in-motion." In this continuous balancing act, the world is ever new. There is at the same time a "familiar rhythm to life" and a "newness of each moment."⁴⁴ In response to this "equilibrium-in-motion" of *dao-de*, the Daoist ecological ethic challenges us to rethink certain notions

⁴¹ DDJ 7.

⁴² DDJ 15.

⁴³ DDJ 37.

⁴⁴ Ames and Hall, "Philosophical Introduction," 33-36.

that we have been grown accustomed to: our place in relation with the natural environment, and our personal responsibility toward the natural environment.

Person-in-Relation-with-the-Natural-World

Applying the principle of the mutually entailing *dao-de* to the human person and the natural world, we can see the value of respecting the dynamic of field and focus, of the context and the particular. In this light, the human person is the “focus” in relation with the natural environment, the “field,” as microcosm to macrocosm. In this view, the human person is not set apart from the presencing of *dao-de*. She is, in fact, an integral part of this dynamic presencing. As co-creative participants in the ongoing presencing of *dao-de*, we are intrinsically related to the natural environment in which we live, and our every action creates an effect upon our surroundings, and vice versa.

Therefore, we can see how the *Daodejing* envisions an ethic that is corrective of the dualistic worldview that apparently lies at the heart of our exploitation of the natural environment. Consequently, in place of the subject-object dichotomy, the Daoist ethic seeks to discover and understand the human person in intimate relation with the world. Given this, we can surmise that the relation of the human person to the natural world is one in which the human person finds herself as person-in-relation-with-the-natural-world—a relationship of interconnectedness, each bearing a mutually creative and deferential influence upon the other. This realization places the human person in an equal relation with the manifold elements in the natural world, and, thus, removes him from the artificial pedestal that he has made for himself. The human person is just a part among the manifold that come together and are manifested in the presencing of *dao-de*. In this light, we are called to temper the arrogance of our rationality, and to let go of the “grasping tendency” of our intellects, which confines us to a limited view and hence a limited experience of the natural world.

Person as Co-creative Participant: Personal Responsibility

The second point that we are invited to rethink in our relation with the natural environment is our notion of personal responsibility towards the natural environment.⁴⁵ In a world of relationality, where the human person is a “co-creative participant”⁴⁶ in the workings of the natural

⁴⁵ Ames, “Putting the *Te* Back into Taoism,” 142.

⁴⁶ Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 16. Integrity is a “becoming whole in one’s relation with other things in a co-creative process in which one shapes and is shaped by one’s enviroing circumstances.”

environment, personal responsibility is inextricably linked to responsibility for all else since the “environment [is] . . . an immediate dimension of ourselves.”⁴⁷ The individual is an intrinsic part, or element, of the ongoing co-creation of the entire ecological whole. The human person is called, then, to emulate *dao* and *de* of the natural world in the way that *dao* “gives things their life,” and *de* “nurtures them.”⁴⁸

The heavens are lasting and the earth enduring.
The reason the world is able to be lasting and enduring
Is because it does not live for itself.
Thus it is able to be long-lived.

It is on this model that the sages withdraw their persons
from contention yet find themselves out in front,
Put their own persons out of mind yet find themselves
taken care of.
Isn't it simply because they are unselfish that they can satisfy
their own needs?⁴⁹

In this way, human freedom is, in the words of Ames and Hall, “the full contribution of [one’s] achieved uniqueness to a shared community”⁵⁰—a community that extends beyond the human community to the wider community of the natural world. Thus, our decisions and actions should benefit this wider community. They should be decisions and actions that arise from the ecological ethic *wei ziran*. *Wei ziran* carries two meanings—the first, “to act with” *ziran*, and, second, “for the sake of” *ziran*. This is because the word *wei* (為) means “to act” as well as “for the sake of, or the reason of.”⁵¹ Let us work out the implications of each meaning on *wei ziran* as the ecological ethic of continual becoming.

For the Sake of *Ziran*

Reading the maxim, *wei ziran* (為自然), with the meaning *wei* as “for the sake of” brings to light the shift of emphasis from anthropocentrism to an ecological consciousness that lies at the heart of this ethic. We have seen in our previous discussion of the natural world as envisioned in the *Daodejing* how the presencing of *dao-de* democratizes and “ecologizes”

⁴⁷ Ames, “Putting the *Te* Back into Taoism,” 142.

⁴⁸ DDJ 51.

⁴⁹ DDJ 7.

⁵⁰ Ames and Hall, “Philosophical Introduction,” 21.

⁵¹ Wilder and Ingram, *Analysis of Chinese Characters*, 32; *Chinese-English Dictionary*, s.v. “Wei.”

the natural world by placing the human person in her place within the unfolding of the cosmos, an unfolding that is characterized by a relationship of mutual entailing, mutual benefit and mutual deference, all of which are expressive of *ziran* (自然).⁵² *Wei ziran* understood as “for the sake of *ziran*,” means that way-making is for the sake of *ziran*. Put another way, we can say that *ziran* is the goal of way-making. Consequently, the human person who is a part of way-making (the presencing of *dao-de*) then will also have the same goal. Thus, one is directed towards acts that will bring about the flourishing of oneself as well as the flourishing of all others—human and non-human, living and non-living.⁵³ In his essay, “The Cosmological Basis of Chinese Ethical Discourse,” Kenneth Inada makes a similar point by stressing the “multi-dimensional” character of ethical discourse. Ethical discourse, he says, must bring “the total reflective and responsive value to the relational condition between and among human beings . . . [and] must, in the final analysis, transcend tangible human activities and be inclusive enough to cover all creatures as well as non-creatures within the total ontological and cosmological scheme of things.”⁵⁴ Thus, to be ethical as *wei ziran* is to be ethical towards the natural environment.

Acting with *Ziran*

Wei ziran, in accord with the second meaning of *wei* (為), is “to act, to do things with *ziran*.” This is none other than to act self-so-ingly, to act with spontaneity. In other words, this is an imperative to *wuwei*, *wuzhi* and *wuyu*, which means, as we have seen, “to act, to know and to desire noncoercively.” Thus, one “acts” in consonance with the “for the sake of.” The “for the sake of” of *wei ziran* acts as both ground and goal for the “acting” of *wei ziran*. Thus, to act with *ziran* is to follow the inconspicuous way of nature, the gentle mutually deferential manner in which the elements in the natural world bring about their effects. It is a call to be more sensitive to the rhythm of nature, to act in such a way that we respect the delicate balance that it has attained over millions of years of evolution.

⁵²Lynn White, Jr., also spoke of such democratization in his ground-breaking essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” Drawing from the Christian tradition, he proposed St. Francis of Assisi as an exemplar and “patron saint for ecologists.” White’s proposal was based on what he considered was the saint’s attempt to “depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures.” The key to the setting up of such a “democracy,” according to White, lay in St. Francis’s belief in the virtue humility—a virtue that he claimed human persons lacked in their relation with the natural environment. (Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” in Kaufman, *Foundations of Environmental Philosophy*, 47).

⁵³See Hall, “On Seeking a Change of Environment,” 109-10.

⁵⁴Inada, “Cosmological Basis of Chinese Ethical Discourse,” 43-44.

Living out Wei Ziran

What does it mean to live out *wei ziran*?

In the appreciation of *dao-de*, the field-focus, it means being open to and understanding the natural environment on its own terms. This will call upon us to take an active stance to gain more in-depth understanding of the workings of the natural environment, which will guide our decision-making. In this endeavor, we will find ourselves in need of the scientific thinking that we critiqued. It is inevitable that we will rely on the valuable knowledge that science can offer. Here, environmental ethics owes much to environmental science, but vice versa too. In this collaboration, the Daoist ethic invites us to broaden our view of the natural environment, to situate our scientific pursuit within the context of ecology as a whole. Scientific pursuit must proceed from an ecological consciousness.

It also means being responsible in our development and utilization of technology. We need to ask ourselves if we can develop technology that will be more “environment-friendly.” We are invited to rethink our “technological optimism,” the cornucopian dream of unbridled economic progress powered by our technological prowess. We may also want to look into developing renewable and indigenous technology, technology that is able to harmonize with the local conditions and needs. Such technology requires of us a wide-ranging understanding of our surroundings and of the unique conditions of our localities and natural environment. An example of such technology for us in the Philippines is the development of wind turbine technology. As an archipelago, we are assured of abundant wind here what with the *Hanging Amihan*, *Hanging Habagat* and seasonal typhoons that visit us at different times each year.

Wei ziran, the Daoist Ecological Ethic of Continual Becoming is an ethos, a way of life. It calls for a conversion, a change at the basic level of our living—which includes our basic conviction about the world and our place in it, the way we perceive and understand the world, the way we act in relation to that world of which we are an inseparable part; in other words, it calls for conversion of the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of our being and becoming human persons. This, however, is not an easy task because it requires a rethinking and a realigning of ourselves that is akin to the realigning with the unworked wood that is spoken of in chapter 37 of the *Daodejing*—a realigning that will allow “[a]ll things . . . to develop along their own lines.”⁵⁵ We have seen the difficulty of acting with *ziran*. Tu Wei-ming expresses this difficulty well. He writes:

[The] aesthetic experience of mutuality and immediacy with nature is often the result of strenuous and continual

⁵⁵ See *DDJ* 37.

effort at self-cultivation. Despite our superior intelligence, we do not have privileged access to the great harmony The process of returning to nature involves unlearning and forgetting as well as remembering. The precondition for us to participate in the internal resonance of the vital forces in nature is our own inner transformation.⁵⁶

This realigning is very much also a “remembering,” a returning to our traditional relation with the natural environment—a relation of oneness that preceded the duality that we are currently caught in. In this study, we realized that the greatest challenge of environmental concern is not the hole in the ozone or the threat of climate change. The greatest challenge lies within us—at the heart of the question of environmental concern is the question of my place in the natural environment. The answer we offer to this question will determine the direction of our response to the myriad environmental problems that we are faced with. Perhaps the challenge of a viable environmental ethic is to present us with an ethic that takes into consideration, and in fact places at the forefront of our consciousness, our decision-making at all levels of our living the intrinsic interrelationship of the human person and the natural environment. From this basic conviction, this worldview, all else arises.

The heavens in realizing oneness became clear;
 The earth in realizing oneness became stable;
 The numinous in realizing oneness became animated;
 The river valleys in realizing oneness became full;
 The lords and kings in realizing oneness brought proper
 order to the world.⁵⁷

We hope to also “realize oneness” and learn to “bring proper order” to the world. And as way-makers in the presencing of *dao-de*, we are still on the way; we have much more to learn, which means also that we have much more to care about.

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⁵⁷ DDJ 39.

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