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RETHINKING THE DAOIST CONCEPT
OF NATURE

Abstract

Recent years have seen an increased turning to the “wisdom of the East” when addressing issues on the environment. The risk of misappropriating its tenets in order to make them conform to the Western system is extremely high however. This paper will lay bare the early texts of Daoism so as to disprove claims that Nature is mystical, antithetical to technology, and subservient to human consciousness. It shall argue that Nature not only arises from a non-anthropocentric source in Dao but that this arising takes place across three levels of reality: Dao’s mystery, the cosmogony of the One-and-Many, and the fourfold comprised of Dao, Heaven, Earth, and man. The result is a vision of Nature no longer bound to a singular actuality but one whose presence is felt across an endless range of possibilities as the substantive realization of Dao.

I. Introduction

It has become fashionable in recent years to turn to the “wisdom of the East” when speaking of issues related to ecology and the environment. The danger with this approach, especially when it comes to Daoism, is the risk of misconstruing or distorting its tenets.1 While scholarly attention on the relationship between Daoism and ecology has grown tremendously in the last decade,2 much of it has focused on a small cluster of terms that attempt to explicate the concept of Nature: naturalness (ziran 自然), non-action (wuwei 無為), and Heaven and Earth (tiandi 天地). These individual terms only cover one side of Nature however. Thus scholars who formulate and tender arguments on what Nature entails for Daoism do so by addressing its ethical significance, its political merit using the language of natural law, or paint it in aesthetic hues so as to reveal its supernatural beauty.
If, however, we wish to probe the possibility of Nature having greater profundity than what these terms can offer, we will require an altogether different approach, one wherein the onto-cosmological and phenomenological import of Nature can shine forth. While Laozi’s *Daodejing* was the first recognizably Daoist text to ponder what Nature entailed, the *Zhuangzi* not only adopted its musings but also developed them into a complete philosophical enterprise. Collectively then, Laozi and Zhuangzi can be read as debunking claims that Nature is mystical, antithetical to technology, subservient to human consciousness, or morally indifferent in the application of its creative and destructive power. The reason we can attribute such claims to them lies in the fact that they wanted to discredit the view that Nature is delimitable by humans alone, that it is tied to our presence of being and nothing else. For Nature to be thought of in such a manner is to engage in a perspectival projection from Earth to Heaven or from Heaven to Earth, but not going beyond either. This paper will hence argue that the Daoist concept of Nature is predicated on the non-anthropocentric self-unfolding of Dao across three interwoven levels of reality: its mysteriousness, as the One-and-Many, and as the fourfold. What we will deduce from this is a vision of Nature no longer tied to a single plane of actuality but one whose presence is felt across an infinite number of planes as the substantive realization of Dao. It is a rethinking of the ecology of time and space but one that is necessary if we are to comprehend the word Nature in its entire multifarious splendor.

II. Nature as an Extension of Dao’s Mystery

For the people of ancient China, the word Nature indubitably meant more than planet Earth and its myriad ecosystems, it also included the heavens as is evident in this excerpt from the *Xici* commentary to the *Book of Changes*:

*The Changes* is a guide to Heaven and Earth, hence it can be used to complete and stitch together the Dao of Heaven and Earth. Facing upwards, one can use it to observe the patterns of Heaven; facing downwards, one can use it to investigate the ordering of Earth. From this one can know the causes lying behind what are dim and what are bright.3

It would seem, then, that the source of Heaven’s dimness and Earth’s brightness is an originally unknowable one and yet, the complementariness of Heaven and Earth, including its obscurity and luminosity, arise simultaneously. This co-arising emerges from a source whose
rootedness is forever veiled to the probing minds of humankind. Confronted with the unreachable loftiness of Heaven above and the unfathomable depths of Earth below, the human subject is reduced to an observer forced to fill in and thread together that which the mind finds baffling. We thus cope with such perplexity by seeking out the patterns (wen 文) and orderings (li 理) of the world in which we stand.

Patterns and orderings may lead one astray however; we fall victim to their beguiling nature and in doing so, take them to be complete in their portrayal as such. Such self-deception was an issue both the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi were very much aware of and they repeatedly warned the reader to be on guard against it. Our body, in its organic composition, is guided by countless unknowable determinations; what makes us think Heaven and Earth are any different? Indeed, the bond between our corporeal and psycho-spiritual realities can be said to mirror that of Heaven and Earth because what is common to both is Dao. Without Heaven there will still be Earth but without Dao, neither will come into being. It is, therefore, not a question of which proceeds from which but rather, what steps must humanity take to ensure their harmony remains in place. The Daodejing provides us with a clue:

Thus it is that the Dao produces (all things), nourishes them, brings them to their full growth, nurses them, completes them, matures them, maintains them, and overspreads them. It produces them and makes no claim to the possession of them; it carries them through their processes and does not vaunt its ability in doing so; it brings them to maturity and exercises no control over them; this is called its mysterious virtue.⁴

A similar account can also be seen in the Zhuangzi:

Life has its sprouting, death has its return, beginning and end follow one another in an unbroken cycle, and no one knows when they will cease. If this is not the case, who else could the ancestor be?⁵

What we see in the above passages is a reverence for the unknown. The mystery beclouding the root of the world’s cycles of transformation is not one to be rebuked or feared but accepted as a necessary condition of said cycle’s self-unfolding. The sprout of life is an issuing forth from a hidden root whose presence is unbeknownst yet without which, the blossoming of said sprout would not be possible. Conversely, death is a returning to whence life emerges and is thus self-completion taken to its ultimate height, which explains why Daoism treasures it. In other words, life and death are a metaphor for the circularity of co-dependency between the internal and the external, the obscured and the exposed. Whether we take the confines of a
circle’s circularity to be full or empty is beside the point because these terms are meaningless in the face of the mystery of their unavoidable incompleteness.

Dao is hence mysteriousness, the Zhuangzi says, in that it:

[Dao] cannot be heard; what is heard is not Dao. Dao cannot be seen; what is seen is not Dao. Dao cannot be spoken of; what is spoken of is not Dao. Who knows the formlessness that gives form to form? This is why Dao bears no name.6

As Dao is not subject to any qualification other than its own spontaneity, the world of beings it makes possible engenders this ideal by harmonizing with each other to form an organic, holistic milieu. The mystery of Dao thus involves the question of how the formless can pollinate itself into the myriad and how this nameless unknown can inspire an endless stream of names. It is here that Nature enters the picture. Whereas Dao is ostensibly immeasurable and unquantifiable, characterized by both Laozi and Zhuangzi as a mystery, Nature is not. Dao’s inner working is hence seen to be veiled in a shroud of mystery but is this true of Nature? Should we romanticize Nature using the language of mysticism, its innate connection to Dao would be destroyed, robbing it of what makes it so alluring. The mystery that Daoism speaks of thus points to the symbiotic relationship threading together Dao and Nature. As Dao is the root of life, Nature flourishes as its limbs and branches; as Dao is darkly obscure, Nature is luminously bright; as Dao takes shelter in nothingness (wu 無), the myriad things find their abode in Nature; and, while Dao instills a sense of quietude and stillness, Nature symbolizes the stirring of things into motion. In other words, Nature directs our gaze towards the mystery of Dao.

Bearing the above in mind, we can rephrase the question of Nature qua Dao’s mystery as one of veiled becoming versus mirrored return. To elaborate, the mystery of which Daoism speaks is not describing the unattainable loftiness of Dao but its inherent reflexivity for self-concealment. As it spontaneously propagates, Dao maintains its undifferentiated wholeness in the guise of the One. This is twofold mystery. Nature, therefore, is a mirroring of second-order mystery, that of the One, but it is also a mirroring of Dao in that Nature is nested within the One which is in turn nested within Dao. Becoming occurs in the One and finds completion in Nature before returning to the One in a self-fulfilling cycle. Nature, said differently, acts as a physical imprint of Dao’s creative power without reflectively doing so. It is the yang 陽 to Dao’s yin 陰 and yet, it is also the yin to Dao’s yang. This seemingly impenetrable paradox, however, is vital to preserving the onto-cosmological attunement of nothingness and being and is why, for example, the Zhuangzi claims:
One cannot use life to give life to death, use death to give death to life. Do death and life wait for each other? They are in fact one body. Is that which precedes Heaven and Earth a thing? That which makes things a thing is not itself a thing. The emergence of things cannot occur before there were things, as if there were already things present, as if there were already things present before these too, without end. 7

Just as death brings life to death and life brings death to life, so too is Nature limited in what it can transform. Since Nature cannot employ itself to transform what lies within it, it must depend upon its complementary opposite to do so; this binomial relationship excludes the One however because the One is an elevated order of Nature. Such being the case, it falls to Dao to act as a counter-balance to Nature. In this way, the mystery of Nature conjoins with that of Dao to form a world utterly natural and non-dependent, though not independent of humanity, and is why in many places throughout its text, the Zhuangzi excoriates society for its blindness to ecological attunement. Indeed, if we read its words carefully we will discover that the Zhuangzi’s criticism of Confucius and Mozi was as much directed to their socio-ethical principles as to the fact that said theories unmask Nature of its inherent mystery.

If we believe that Heaven and Earth symbolize the phenomenological face of Nature as opposed to Nature in its entirety, this would conform to the Zhuangzi’s statement that what makes a thing a thing is not itself a thing. That which is no-thing brings things to completion, as Laozi so succinctly illustrated in chapter 11 when he said the empty space of a room gives it its use, not the four walls surrounding said space. Taking Heaven and Earth as a thing thus eliminates Nature from being thought of as such; what makes this logic sound is the inclusion of mystery. Nature qua mystery is hence a phenomenological realm of existence whereby nonbeing gives birth to being and being marks the veiling of nonbeing. This meontological fluidity is necessary if Nature is to preserve its root in Dao yet avoid being torn asunder from the One. Although the single body motif is used to describe both the Thing and that which creates it, when it comes to Nature and the One, the matter is not so simple. From the vantage point of humanity they are as one body but from the viewpoint of Dao, they are like its shadow and penumbra. Wherein mystery determines the coherency or dissolution of unity depends on its source. Given that Nature’s source is itself mysteriousness (i.e., Dao), it is not unreasonable to expect it will possess this trait too. Indeed, it cannot be otherwise for if it were, Daoism would have no grounds upon which to attack its opponents and yet, its theory of Nature must also take into account the need to shield Dao from misguided discoverability. Since relying on mystery
alone would prove insufficient for the task, the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* needed to formulate a second line of argumentation, one that would elaborate on Nature’s mystery by way of the cosmogonist language of the One-and-Many.

### III. Nature as Cosmogonic Flow

There is an interesting passage in the *Ethics* of Spinoza that reads:

> I think I have shown quite clearly that from God’s supreme power or infinite nature, an infinity of things in infinite ways—that is, everything—has necessarily flowed or is always following from that same necessity...\(^8\)

Although colored in religious hues, Spinoza’s account of the creative flow of life as it transforms from a singular source into the myriad beings populating the world is a medieval reading of the One-and-Many problem first put forward by Plato in his *Parmenides*. More recently, Henri Bergson and his “vital impulse” (*élán vital*) has pushed the debate in an altogether direction, that of ceaselessly self-dividing creativity.\(^9\) Daoism was no stranger to the One-and-Many problem and seemed to offer its own solution with the concept of *qi* 氣 (vital breath). Support for this hypothesis, however, is based on Heshang Gong’s commentary to chapter 42 of the *Daodejing*, which reads thusly:

> Dao gives birth to the One, the One gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to the myriad things. The myriad things bear *yin* and embrace *yang*, blending their *qi* to achieve harmony.

Heshang Gong offers us the following commentary:

> That which Dao gives birth to is the One. The One gives birth to *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* give birth to harmony, clarity, and turbidity, and these three forms of *qi* were divided into Heaven, Earth, and man. Heaven, Earth, and man together gave birth to the myriad things, with Heaven bestowing, Earth transforming, and man rising to maturity. The myriad things could not but bear *yin* and move towards *yang*, revolving around this core, daily anew. The myriad things at their core all possess primal *qi* which keeps them harmonious and supple. It is like the heart lying in one’s chest, marrow lying within one’s bones, the empty spaces within grass and trees that allow the wind to pass through. Thus by having it things will have a prolonged life.\(^10\)

If, on the other hand, we look at the commentary of Wang Bi, the picture is noticeably different:

> The myriad things have their myriad forms, yet each reverts to oneness. How do they become one? They do so in nothingness. As
oneness occurs in nothingness, oneness can also be called nothingness. Since it is called oneness, how can one not speak of it? With speech and the One, is this not two? Once there is one and two, three is born as a consequence. From nothingness to being, numbers reach their end here; what continues from this does not follow the flow of Dao. Thus in knowing the creation of the myriad things, one also knows their ruler. Although there are myriads of forms, their qi blends into one.

Wang Bi’s metaphysical language, in particular his doctrine of nothingness, marked an important advancement for Chinese philosophy. Be that as it may, the point is that his portrayal of the One-and-Many question seems more in line with the Zhuangzi than the Daodejing. Their alignment is important in that it shows continuity of thought on this issue while reinforcing the view that qi is not the dispersing agent of the One but is what facilitates harmonization with it. In this way, the Zhuangzi espouses a doctrine of multiplicity that differs from the likes of Plato, Spinoza, and Bergson, in being a process that is wholly internal. Although qi emanates from Dao and pervades the world as its animating spirit, qi itself is unable to create things; that responsibility falls to the cosmogonist dyad of Dao and nothingness. Owing to the mystery of Dao and that the One and Nature both fall under its umbrella, the view that qi is the bifurcating life-flow of Dao becomes questionable. The multiplicity of beings cannot return to a state of unity via qi any more than qi is able to produce them. An example of this qi-less activity is found in the Zhuangzi:

For all the myriad things, each one will return to its root, each one returning to its root without knowing why. Muddled and confused, to the end of their lives they will not leave it; trying to know it however is to have already left it. Do not ask its name or try to glimpse its character, and things will hence give birth to themselves.

What is noticeably absent here, yet is present in Western accounts, is an indication that the path from One-to-Many is unidirectional; the Many are summarily ejected from the oneness of their creator only to be left to their own devices. The implication is that Nature suddenly finds itself being lorded over by humanity, for it is we who claim to have exclusive knowledge of the One, not Nature. Daoism, in contrast, believes the situation to be otherwise. Nature is but an extension of the One, and since the myriad things take Nature as their place of abode, their multitudes are no different from the undifferentiated wholeness of the One. This leads to a potential objection: if the Many is embodied by Nature, and Nature is on par with the One, then the Many qua Nature qua the One are one and the same. Is this not the solution philosophers have been seeking for two and a half millennia? The answer is no. Previously we mentioned that Nature is nested
within the One, and the One is nested within the mystery of Dao. One should not, however, think of these three as belonging to a horizontal-vertical hierarchy but comprising an intermingling nebula. Wherein each differs is not in its distance or proximity to Dao; rather, it is the degree to which Dao’s creative potential has been actualized that determines this.

To elaborate, the universe at its inception was still, empty, and silent. Therein resided Dao, unperturbed and solitary. Spontaneously gathering itself and drawing upon the nothingness in which it found itself, Dao began molding the ontological constitution of various branches of being. Each ancestral form of being lacked name or attribute, subsisting in indistinguishable unity otherwise known as the One. With each ontological ancestor unable to depart from the One, they unfurled themselves via self-transfiguration becoming the ontic beings of the world. It is these beings that, taken collectively, comprise Nature. Only after humanity subsequently assigns them names and attributes do the myriad things leave the nourishing shelter of Dao’s mystery, placing their inborn nature in great peril in the process. This is why Wang Bi said numbers stop at three and the Zhuangzi pleaded for us to namelessly revert to a state of primal cohesiveness.

In contrast to the Zhuangzi’s cosmogony, other Daoist texts such as the Liezi maintain the role of qi in the One-Many equation:

The sages of old took yin and yang as regulating Heaven and Earth. If that which has form is born of the formless, whence do Heaven and Earth come? Thus it is said: There is the great one, great beginning, great foundation, and great simplicity. The time of the great one was when qi had yet to be encountered; the time of the great beginning saw the emergence of qi; the time of great foundation was when forms took shape; and the time of great simplicity marked the start of substance. Qi, form, and substance were complete but not yet separated, thus they were called undifferentiated wholeness. Undifferentiated wholeness describes the undifferentiated wholeness and inseparability of the myriad things.\(^{13}\)

But let us return to Nature, to the things themselves. The truth of Nature, as both an abstract concept and as the objective material of Heaven and Earth, is that it is so much more than a descriptive state of reality: it is an emotionally aesthetic plenum in which the great variety of life buzzes and whizzes past in a never-ending stream of vitality, struggle, and decline. Nature is the anthropocentric materialization of Dao’s non-anthropocentric potentiality, a totality that is in constant flux and yet, it never loses its balance or harmony. The truth of Nature is that it does not need the likes of humanity to persist and indeed, it has become ever more distant from Dao because of us, but this does not mean that Nature is sick and in need of curing. It is wrong
for us, as one of the beings comprising the Many, to attempt such ends. That which has the means to determine Nature’s fate is Dao alone but Dao does not deliberately interfere (youwei 有為) with things, preferring instead to let them be (wuwei 無為).

In letting be, Dao relinquishes the right to claim an essence of its own which explains why it is at once both one and many. Nature is the realization of “walking two paths,” to quote Zhuangzi; we stand before it as a single being yet we are never alone in said standing. This is the problem of the One-and-Many Daoism wishes us to contemplate. Humanity takes Nature for granted, not in terms of its utility, but its inescapable oneness. What is more, the principle of One-and-Many even extends to our individual bodies, as the *Zhuangzi* notes when discussing the sage Wang Tai:

> He doesn’t know when it is appropriate to use his ears and when his eyes, his mind wandering in the harmony of virtue; he regards the likeness of things but not their differences, seeing the loss of his foot as if he had only lost so much soil. ¹⁴

Wang can be a model for the world precisely because of his ability to look beyond the traits that distinguish one thing from another. His virtue is complete insofar as it comes from Heaven and Heaven’s perfection comes from modeling itself after Dao.¹⁵ Dao, however, has nothing after which it can be modeled and so it uses itself as the standard of measurement. For Laozi, the innate ability of Dao to serve as the model after which all other things are based is due to its supreme naturalness. Although the Chinese word *ziran* can also be translated as Nature, it is better served by naturalness than Nature. Why? It is so because when Daoism speaks of the “truth” (zhen 真) of things—its genuineness or authenticity—the root of said truth lies not in Nature but Dao. This is why Nature represents the permeation of Dao in Heaven and Earth, as the *Zhuangzi* so poignantly demonstrates:

> The genuine is received from Heaven, being natural and unchanging. Thus the sage models himself after Heaven and treasures the genuine and is not restrained by vulgarity. The foolish do the opposite and so cannot model themselves after Heaven and are pitied by others. Not knowing how to treasure the genuine, they live amidst the commonplace and accept the changes of vulgarity. This is why they are insufficient.¹⁶

The *Zhuangzi* has Wang Tai focus on the Heavenly instead of what belongs to man in that doing so equips him with the means by which to see things in their unity rather than their separation. For Wang Tai to cultivate himself so as to embody the virtue of Dao, he cannot look downwards on the ladder of self-modeling to humanity but must strain upwards to observe Heaven. The same holds true for Nature; as it
already contains Heaven and Earth in its capacity as the Many, the only place to which it can turn that surpasses it is the One. Wang Tai thus employs Heaven as his guide, attaining oneness with the myriad things as a result. Similarly, Nature follows the traceless steps of Dao and so is able to harmonize the Many through the One. From this it becomes clear how the mystery of Dao is transmitted from the One to the Many without interruption.

What remains to be explained, however, is how humanity can establish a meaningful relationship with Nature given its cosmological ties to Dao, the One, and the Many. The difficulty of creating such a rapport is especially notable in light of the following statement:

In assigning numbers to things, we say there are myriads and yet, man only counts as one. The people can be found in all nine territories but for those who live off of grain for food, wherever a boat and carriage can go, such people only count as one. Comparing them to the myriad things, how are they different from the fine hair on a horse’s body?¹⁷

It appears we need to rethink the gravity of our position as outlined by the Zhuangzi and seek a remedy that is not discordant with Nature. The solution, it will be argued, requires us to further develop our cosmological understanding of Dao, mystery, and the One, by inserting the human element into the equation. What is meant by the human element is not the common person but one whose mind has sufficient clarity to mirror Dao. Such a paradigmatic individual is the sage. It hence falls upon the sage to serve as the model of exemplariness for the rest of us insofar as he is the only one capable of embracing the oneness of Nature while guarding Dao’s mystery. Doing so elevates the sage to a level of greatness that is on par with that of Dao, Heaven, and Earth and together they are known as the four greats. In other words, the Four allow Nature to be accessed from multiple experiential realms concurrently—the meontological, cosmological, ontological, and phenomenological. Explaining how this is possible is our next task.

IV. Nature as the Fourfold

Having examined Nature from the perspectives of Dao’s mystery and the One-and-Many, we can now proceed to the third standpoint that adds the role of man to the mix. This is where we come across the notion of the fourfold, a term famously used by Martin Heidegger in his 1954 essay “Building Dwelling Thinking.”¹⁸ Although Heidegger’s use of the term was very much indebted to Meister Eckhart, he would have nevertheless encountered this theme when reading the twenty-fifth chapter of the Daodejing:
Therefore Dao is great, Heaven is great, Earth is great, and the king is great. These are the four greats of the universe and the king is one of them. Man models himself after Earth, Earth models itself after Heaven, Heaven models itself after Dao, and Dao models itself after naturalness.

Laozi’s text is revealing in spite of its simplicity. The four greats are not literally so but should be taken as such in name only; the first three give an account of Nature while the fourth, the king, speaks to man. What is missing from Laozi’s portrayal, however, is the bridge between man, the least significant great, and Dao, the progenitor of the other three. One might argue that such a bridge is none other than Nature but a stronger case can be found in the role of nothingness. Nothingness undergirds and facilitates Dao while Dao imbues all that it creates with said nothingness. Moreover, nothingness is the veiling cloak of mystery that accompanies Dao wherever it gathers, forming a complimentary pair with being and perhaps most relevant to us, serves as our transitional stage of presence as we traverse the transformation from life to death. Nothingness, we can say, is the bridge joining the worldly being of man to the non-groundedness of Dao.

For the sage, being recognized as one of the Four does not signify his autonomy from the other three; on the contrary, he must live in conjunction with them in order to make his heart-mind (xin 心) their place of abode. This is why the Zhuangzi writes:

The sage’s movement is that of Heaven, his stillness is that of Earth, his entire heart-mind is set on this and so he rules the world. His ghosts do not spook him and his soul is not exhausted; with his entire heart-mind set, he serves the myriad things. From empty stillness his words extend to Heaven and Earth, through to the myriad things, and this is what we call the joy of Heaven. The joy of Heaven is the heart-mind of the sage and he uses it to preserve the world therein.

There are three things we can say about this. First, Heaven’s circularity symbolizes motion while Earth’s squareness speaks to its stillness. Although the theme of round Heaven and square Earth became an important feature of Huang-Lao cosmology, particularly the Zhoubi Suanjing《周髀算經》and Huainanzi《淮南子》，evidence of such visualizing is also found in pre-Qin texts, including the Zhuangzi.21 The activity of Heaven and Earth—the latter’s stillness qualifies as an activity of rest—as the second and third Great, come together in the fourth Great, the sage. What we have, then, is the comingling of six distinct celestial manifestations (Heaven, circularity, motion; Earth, squareness, rest) within the corporeality of the sage. Given this, is it no wonder that the sage is regarded with such vaulted esteem?

Our second point pertains to the issuance of things, in this case language, from the nothingness that is Dao’s perpetual home. How things
are born from nothingness without any connotation of *creatio ex nihilio* is beyond the scope of this paper, however, the following depiction should suffice:

In the great beginning there was nothingness, nonbeing, and namelessness. From it arose the One, an oneness that was without form. When things obtained it they were thus born and this was called virtue. Before there were forms and divisions, they were innumerable though without separation, and this was called the order of things. From this flowing and moving things were born and once they became complete they gave birth to principles that were called forms. These forms and their bodies contained spirits, each having its own qualities and regulations and this was called the inborn nature. When the inborn nature is cultivated one will return to virtue, and virtue at its ultimate is identical to the beginning. Being identical it is empty, and being empty it is great.

No matter if we are engaging the cosmogony of the above-cited passage or the metaphysics of the one preceding it, the fourfold act in concert to sustain the flourishing of Nature. Given Dao threads itself (*tong* 通) through every thing and not-thing alike, nothingness serves as the meontological fabric through which said threading occurs. In this way, the fourfold is both four and non-four, the “non” being a necessary counter to the “is-ness” of the four. Humanity is hence tasked with expanding our knowledge of Nature by darkening our subjectivity (i.e., sitting in forgetfulness, *zuowang* 坐忘) via fasting of the mind (*xinzhai* 心齋). To behold such behavior as engaging in spiritual meditation, as many are wont to do, is to misread Daoism’s praxis of life nourishment. The objective of such forgetting and fasting is a mindset that will prepare us for a wholly new phenomenological engagement with Nature as the One-and-Many. What is more, only after one sees the braided thread of nothingness and Dao in each of the experiential realms associated with the Four can we begin to comprehend the true extent of its affective power on what it means to be one with Nature.

The third observation we can make stems from the *Zhuangzi*’s claim that with heavenly joy (*tianle* 天樂) the world gathers within the heart-mind of the sage. A search of pre-Qin texts reveals that the term *tianle* is unique to the Heavenly Dao chapter (*tiandao* 天道) of the *Zhuangzi*. Like the terms *zuowang* and *xinzhai*, which are also lexical creations of *Zhuangzi*, *tianle* requires careful explication. With his heart-mind set on Dao, the sage experiences its empty stillness and applies it to the world at large. As he can extend to others what lies within himself, the sage transmits the thread of Dao to the myriad things and so is fit to govern them. If he sets himself on Dao yet makes no attempt to transmit it externally, he is said to have acquired knowledge of emptiness; if he quiets his mind yet does not employ it to act in
the world, he is said to have reverted to the root of Dao (i.e., nothingness). In both cases, the sage exhibits kingliness and is thus seen as one who has penetrated the ultimate ordering of things. There is nowhere he goes that will disrupt his harmony with Dao, nowhere he cannot go that will agitate his oneness with Nature. He neither imposes his will on things nor attempts to alter their inborn nature but simply lets the beings of the world follow their Dao-given inclinations. Joyfully, he shares the Heavenly above with the Earthly below, all the while wandering between them without leaving so much as a trace (wuji 無跡).

To quote the Zhuangzi one final time:

Although Heaven and Earth are great, their transformations are equal; although the myriad things are many, their ruler is but one; although the people are many, they are all subjects of the ruler. The ruler takes virtue as his origin and Heaven as his completion, thus it is said: The ruler of the world in high antiquity ruled through non-action and Heavenly virtue, and that is all.24

Man dwells in Nature but depends on the Earth for sustenance, while Heaven nourishes the Earth and together, they are borne of Dao. This is the fourfold; a mystery of conjoining, becoming, and flourishing whose propensity for quiescent tranquility guarantees that one element will never usurp the others. Unlike Heidegger, for whom the fourfold points to the dwelling of being in the world, Daoism uses the idea to warn us against overtly exerting our existence; indeed, to follow the example of the sage requires that we do precisely the opposite. Conjoining with the myriad things such that Heaven and Earth becomes his companion, the sage differs from common kings in that his inner sagacity regulates his external kingliness. To deviate from this path is to abandon the virtue of Dao, to ignore the signposts that are only visible once we have quieted our mind of all that would undo our shared oneness with things.

And so, the fourfold is an oneness whose collectivity is neither monistic nor nihilistic but carries the recognition that nothingness, Dao, and its subtle breath (jingqi 精氣) give rise to endlessly spontaneous creation, transformation, and revitalization. To be enfolded into the Four is thus to view Nature as the playground of Dao’s marvelous possibilities, to grasp its profundity in a temporal sense without decloaking its mystery.25 Having grasped the meaning of the fourfold, we can promptly cease thinking of the Four as such and behold Dao’s embeddedness in Heaven, Earth, and humanity as being part of its own naturalness. Nothing is more natural than Dao but in order to make said naturalness accessible to humanity, it must do so through Nature. In this way, Nature is beyond terms such as immanent, transcendent, spiritual, mystical, and so forth, since these are the tools of
humanity to carve up what is inherently uncarvable. This is the genius of Daoism’s insight into Nature—we are one of four not one plus three. To stand outside Nature, as one to be added to three, is to think of Nature qua the Three as external and inferior when in fact there has never been a time when Dao qua Nature has abandoned us.

V. Conclusion

This paper has argued that a characterization of Nature that is independent of ethical relations, socio-political hierarchy, moral rectification, and ritualistic behavior, is not only feasible, it is urgently needed to deter uninformed appropriations of Daoism’s theoretical apparatus. Focusing on the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi, we have seen how the role played by man in delimiting said definition is reduced to its bare minimum thereby allowing Nature to fulfill its station as the catalyst for the interweaving of Dao and the One-and-Many. Owing to their entwinement, the extent to which these three can be truly comprehended by the fourth (i.e., humanity) is a point of perpetual mystery. Nature’s mystery must remain so and to claim otherwise is to discuss what is other than Nature qua the One-Many qua Dao. For Daoism, Nature carries with it recognition of the world being more than a mere place of dwelling; it facilitates a form of knowledge that grapples with the realization that Nature cannot reveal the meaning of being human but instead plays upon its incommensurability so as to push us towards a life praxis that is communally transformational. If we wish to return to and embrace Nature in all its majestic fury and haunting sublimeness, we must accept the fact that the nature of Nature is to elude discovery; with Dao as it head and the One as its tail, how could it be otherwise?

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Endnotes

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1. Robert Corrington is one such example when he says: “For the philosophical Daoist the entire universe is pervaded with qi and is thus an organic whole. It is no wonder that process theologians have been friendly to this aspect of Daoism as it reinforces their commitment to the idea that each item of the universe (actual occasions) is connected with each other (past) occasion. From the perspective of my ecstatic naturalism I have to confess that I find this idea to be an idealistic delusion, propped up by bad science and bad metaphysics.” Robert Corrington, “Daoism and Ecstatic Naturalism,” CKTS Newsletter 5, no. 2 (1997): 1.


4. Laozi 老子, ch. 51. *Daodejing* (Classic of Dao and De) in *Daozang* (Daoist Canon), 36 volumes (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian Chuban She, 1988).


6. Zhuangzi 莊子, ch. 22.


9. Heshang Gong 河上公, ch. 42. *Daode Zhenjing Zhu* (Commentary on the True Classic of Dao and De) in *Daozang* (Daoist Canon), 36 volumes (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian Chuban She, 1988).

10. Wang Bi 王弼, ch. 42. *Daode Zhenjing Zhu* (Commentary on the True Classic of Dao and De) in *Daozang* (Daoist Canon), 36 volumes (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian Chuban She, 1988).

11. Zhuangzi 莊子, ch. 11.

12. Liezi 列子, ch. 1. *Chongxuzhide Zhenjing* (The True Classic of Liezi) in *Daozang* (Daoist Canon), 36 volumes. (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian Chuban She, 1988).

13. Zhuangzi 莊子, ch. 5.

14. This pattern of modeling appears in chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*: “Man models himself after Earth, Earth models itself after Heaven, Heaven models itself after Dao, and Dao models itself after naturalness.”

15. Heidegger says: “Recall that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth. But ‘on the earth’ already means ‘under the sky.’ Both of these also mean ‘remaining before the divinities’ and include a ‘belonging to men’s being with one another.’ By a primal oneness the four—earth and sky, divinities and mortals—belong together in one... This simple oneness of the four we call the fourfold.” Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), 147–48.

16. Heidegger phrases it thusly: “All revealing belongs within a harboring and a concealing. But that which frees [entities for intelligibility]—the mystery—is concealed and always concealing itself.... Freedom [sense-making, the revealing of beings] is that which conceals in a way that opens to light, in whose clearing shimmers the veil that hides the essential occurrence of all truth and lets the veil appear as what veils.”


21. “The Ru wear round caps on their heads to show that they know the cycles of Heaven; they walk in square shoes to show that they know the form of Earth.” Zhuangzi, ch. 21.


24. Ibid.


26. This is where the present paper differs from other studies, such as that by James Miller, who says: “There can be no ‘Dao and Nature’ as though these were two discrete categories of being (cf. Creator and the created in Christian thought) that must be brought by some means or other into relation (cf. an absolute and singular act of creation ex nihilo). Dao is no more–and no less–than the flourishing of nature itself.” James Miller, “Daoism and Nature,” in *Nature across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin (Dordrecht: Springer Science + Business Media, 2003), 393.