

**Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought:
Essays in Environmental Philosophy**

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Human/Nature in Nietzsche and Taoism

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To translate the human being back into nature; to master the many vain and fanatical interpretations and connotations that have hitherto been scrawled and painted over the eternal basic text of *homo natura* . . . that would be a strange and wonderful task.

Beyond Good and Evil

Before we can react to and act upon our natural environment aright, we must learn the text of nature properly. Many of the proposed solutions to the current ecological crisis are taken in by traditional interpretations, ignore questions of hermeneutics, and so overlook the underlying fantasies and prejudices that condition (for the most part, quite unconsciously) our perception of the natural world—and thereby also our interactions with the environment. It has been noted frequently that the Chinese Taoist tradition embodies an understanding of nature which may help us reorient ourselves, here in the West, toward the natural world. This is so not only because the Taoist attitude toward nature is in itself more sane, less obviously exploitative, and embodies a minimally self-serving interpretation of the phenomena, but also because—as a perspective on nature that has disparate social-historical roots and is based on philosophical assumptions very different from our own—it allows us to gain a fresh perspective on what may be characteristically Eurocentric interpretations of the natural environment. It is customary, in comparative essays on environmental issues, to seek enlightenment by moving from Western ideas to the wisdom of the East; but on the present topic it may be helpful heuristically to try moving counter to the general flow of the present collection.

The Taoist understanding of nature and the natural is itself complex, and it is not immediately clear—beyond their criticisms of what they saw as a degenerate way of understanding nature—just how the Taoists think we should understand ourselves and behave in relation to the natural realm. In order to bring into relief this aspect of the Taoist world view, it will be instructive to make a comparison with the ideas of a Western thinker whose perspective is remarkably similar, namely, Nietzsche. Since there is no

evidence that Nietzsche knew anything about Taoism, the number of his ideas about nature which correspond to Taoist views suggests that there may be further, hitherto unexplored philosophical (re)sources in the Western tradition which may prove helpful to consider in our current predicament.

Taking our cue from Nietzsche's characterization of the human as "the sickest animal," as being the one farthest removed from its instincts, we may frame the invitation for dialogue in terms of a medical metaphor. Beginning from the premise that there has been something sick about the predominant Western attitude towards nature over the past century, and that the Chinese attitude during the fourth to the second centuries B.C.E. was at least ailing, we can look at the relevant ideas under the headings of diagnosis, etiology, and prescription. Both Nietzsche and the Taoists share the view that the major problem is anthropocentrism—as a cause and also a symptom of a relationship with nature that is out of joint. The Taoists bemoan the lack of natural spontaneity in our actions, while Nietzsche emphasizes a want of creativity. Both posit comparable causes for this sickness, namely, a misunderstanding of the human/nature relation through its being conditioned by ego-centered fantasy projections and anthropocentric readings of the book of nature. For the Taoists, the major pernicious force here is a certain kind of discriminative consciousness, while Nietzsche in addition blames herd mentality (as imaged especially in the domesticated animals that populate *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).¹ The prescription on both sides is to see through and withdraw the ego-generated anthropomorphic projections that vitiate our relations with natural phenomena, allowing us to live in what Chuang-tzu calls "a full view of heaven [*t'ien*]," and to engage in what Nietzsche would style a "dance" through the myriad perspectives on ourselves and the world that are open to us.²

The disrelation to nature manifests on two levels, corresponding to the two senses of the English word: as applied to the natural world, and also to a particular creature (as when we talk, for instance, of human nature"). On the level of the individual there is the natural spontaneity of the newborn child, in whom no hiatus has opened up between impulse and action. Then, with the advent of culture, the harmony is disrupted as drives begin to conflict with each other and with the drives of others, and the person becomes alienated from the natural instincts of the body. A reintegration would involve an incorporation of the acknowledgement of one's difference from the rest of nature into the undistorted unfolding of the individual's nature. On the collective level, the first phase consists in a social group's living in a harmoniously utopian unity with the natural environment—though Nietzsche would say: *literally* utopian, since he doubts whether such a condition ever actually obtained—and to judge from the way in which the Taoists project the fantasy, they probably doubt it too. This gives way to a separation of the social from

the natural world—a more radical split in the West, thanks to the greater depth of the subject-object dichotomy—which again would be resolved by some kind of integration of identity and difference.

I

The question of how to understand nature is not, for the early Taoist thinkers, a merely abstract philosophical question, but rather an existential one that bears directly on the problem of how to live one's life in the most fulfilling way. The prescriptive force of early Taoist philosophy, simply conceived, is something like "Act in harmony with *tao*." But since for most mortals the true *tao*-being nameless, empty, deep, dark, insubstantial—is difficult if not impossible to discern, the Taoist injunction comes down to "follow the natural way," or "behave in harmony with nature." This simple-sounding prescription is difficult to follow, because the human being is alienated from nature and from his or her own nature by an inherent (one is tempted to say "natural") drive to conceptualize and thereby falsify his experience of the world.

The problem of the natural in Taoism is compounded by the lack of a single term in Taoist vocabulary that corresponds exactly to our word "nature." There is rather a complex of related terms, of which the most important in the present context is *t'ien*, or "heaven/sky," which often—especially in the compound *t'ien-ti*, "heaven-and-earth"—comes closest to what we mean by the natural world.³ The notion of *t'ien* was traditionally that of a divine power responsible for the ongoing creation of the universe, and by the time of Confucius it had come to be seen as responsible for the destiny of human beings and as a pattern for their proper conduct. With Taoism, the sense of *t'ien* as a personal presence seems to have diminished, thereby bringing the idea closer to that of "nature." In the *Lao-tzu* it is said to be impartial (Nietzsche constantly emphasizes the amoral character of the natural world—see, for example, *GS* 109, 301, 344), and to work by not-contending, through "inaction" (*wu wei*). Its operations, often referred to as the "way of heaven," are to be emulated by human beings, and themselves ultimately depend on the spontaneous "self-so-ing" (*tzu-jan*) of all things.

Man models himself on earth, earth on heaven,
heaven on the way, and the way on what is naturally so.

(*Lao-tzu* 25)

Heaven and earth thus provide mediating patterns in the realm of the sensible for the movements of *tao*. The great majority of similes for *tao* are drawn from nature: in order to emulate the way, human beings are encouraged to be like water, thawing ice, uncarved wood, a valley, grass and trees, and so on (8, 15, 76). The way of heaven can be discerned not only by observing external natural phenomena but also by "internal" reflection: "Without looking out of the window / One can see the way of heaven" (47). The notion of *i'ien* occupies a more prominent position in the *Chuang-tzu* than in *Lao-tzu*, being in some respects emphasized more than *tao* itself—an issue we shall take up later.

The comparison with Nietzsche can be initiated by looking at the idea in the *Lao-tzu* of a movement away from the "natural state." Several chapters imagine an original, innocent oneness with nature through the image of the infant or the child (10, 20, 28, 55), which is disrupted by the advent of calculative thinking. The text posits a parallel shift on the collective as well as the individual level—from a primordial utopian society in which "small is beautiful" and the necessities of life are met simply and fully (cf. 80), to the larger-scale society of the Warring States period with its relatively sophisticated tools and weaponry.

We find an account of a corresponding condition in a passage from a public lecture delivered by Nietzsche the year his first book was published (1872), which is worth quoting at some length since it is not well known and because it points up the Romantic character of Nietzsche's early views. In the course of offering his audience some advice on education, he distinguishes between two different ways relating to nature:

If you want to lead a young person on to the right path of education, be careful not to disturb his naively trustful and personally immediate relationship with nature: forest and cliff, storm and vulture, the single flower, the butterfly, the meadow and the mountainside must speak to him in their own tongues; at the same time he must recognize himself in them as in countless dispersed reflexes and reflections and in a multi-colored whirl of changing appearances; in this way he will unconsciously sympathize with the metaphysical oneness of all things in the great metaphor of nature, and at the same time calm himself with their eternal perseverance and necessity. But how many young people are permitted to grow up disposed so closely and almost personally toward nature! The others must early on learn another truth: how one subjugates nature toward one's own ends. This is the end of that naive metaphysics, and the physiology of plants and animals, geology, and inorganic chemistry force their pupils to a quite different view. What has been lost in this newly imposed view is not merely some poetic phantasmagoria but the instinctive, true and unique understanding of nature: and in its place we now have clever calculation and a cunning overcoming of

nature. Thus someone who is educated properly is afforded the invaluable gift of being able to remain faithful without any breach to the contemplative instincts of his childhood, and thereby to achieve a condition of peaceful oneness and harmonious integration . . .⁴

The beginning of an unpublished essay from the following year conveys Nietzsche's sense of the overweening anthropocentrism that characterizes the modern attitude towards the natural world in remarkably Taoist terms, and also suggests a comparably modest view of the status of human knowledge.

In some out-of-the-way corner of the universe which flows out into innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which some clever animals invented knowing.

. . . how shadowy and ephemeral, how aimless and arbitrary an exception the human intellect makes of itself within nature . . . only its possessor and begetter takes it so pathetically seriously, as if the axis of the world turned within it. But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would realize that it flies through the air with a similar seriousness, and feels within itself the flying center of the world.⁵

Nietzsche's critiques of anthropocentrism remain vigorous through to his last works, where he speaks of the vanity of behaving "as if humankind were the grand intention behind animal evolution. The human being is in no way the crown of creation; every creature is, beside him, at a similar stage of perfection" (AC 14).

Whereas the early Taoist thinkers were arguing in the context of the Confucian tradition, which had more or less ignored the natural world in its concentration on the sociopolitical sphere, Nietzsche had a longer history and greater weight of anthropocentrism to work against. It will be helpful to sketch this history by adducing briefly some of his remarks about the various epochs of misunderstanding in the West.

In a section of *Human, All-too-Human* on the "Origins of religious cult," Nietzsche suggests that we transpose ourselves imaginatively back into primitive society in order to appreciate the human being's very different relation to nature then. "The whole of nature is for [those] religious people a sum of activities of conscious and volitional [*wollend*] beings, an enormous complex of *willed acts*" (HA I, 111). The superstitious belief in magic then arises in an attempt to exert some measure of control over these powers: "to determine nature toward human advantage, and so to *impress upon it a lawfulness which it does not have from the start*." This is the beginning of a move, on the collective level, away from what Nietzsche earlier called the

“personally immediate relationship with nature” toward a more detached attitude; and the greater the distance, the less the identification, and the easier it becomes to assert control over the environment.

The ancient Greeks came to terms with the forces of nature, according to the account in *The Birth of Tragedy*, through the means of a powerful artifice. The move toward a more “depersonalized” view of nature was effected by a process of projection—and so at the expense of a concealment and falsification of the world. While the Dionysiac experience consisted in “an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the heart of nature” (sec. 7), this merging was experienced as both blissful and terrifying in its “lethargy” (the *lêthê* here being a forgetting of the individual self). Since the forces of nature were too terrible and cruel to be faced directly, the Greeks had to interpose the Apollinian “veil of beautiful seeming” in order to be able to live. The link with nature was still maintained through the powers of Dionysus and the satyr-chorus of Greek tragedy, but the projection of the illusory dreamworld of Apollo, the major element of which was the realm of the Olympian gods, veiled the terrible nature—meaningless—of the natural world sufficiently to make life bearable.

Nietzsche later ridicules the Stoics (and their philosophical epigoni of subsequent epochs) for their claiming to live “according to nature”: “While you rapturously pretend to be reading the canon of your law from nature, you actually want the opposite. . . . Your pride wants to prescribe to nature, even to nature, your own morality and ideals . . .” (*BGE* 9). This kind of falsification is further developed by Christianity, which widens the gulf between nature and the human. Nietzsche reproaches the Christian tradition for elaborating “an imaginary science of *nature* (anthropocentric; completely lacking the concept of natural causes),” and shows how “after the concept ‘nature’ had been made the counter-enemy to ‘God,’ ‘natural’ had then to mean the same as ‘reprehensible’ ” (*AC* 15). Christianity’s mistrust of and contempt for the body, as expressed in the attempt to extirpate or deny the majority of the human beings’ natural drives and passions, divorced from its animal past and made it “the sickest animal”—though at the same time also “the most interesting” (*AC* 14).

While the Christian tradition falsified our view of nature by imposing moralistic judgements on it, Kant continued and refined the practice of imposing laws—but now in the form of conceptual structures: “When Kant says that ‘the understanding does not draw its laws from nature but prescribes them to it,’ this is completely true with respect to the *concept of nature* which we are obliged to connect with it (nature = the world as representation, that is, as error), but which is the summation of hosts of errors on the part of the understanding” (*HA* I, 19). While Nietzsche may be grudgingly grateful to Kant for bringing these operations of the human intellect out into the open,

he nevertheless sees this kind of thinking as the root of the modern attitude towards nature, which he later describes (quite prophetically—the year is 1887) as “*hubris*, our raping of nature by means of machines and the inconsiderately employed inventions of technology.”⁶

It is possible to distinguish in this account several layers of anthropocentric projections on to the natural world which need to be lifted off before we can read what Nietzsche calls “the basic text of nature.” The first consists of moral evaluations, primarily from the Christian—but also from the Socratic/Platonic—tradition: “Human beings have ascribed to all that exists a connection with morality, and have laid an ethical significance on the world’s shoulders” (*Dawn* 3). Nietzsche has a basic mistrust of what the title of an early aphorism calls “the habit of opposites,” especially in relation to nature, and all the more so when the values in question are ethical: “Our generally imprecise observation sees opposites everywhere in nature (‘warm and cold,’ for example), where there are no opposites but only differences of degree” (*HA* II/2, 67).

While this mistrust is surely inherited from Heraclitus, its denial of the existence of fixed and independent opposites is perfectly congruent with the basic tenets of Taoism. Nietzsche would heartily endorse this passage from the *Lao-tzu*, so reminiscent of the obscure Ephesian:

The whole world understands that which makes beauty beautiful,
yet this is simply the ugly;
The whole world understands that which makes goodness good,
yet this is simply the bad;
Thus Something and Nothing give birth to one another;
The difficult and the easy complement one another . . .

(Chap. 2; see also Chap. 20)

Given that the Taoists were writing in an atmosphere dominated by a moral dogmatism preached by the followers of Confucius, they are particularly forceful in arguing against such hardened ethical concepts from that tradition as goodwill/benevolence (*jen*) and duty/rectitude (*yi*) which they regard as damaging or running counter to the way of heaven.⁷

Moving to the next level, we discover that Nietzsche’s penchant for “unmasking” supposedly moral judgements and actions and showing the various kinds of utility-based motivations behind them is matched by his fondness for exposing considerations of utility as being crass in comparison with the aesthetic standpoint. To liberate all things from their “bondage under purpose,” as Zarathustra puts it,⁸ to free natural phenomena from utilitarian judgements of the form “this thing is good/useful for doing such-and-such,” is a goal pursued by Nietzsche throughout his career. His

tactics have their counterpart in some of Chuang-tzu's best known and most effective strategies for pointing up the anthropocentrism inherent in our everyday judgements, that is, his anecdotes concerning "the usefulness of being useless," in which natural things are seen to be able to last out their allotted span precisely by *not* being useful for any human purposes.⁹

Chuang-tzu wants us to see that all value judgements are relative insofar as they are made from a particular perspective, and that particular perspectives are by their nature narrow and limited in comparison with the openness of heaven or the way. Thus, in contrast to discriminative consciousness, which "picks out a stalk from a pillar, a hag from beautiful Hsi Shih, things however peculiar or incongruous, the Way interchanges them and deems them one" (Chap. 2; *IC* 53). In just the same way, Nietzsche follows Heraclitus in advocating a flexibility with respect to perspectives, an "interchanging" of them, which lets one always entertain—literally: "hold [oneself] between"—the opposite of any current viewpoint. As Chuang-tzu asks (through the persona of Wang Ni): "How do I know that what I call knowing is not ignorance? How do I know that what I call ignorance is not knowing?"; of loaches, apes and humans—"which knows the right place to live?"; of humans, deer, centipedes, owls, and crows—"which has a proper sense of taste?"; of monkeys, birds, fish and men—"which knows what is truly beautiful in the world?" (Chap. 2; *IC* 58).

At the next level, one encounters views that see things as true/genuine or false, correct or incorrect, appropriately or inappropriately ordered. One of Chuang-tzu's most far- and deep-reaching questions is this:

By what is the Way hidden that there should be a genuine or a false? By what is saying darkened that sometimes "That's it" and sometimes "That's not"? . . . No thing is not "other," no thing is not "it." If you treat yourself too as "other" they do not appear, if you know of yourself you know of them. . . . Are there really It and Other? Or really no It and Other? Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the axis of the Way (Chap. 2; *IC* 52-53).

The ground level involves the most basic conceptualizing into opposites—distinctions between self and other, inner and outer, cause and effect—and even taking natural phenomena as "things" at all, as unities of any kind. The notion that the concept of a thing is merely a fiction, made up for the sake of convenience in coping with and controlling the world, is one that Nietzsche elaborates with increasing frequency and sophistication in his later works. But the idea appears early, in "On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense," and in a context that is directly relevant to our present concerns. With respect to the formation of concepts, Nietzsche writes:

"Every concept arises from the positing as equal of what is not equal. . . . We obtain the concept, and also the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual, whereas nature in contrast knows no forms or concepts . . ."

The Taoist position is nicely summed up in a passage from *Chuang-tzu* which describes a progressive degeneration, beginning from a mythical past, of human beings' relation to the world—and which, if we were to imagine it reversed, would be strikingly congruent with the process we have seen Nietzsche sketch with respect to the Western tradition.

The men of old, their knowledge had arrived at something: at what had it arrived? There were some who thought that there had not yet begun to be things—the utmost, the exhaustive, there is no more to add. The next thought that there were things but there had not yet begun to be borders. The next thought there were borders to them but there had not yet begun to be "That's it, that's not." The lighting up of "That's it, that's not" is the reason why the Way is flawed (Chap. 2; *IC* 54).

II

Let us examine more closely the process by which the anthropocentric standpoint is dissolved through an identification of the human being with natural phenomena. Since this transformation is vividly exemplified in so many passages in Taoist writings, the major focus will be on the text of Nietzsche's in which it predominates—*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Almost as remarkable as the plethora of images of natural phenomena in this work, in both literal and metaphorical presentation, is the paucity of imagery drawn from culture or city. And the few manifestations of civilization that do appear—the machinery of the state, newspapers and other publications, the trappings of religious institutions—are roundly excoriated.

The force of Zarathustra's often repeated dictum, "The human being is something that shall be overcome," is in part that the condition of the "overman" (*Übermensch*) is attained by transcending the egocentric and anthropocentric standpoints. In the Prologue, Zarathustra proclaims his love for "him who works and invents to build a house for the overman and prepare for him earth, animal and plant: for in this way he wills his own going under," and also for "him whose soul squanders itself, who does not want thanks and does not give back: for he gives always and does not want to preserve himself" (sec. 4). Somewhat paradoxically, Zarathustra also loves

"him whose soul is overfull so that he forgets himself, and all things are in him: thus all things become his going under."

This double movement (worthy of Kierkegaard) of the soul's self-emptying and self-filling corresponds to Chuang-tzu's idea that one enters the realm of heaven by forgetting about all things—including heaven. The first of the Inner Chapters speaks of "the man who rides a true course between heaven and earth, with the changes of the Six Energies for his chariot" (IC 44). The "Energies" referred to here are forms of *ch'i*, the vital principle that animates the entire universe, and are traditionally the forces of *yin* and *yang*, wind and rain, dark and light. The text often speaks of a kind of person who is "daemonic" (*shen*) insofar as he "yokes the clouds to his chariot, rides the sun and moon and roams beyond the four seas."¹⁰ This represents for Chuang-tzu the ultimate relationship with natural forces: one is able to empty the "heart" (*hsin*—for the ancient Chinese, the organ of thought) of conceptual ratiocination and discriminative evaluation, in order to respond spontaneously to the forces of nature in the light of heaven—that is, in full awareness of the global context.¹¹ This process involves a forgetting of one's self which is characterized in an enigmatic remark by Lao-tzu to Confucius in a dialogue from the Outer Chapters: "To forget all about things, forget all about Heaven, the name for that is 'forgetfulness of self,' and it is the man forgetful of self who may be said to enter the realm of Heaven" (Chap. 12, IC 132).

A corresponding relationship to natural forces—the totality of which Nietzsche sometimes calls "will to power"—is to be found somewhere between the protagonist of *Zarathustra* and the overman, as an existential potentiality of which Zarathustra is the herald. Zarathustra concludes the speech just quoted from with one of several elemental exemplifications: "See, I am a herald of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightning is called overman" (sec. 4). From the book's first page to its last, both Zarathustra and the overman are closely related to the sun, that major representative of the element of fire, and again in the Prologue the overman is proclaimed to be "the sense of the earth," and also "a sea" (sec. 3). In the chapter "Before Sunrise," Zarathustra addresses a lyrical eulogy to the heavens, speaking to the sky as a close relative, in intimate terms; and by the time of the later section "At Midday," the relation is made even closer through the pristine image of his soul as a drop of condensation from the sky.

When will you drink this drop of dew, which fell upon all earthly things—
when will you drink this wonderful soul—

—when, you well of eternity! you serene and ghastly midday-abys! when
will you drink my soul back into you (IV, 10)?

Other meteorological phenomena with which Zarathustra is identified are clouds and storms—"Too great was the tension of my cloud: from laughing lightning I want to hurl showers of hail into the depths" (II, 1); winds from both directions—"I am a north wind to ripe figs" (II, 2), and "They hear only my winter-storms whistling: and *not* that I also travel over warm seas, like yearning, heavy, hot south winds" (III, 6); as well as seasons, and light itself (II, 6, 8).

One of the primary images for psychological mutability in the early Taoist texts is water, an element that forms a major stream of imagery in *Zarathustra* for the transformation of the ego-centered person into the overman.¹² Zarathustra's love for his fellow humans has filled his soul to overflowing during his prolonged period of solitude on the mountaintop.

Mouth have I become through and through, and the roaring of a stream out
of high rocks: I want to plunge my speech down into the valleys. . . .

There is indeed a lake within me, hermit-like and self-sufficient; but the
river of my love carries it away with it—down to the sea (II, 1)!

Moving up the scale of organic complexity we come to vegetation, a realm from which much Taoist imagery is drawn—presumably, because the growth of plants unfolds spontaneously from within, they are nurtured through the roots from the cool, damp, *yin* forces of the earth, and the careful cultivation of them is a paradigm example of that central, non-interfering *modus operandi* of Taoism: *wu-wei*. The practice of agriculture is a particularly good exemplification of being a "helper of Heaven" (*Chuang-tzu* 19; IC 182), insofar as the good farmer responds to the progression of the seasons by the appropriate activities so as to help his plants attain their full fruition. "Returning to the root" is a central image in the *Lao-tzu*, and it figures prominently in the Outer Chapters of the *Chuang-tzu* as well.

While vegetal imagery runs through all Nietzsche's works, it is particularly luxuriant in *Zarathustra*. The seeds for this branch of metaphors are sown in the Prologue (sec. 5), when Zarathustra says:

It is time for the human being to plant the seed of his highest hope.

His soil is still rich enough for it. But his soil will become poor and tame and
no high tree will be able to grow from it.

Roots figure in one of the book's most telling psychological images, which has distinctly Taoist overtones. Zarathustra says to the youth by the tree on the mountainside:

. . . it is the same with the human being as with the tree.

The more he aspires to the height and light, the more strongly his roots strive earthwards, downwards, into the dark, the depths—into evil (I, 8).

To ignore this law of psychospiritual development would be to try, in the words of *Chuang-tzu*, “to take Heaven as your authority and do without earth” (Chap. 17; *IC* 147), and to run the risk of having the tree of life and soul topple over owing to an overly shallow root structure.

Just as all the talk about the advantageous uselessness of gnarled and knotty trees in *Chuang-tzu* is to be applied to the analogous uselessness of the sage and of *Chuang-tzu*’s own words, so Zarathustra is himself closely identified with the arboreal. “I am indeed a forest and a night of dark trees,” he says, “but whoever is not afraid of my darkness will find rose-bushes beneath my cypresses”; and later one of the retired kings likens him to a magnificent pine.¹³ “Among all that owe their destiny to the earth, only the pine and the cypress are due on course,” *Chuang-tzu* has Confucius say (Chap. 5; *IC* 77). A major reason for Zarathustra’s taking so long to proclaim the book’s central idea, the thought of eternal recurrence, is that he himself has to go through a lengthy process of ripening. Although he says to his followers fairly early, “like [ripe] figs these teachings fall to you, my friends” (II, 2), it is not until the beginning of Part IV that he is able to say to his animals: “What is happening to me is what happens to all fruits that become ripe. There is *honey* in my veins, which makes by blood thicker and also my soul stiller” (IV, 1). After all the agricultural imagery, it is not surprising that Zarathustra’s offspring, his “children,” turn out to be—as the “living plantation of [his] thoughts”—trees.

My children are still verdant in their first spring, standing close together and shaken by the same winds, the trees of my garden and my best soil. . . .

But some day I want to dig them up and plant each one on his own, so that he may learn solitude and defiance and foresight.

Gnarled and crooked and with pliant hardness he shall then stand by the sea, a living lighthouse of invincible life (III, 3).

The Taoists would appreciate that the ithyphallic nature of Zarathustra’s tree has to do only with its being a manifestation of light, a *Leuchtturm* or “light-tower”; the primary image is of Zarathustra’s thought-children as “gnarled and crooked” rather than singularly upright—and with a “pliant hardness” to match the most striking of Taoists oxymorons.

Figs and honey are associated particularly with Dionysus, a God of vegetation in general, and it is he who informs the most lyrical development

of the vegetal imagery in *Zarathustra*. Just as we speak of the Chinese tradition of “self-cultivation,” and the Taoists talk in particular of nourishing and cultivating *te*, that potentiality in an animate being which comes from heaven, so Zarathustra tends and cultivates his soul, now imagined as a vine.

Oh my soul, I gave your soil all my wisdom to drink, all new wines and also all unthinkable old and strong wines of wisdom.

Oh my soul, I poured every sun upon you and every night and every silence and every yearning:—then you grew up for me like a vine.

Oh my soul, overrich and heavy you stand there now, a vine with swelling udders and crowded brown gold-grapes:—

. . . you would rather, oh my soul, smile than pour out your suffering.

—to pour out in torrential tears all your suffering over your fullness and over all the vine’s urge for the vintager and his vine-knife (III, 14)!

This magnificently bizarre imagery furthers the parallel but also marks a point at which Nietzsche begins to diverge from the Taoist way: while *Chuang-tzu* counts as unfortunate the trees that because of their usefulness as lumber are felled before their prime, Nietzsche—in a trope of quite unabashed anthropomorphism—imagines the vine in its ripeness as *lusting* after the vintager’s knife, likening its pain at its overfullness to that of a cow’s needing to be milked. It is difficult to imagine *Chuang-tzu*’s speaking of a tree’s “urge” to be made into a bell-stand by a master woodworker (Chap. 19; *IC* 135)—though he would surely have allowed that the vine and wine are special cases. But this excess on the part of Nietzsche may be what brings him into a more vital participation in the natural world than that of his Taoist counterparts.

Zarathustra’s grafting of the mammalian metaphor of the cow’s udders on to the vegetal imagery of the vine leads us to the next level of biological complexity: the animal realm. Having discussed several aspects of the animal imagery in *Zarathustra* and *Chuang-tzu* elsewhere,¹⁴ I shall make the treatment here correspondingly short. The primary function of the numerous animal anecdotes in *Chuang-tzu* is to help shift the reader from the anthropocentric standpoint, through invitations to adopt the perspectives of a variety of animals. The best known examples of this are the story of *Chuang-tzu*’s dreaming he was a butterfly (or vice versa), and his exchange with Hui Shih about the joy of the minnows in the stream.¹⁵ Images of animals are also used in describing the ways in which an accomplished Taoist understands death as simply the next in the endless series of transformations that make up the way. When Master Yü succumbs to a disfiguring illness that is clearly about to become fatal, he and his friends wonder what the maker of

things is going to transform him into next—a cock, a horse, a rat's liver, or a fly's leg (Chap. 6; *IC* 88).

At a somewhat more figurative level, Zarathustra in his first speech imagines the "Three Transformations of the Spirit" as a camel, a lion, and a child—this final transformation (a reappropriation of the natural) being characterized as "innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a play" (I, 1). The text of *Zarathustra* contains more animals—over seventy different species are mentioned by name—than any work of Western philosophy since Aristotle's magnificent zoological treatises. Most of these fauna figure in tropes of metaphor or simile, but a significant feature of the narrative content is that Zarathustra's closest companions are his eagle and serpent. For Nietzsche, the basic human drives (*Triebe*) are thought of as perspectives and also imagined as animals (snakes, beasts of prey, etc.). But the importance of being able to adopt the perspective of animals pertains to the "higher" faculties as well: in addition to the chthonic wisdom of the serpent, Zarathustra's "wild wisdom" takes the form of a lioness (II, 1); and he wants his words to tear open the ground of his listeners' souls "like the boar's snout" (II, 5). He speaks of himself as having the legs of a horse and the stomach of an eagle (III, 11); and the more he practices the art of flying—a favorite sport of the Taoist adept—the more he comes to rely on "bird-wisdom" (III, 16).

As a verse from the Outer Chapters of *Chuang-tzu* puts it:

Without praises, without curses,
Now a dragon, now a snake,
You transform together with the times,
And never consent to be one thing alone.

(Chap. 20; *IC* 121)

III

Having seen the extent to which Nietzsche and the Taoists advocate a regaining of our participation in the continuum of natural phenomena extending from the basic elements through the vegetal to the animal realm, let us conclude by delineating in greater detail the nature of this recommended relationship. Both parties have been misunderstood to be calling for a simple return to a primordial and unreflective participation in the natural world, a regression to the primitive innocence of childhood, in which

one is merely carried along by the flux of change and driven only by raw impulse and desire. But if we are not simply being advised to "go with the flow," to grow like plants or behave like animals, then what *is* the force of the injunctions to participate in natural phenomena? Let us approach this question indirectly, by way of remarking on a phase in Nietzsche's thought during which his denigration of participation makes him appear to veer away from the path that runs parallel to the Taoist way.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, a Dionysiac union of the self with nature and the primordial ground of all things is understood as an experience that embodies the most profound truth of which human beings are capable—and a deeper wisdom than that afforded by cool and clear Apollinian detachment from the world according to the *principium individuationis*. Poetic imagination is said to allow empathetic identification with beings of all kinds and to afford deep insight into their nature. "On Truth and Lie" (from the following year) fills out this idea through speaking of the formation of images and metaphors as "the fundamental human drive," asserting the importance of "the mass of images that streams forth originally from the primal faculty of human phantasy like a fiery liquid," and affirming the human being as "an artistically creating subject." The imagination is here (as it was for the German Idealists) the realm that mediates between inner and outer, subject and object, human and nature; not merely one faculty among others but "a freely creating and freely inventing intermediate-sphere and mediating force." Thanks to the work and play of such primordial imagination, "trees can speak as nymphs," as they did to the ancient Greeks, and so "at every moment anything is—as in a dream—possible, and the whole of nature swarms around human beings as if it were a masquerade of gods." So far, we are not far removed from the panpsychism of *Chuang-tzu* and associated notions; but during the following few years, Nietzsche's "positivist" leanings draw him away from that kind of world view.

Beginning with *Human, All-too-human*, he tends to denigrate original participation in nature as primitive "animism," and to see it not as an interfusion of subject and object through the medium of primordial imagination, but rather as a projection of human psychology on to the inanimate world.¹⁶ This tendency persists until *Dawn*, where an aphorism entitled "Good and evil nature" begins: "First human beings projected themselves imaginatively into nature: everywhere they saw themselves and things like them, their bad and capricious dispositions, hidden in clouds, thunderstorms, beasts of prey, trees and plants: at that time they invented 'evil nature'" (*Dawn* 17). Before and after this phase in his thinking Nietzsche emphasized the primacy of the *between* (what Heidegger would later explicitly call *das Zwischen*), the field in which the interplay of nature and human nature is played out.

By the time of *The Gay Science*, however, Nietzsche again acknowledges the operations of an all-pervasive phantasy-activity that is archaic and impersonal, and which conditions all experience. He challenges the "realists": "That mountain there! That cloud! What is 'real' about that? Withdraw from it the phantasm and the whole human contribution, you sober ones! Yes, if only you could! The withdrawal is hard because the projection is voluntary, not willed, and has behind it the pressure of many generations. If only you could forget your heritage, your past, your previous education—your entire humanity and animality!"¹⁷ The point—to which Chuang-tzu also subscribes—is that not only does the external environment exert an effect on the natural world within, on the moon and trees and butterflies and fishes of dreams and the imagination, but this inner nature just as much—and more primordially—conditions our apprehension of the external environment. We are here back on the middle ground of Nietzsche's early works, and the paradoxical idea that we live in the midst of the imagination—as an *oikos* with its own peculiar ecology—as much as the imagination is a vital power within us.

"Unutterably vast, the Heaven within him," writes Chuang-tzu (Chap. 5; *IC* 82). This is also nature as imagined in the Neoplatonic tradition, as a realm of the last reaches of emanation from the world soul, which rises up both within and outside the individual. It is the nature-imbued soul of *Zarathustra*:

the most comprehensive soul, which can run and roam and wander astray
the farthest within itself . . .

the one that loves itself the most, in which all things have their flowing and
counterflow, and ebb and flood . . . (III, 12).

But to realize oneself as this kind of non-encapsulated soul requires not only a breaking away from an unconscious immersion in the flux of phenomena and a seeing through of the anthropomorphic and religious projections that have vitiated our apprehension of the natural world, but also an all-embracing reintegration with it. "When shall we have completely de-deified nature!" asks Nietzsche; "When shall we be able to start to naturalize ourselves with pure, new-found, newly redeemed nature!" (*GS* 109). The task is to naturalize ourselves—but only after we have seen nature in "the light of heaven" (as Chuang-tzu would say) rather than illumined by our own projections. Because this clarified nature is terrifying in its amorality, to engage it demands courage. As Nietzsche writes in one of his last remarks on the issue, in *Twilight of the Idols*, "I too speak of a 'return to nature' though it is not actually a going back but rather a *coming up*—up into a high, free, even terrible nature and naturalness" (IX, 48).

Here is another difference between Nietzsche and Lao-Chuang, in whom the element of terror is absent and whose equanimity is undisturbed by the consideration that "Heaven and earth are ruthless/amoral" (*Lao-tzu* 5), and that "Heaven is impartial to everything it covers" (*Chuang-tzu* 6; *IC* 93). The disparity presumably stems from differences in the historical contexts: Nietzsche is more extreme than the Taoists because he has the pressure of a longer historical tradition behind him, or—as he likes to put it—because "the tension of the bow" has become much greater in his culture. The peculiarity of our modern historical situation is felt and voiced by Nietzsche in biological terms: In contrast to the relatively homogeneous societies the early Taoists were addressing, Nietzsche's readers—as end-of-the-century Europeans—bore (and bear) "the inheritance of a multifaceted descent in their bodies . . . contradictory and often not only contradictory drives and value-standards which fight among each other and seldom give each other peace . . ." (*BGE* 200). And just as nature, for the Taoists, lapses from its impartiality and "punishes" by shackling a person with the fetters of morality (*Chuang-tzu* 5; *IC* 79), for Nietzsche it is "the 'nature' in [every morality] which . . . implants the necessity of limited horizons . . . which *teaches* the *narrowing of perspectives* . . . as a condition of life and growth" (*BGE* 188).

The Taoists inherited from the Confucian tradition the idea of the "three spheres" of heaven, earth, and the human, which are intimately interfused with each other. A consideration of the relationship between heaven and the human in *Chuang-tzu* reveals that there is a movement of reintegration parallel to the one we saw in Nietzsche, though the terms in which it is described are different. A typical dictum from the *Chuang-tzu* is: "Don't let man extinguish heaven, / Don't let deliberation extinguish destiny" (Chap. 17; *IC* 149). Here is the central Taoist distinction between two aspects of our being: destiny—that portion of our activities and abilities that lies outside the will, our spontaneous nature; and deliberation—our voluntarily developed and guided powers of conscious reasoning. It is significant that we have to acknowledge the contemporary Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, who has looked at Nietzsche from the perspective of Zen, for pointing up the presence of two comparable ideas in Nietzsche's thought by emphasizing the importance of his idea of *amor fati* and the enterprise of integrating *ego* with *fatum*.¹⁸ To be able to distinguish between the two, and keep the former from encroaching upon the latter, is to be well on the way. "To know what is Heaven's doing and what is man's is the utmost in knowledge. Whoever knows what Heaven does lives the life generated by Heaven" (*Chuang-tzu* 6; *IC* 84).

We encountered earlier in *Chuang-tzu* the notion of forgetting even heaven (which has a significant parallel in the Mahayana Buddhist injunction not to hold fast to the experience of *sūnyatā*). The more surprising remark that "the perfect man hates Heaven" (Chap. 23; *IC* 106), points up the

paradoxical nature of the relationship between heaven and the human. An essay at the beginning of one of the Outer Chapters, which explains the often repeated phrase "the essentials of our nature and destiny," describes the process by which one detaches oneself from the world and then, by "renewing life," becomes "one with Heaven" and "returns to become the helper of Heaven" (*Chuang-tzu* 19; *IC* 182). This idea, which succinctly sums up the Taoist project of a separation from the primal oneness with nature together with a reintegration informed by the broader perspective achieved thereby, is also found in the *Lao-tzu* where the sage is said to "Learn to be without learning . . . in order to help the myriad creatures to be natural . . ." (64). The human being's "natural" inclination to diverge from its true nature can, if informed by a more comprehensive understanding of the ways of the natural world, be turned to the advantage of all beings.

Again, however, there is a difference in emphasis between Nietzsche and Lao-Chuang. It is true that some of Nietzsche's ideas are impressively serene: there is a distinctly Taoist tone to Zarathustra's saying, for instance, that "All things are baptised in the well of eternity and are beyond good and evil," and to his blessing them by "standing over each individual thing as its own heaven, its round roof, its azure bell and eternal security" (III, 4). Nevertheless, the way to such serenity appears more difficult in Nietzsche, and full of passion and suffering. In the realm of self-cultivation the discrepancy is brought out by Nietzsche's fondness for the word *Zucht* in this context. The word refers both to the cultivation of plants and to the breeding, or rearing, of animals, and when applied to humans it has the connotation of discipline, or training. In agriculture of the soul, one has to be not only the plants which grow but also the farmer who tends them. "Woe to the thinker who is not the gardener but only the ground of what grows in him" (*Dawn* 382)! And in rearing the inner animals, one must be wary of confusing the discipline of breeding (*Züchtung*) with taming (*Zähmung*): the beasts of burden and prey can be trained and their forces harmonized with the others in such a way that their power is not lost but is retained.¹⁹

However, along with the creatures comes the creator—and it is at this point that the metaphor of the artist supervenes upon that of the cultivator/breeder. In speaking of "the discipline of great suffering," Nietzsche distinguishes between the "material, fragments, superfluity, dirt, nonsense, chaos" that we are and the "creator [and] hammer-hardness" within, and suggests that the former must be "formed, broken, forged, torn, burned, annealed, refined" by the latter (*BGE* 225). If this seems a far cry from the *Lao-tzu*'s exhortations to "return to being the uncarved block," we must remember that this image for the reductive and subtractive aspects of the Taoist project is deceptively simple. The paring away of the accretions of conceptual thinking is a long and arduous process, and the natural ease of

Taoist spontaneity strangely difficult to attain. "Wherever desires and cravings are deep," says Chuang-tzu, "the impulse which is from Heaven is shallow" (Chap. 6; *IC* 84). The detachment from and reduction of egocentric desires which afford an openness to the profounder impulses from nature, appear to lead to this goal by way of a certain *apatheia*. Nietzsche diverges here, insofar as he wants to exploit the tyrannical tendency of the natural drives by strengthening them and turning them against each other, and to push the strictures of morality (and all other "anti-natural" regimens) to the farthest extreme—at which limit a conversion comes about through which they overcome themselves.²⁰ Given harder material to work on than the Taoists, Nietzsche's task is more intense and his imagery for it wilder and often alchemically tinged, suggesting more of an *opus contra naturam* in order to effect the transformation and translation of our selves into renatured nature.

In the end, however, both sides are trying to understand that enigmatic relation, human/nature, and to bridge—without closing it—the chasm that joins the moments.

Human/Nature in Nietzsche and Taoism

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Subsequent references to Nietzsche's works will be made mostly within the body of the text, by means of the following abbreviations and the section or aphorism number:

AC - *The Antichrist*

BGE - *Beyond Good and Evil*

HA - *Human, All-too-human*

GS - *The Gay Science*

While I have in most cases consulted the available English translations, the translations of the quotations are my own—for the sake of preservation of the imagery—from the *Kritische Studienausgabe (KSA)* of Nietzsche's *Werke*, edited by Colli and Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980).

2. *Chuang-tzu* 17 (*IC* 149). In quoting from the *Chuang-tzu*, I refer to the chapter number and also to the partial translation by A.C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), abbreviated as *IC*, followed by the page number. The bulk of the discussion is based on the seven "Inner Chapters," which are generally agreed to be from the hand of Chuang-tzu himself, though there will be occasional reference to passages from the Outer Chapters which are in harmony with the core of the work. References to the *Tao Te Ching*, will be to

the number of the chapter; I have used the translation by D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1963), and also Ch'en Ku-ying, *Lao Tzu: Text, Notes and Comments*, translated by Rhett W. Young and Roger T. Ames (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1977). For a comparison of Nietzsche's idea of the dance and Chuang-tzu's notion of "free and easy wandering" (*hsiao yao yu*), much of which is relevant to the themes of the present essay, see Graham Parkes, "The Wandering Dance: Chuang-tzu & Zarathustra," *Philosophy East and West* 33, no. 3 (1983).

3. Other relevant terms are: *te*, or "power," which refers to the "natural potency" a being gets from *t'ien* and/or *tao*; *hsing*, meaning the "nature" of a being (and especially of the human being); *chen jen*, the "genuine, authentic, or true person;" and *tzu-jan*, meaning "spontaneous activity" or, more literally, "self-so-ing." These last two terms are characteristically Taoist, making their first appearance in the *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu*.

4. "On the Future of our Educational Institutions," lecture 4. For an interesting selection of very early (unpublished) writings by Nietzsche on his love of nature, see Alwin Mittasch, *Nietzsche als Naturphilosoph* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1952), chapter 2. "The Young Nietzsche's Feeling for and Sense of Nature."

5. "On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense," a translation of which can be found in Daniel Breazeale, ed., *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979). One is reminded of the numerous passages in *Chuang-tzu* which transpose the reader into the perspectives of various kinds of animals; and also of William Blake's lines concerning "Energy [as] Eternal Delight":

How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way
Is an immense world of delight clos'd by your senses five?

"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

6. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay III, 9.

7. See, in particular, *Lao-tzu* 18, 38; and *Chuang-tzu* 2, 6, 13, 14 (*IC* 60, 91-92, 128-29).

8. Zarathustra III, 4. References to *Zarathustra* will be to the book and chapter numbers—the most useful convention, even in the absence of numbered chapters in the original.

9. *Chuang-tzu* 1, 4, 20 (*IC* 47, 72-75, 121). For a discussion of this theme in *Chuang-tzu* with reference to Heidegger's ideas about *Zuhandenheit* and the utilitarian standpoint, see my "Thoughts on the Way: *Being and Time* via Lao-Chuang," in Graham Parkes, ed., *Heidegger and Asian Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

10. *Chuang-tzu* 2 (*IC* 58). Compare the "daemonic man" in chapter 1, who

"sucks in the wind, drinks the dew [and] rides the vapour of the clouds" (*IC* 46), and the one in chapter 6 who is able "to climb the sky and roam the mists" (*IC* 89).

11. A fine treatment of Chuang-tzu's idea of responding in full awareness can be found in A.C. Graham's "Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of 'Is' and 'Ought'," in Victor H. Mair, ed., *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983).

12. For a more detailed discussion of this theme, see Graham Parkes, "The Overflowing Soul: Images of Transformation in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*," *Man and World* 16 (1983).

13. *Zarathustra* II, 10 and IV, 11. The tree of life needs the darkness of the earth, the death of winter, and the decay of foliage in order to be able to extend its life up into the heights and light.

14. In "The Wandering Dance," loc. cit.

15. *Chuang-tzu* 2, and 17 (*IC* 61, 123). Compare the rather Zarathustrian passage in chapter 6 in which Confucius says to Yen Hui: "You dream that you are a bird and fly away in the sky, dream that you are a fish and plunge into the deep. There's no telling whether the man who speaks now is the waker or the dreamer. Rather than go towards what suits you, laugh; rather than acknowledge it with your laughter, shove it from you" (*IC* 91). It is a little-known—and intriguing—fact that Heidegger was quoting the story of the minnows in discussions of empathetic intersubjectivity as early as 1930; see the Prologue to "Thoughts on the Way," loc. cit.

16. For an account of the history of the idea of participation in the Western tradition, see Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances* (New York: Harcourt, 1965); and for a helpful articulation of the distinctions among the notions of animism, anthropomorphism, and personification from a depth-psychological perspective aligned with Nietzsche's, see chapter 1 of James Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology* (New York: Harper, 1976).

17. *GS* 57, which it is important to read in connection with aphorisms 54 and 56-59. One is reminded in this context of Freud's ideas about archaic inheritance and Jung's discussions of the productions of the collective unconscious.

18. This theme is especially prominent in Nishitani's extended treatment of Nietzsche in his 1949 text *Nihirizumu*. See *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes with Setsuko Aihara (University of California Press, forthcoming).

19. This distinction is made in section 398 of *The Will to Power*, where Nietzsche goes on to characterize breeding as "a means by which the forces of humanity are stored up monumentally, so that races can build upon the work of their ancestors—not only outwardly, but inside, growing organically out of them . . ."

20. Again, this is a major theme in Nishitani's treatment of Nietzsche in *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*.