

# Zhuangzi and Nietzsche on the Human and Nature

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*In the context of an unprecedented level of human harm to the natural world on a global scale, this essay aims to rehabilitate the category of the natural by drawing on the philosophies of the classical Daoist Zhuangzi and Friedrich Nietzsche. It considers the benefits of their undermining of anthropocentrism, their appreciation of natural limitations, their checking of human projections onto nature, and their recommendations concerning following the ways of nature while at the same time promoting human culture. The essay concludes with a few examples of how these ideas apply to some current environmental issues.*

In the context of an unprecedented level of human harm to the natural world—on a global scale, this essay aims to rehabilitate the category of the “natural” by drawing on the philosophies of two thinkers widely separated temporally as well as geographically: the classical Daoist, Zhuangzi, and Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>1</sup> (Zhuangzi was a contemporary of Epicurus, but is even closer philosophically to Heraclitus, whom Nietzsche admired most of all.) This endeavor may appear quixotic at a time when the death of the category “nature” has been widely broadcast. According to the progressive authors of *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*:

The categories of *Nature*, *the environment*, *natural*, and *unnatural* have long since been deconstructed. And yet they retain their mythic and debilitating hold over most environmentalists. . . . To posit that human societies should model themselves after living systems that are characterized as *Nature*, as environmentalists so often do, begs the question: *which* living systems? (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 2007, 133)

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1. The present essay is an extension and perhaps also deepening of ideas in an earlier piece, “Human/Nature in Nietzsche and Taoism” (1989), in which the perspective on both thinkers is more literary and psychological, and the general orientation less practical.

Three main reasons have been given for abandoning the distinction between the human and nature:

1. Humans evolved naturally, and so everything they do is natural.
2. As announced in a presciently depressing book from 1990, *The End of Nature*, we have now "humanized" the whole earth, leaving no part of nature untouched by industrial pollution (McKibben 1990).
3. Nature is always socially constructed, so we can never reach anything like "pure" nature in itself, apart from human factors that condition all experience of it.

The argument in each case is that the human now pervades all, embracing and overwhelming the womb and matrix from which humans emerged as a species some two or three million years ago. And yet, within the whole overwhelmed by the human we can still distinguish several millions of other species, non-humans, here by nature, with whom we share the planet in close symbiosis. And just as we encourage mature individuals to temper their natural selfishness, weaken egoism in favor of public good, so we have to call, in a globalized world, for an expansion of concern beyond anthropocentrism, a truer embrace of our natural cousins and circumstances.

Let us take the end of nature first. Now that we have rained some kind of pollution on every square kilometer of the earth's surface, there may no longer be any pristine ecosystem left. And since there is so much in the biosphere that is still unknown to us, we should hope that wilderness preservation movements that aim to keep selected ecosystems untouched by humans as far as possible will manage to save at least some of these natural sources of knowledge and understanding. "Human" ecology is also an important science, but it can't teach us about the workings of natural ecosystems in themselves—that majority there used to be, of systems untouched by the human species.

However, just because humans evolved naturally, it doesn't follow that everything they do is natural—though it can be hard to know where to draw the line. Birds, bees, and humans do what comes naturally, and so procreating, being a predator that devours plants as well as other animals, fighting for dominance in the social group are all natural activities. It was natural for early humans to seek shelter from the cold and the rain in caves, and, once they learned the Promethean art of making fire, to use that to enhance the protective effect. As birds build nests, and beavers dams, humans naturally build houses. But what about living and working in structures hermetically sealed against weather and climate, providing heat in the winter and cool in the summer, such that the dwellers breathe only air that has been suitably conditioned? If we genetically manipulate ourselves and replace enough of the human body with synthetic prostheses, many enthusiasts would call us "post-

or "trans-human," beyond natural—and so distinct from the natural that we will leave behind.

It is natural enough for humans to be social (many other animal species—ants and primates for example—form social groups), but the early phases of human socialization are designed to replace natural functions (such as excreting) with actions that fit into a socially approved framework. Freud's writings on toilet training show brilliantly how the transition from "Shit happens" to "I do potty" is a key factor in the initial development of human agency and the formation of an "I" that controls our behavior. A well-socialized human will be capable of regulating the drives to eat and drink and excrete, as well as the sexual and aggressive drives, according to social mores—thereby replacing nature with culture (or with what Nietzsche calls "a second nature" [*HL*, §3]).<sup>2</sup> However, as Freud also reminds us, the price one pays for a strong and socially acceptable ego is often neurosis.

As far as the social construction of nature is concerned: since we need to consume water, and plants or animals, in order to survive, societies develop relationships with the natural world based on a perspective of utility, which we are obliged to adopt at least some of the time. Other perspectives are possible, and when it comes to modern environmental approaches to nature, theorists posit three main approaches, or "framing devices" for this kind of discourse: those of moral responsibility, empirical objectivity (natural sciences), and aesthetic judgment.<sup>3</sup> But there is another, more radical approach that breaks through such framing devices and leaves anthropocentrism behind. It is difficult to manage because our experience of the natural world is conditioned by the limitations of a human body that is always situated in a particular physical context. Even if we could drop the socially constructed frames, don't our bodies confine us to anthropocentric perspectives on the natural world?

Both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche would say no, and they point out ways to undercut anthropocentrism. One way (which I'll only mention here since I've discussed it elsewhere) is through entertaining the perspectives of a wide variety of fauna.<sup>4</sup> Zhuangzi's strategy is especially interesting insofar as he invokes so few mammals by comparison with

2. To keep the argument clear I use my own translations of Nietzsche's texts, from the *Kritische Studienausgabe*, hereafter cited as *KSA*. Unless otherwise specified, references will be to the work and aphorism or section number, so that the passage can be found in any edition. In the case of the unpublished notebooks, I follow the standard practice of referring to the volume, notebook, and note numbers (as in *KSA* 9:11 [228]).

3. See, for example, Eder 1996, 171.

4. See Parkes 1989, 2000, and 2011. A comprehensive study is Adrian del Caro, *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric of Earth* (2004).

reptiles, insects, birds, and fish. Perhaps because mammals are the animals closest to human beings and those with whom it's easiest to fall into the pathetic fallacy: it's more difficult to project human feelings and emotions onto creatures such as insects and fishes. Nevertheless, in chapter seventeen we see Zhuangzi empathizing famously with the happiness of minnows swimming in the River Hao. The farther otherness of non-mammals pulls us more effectively off our anthropocentric perches.

Both thinkers regard the distinction between the natural and the human as important, and they believe that we humans would flourish better if we modeled our actions on natural systems ("living systems that are characterized as Nature")—and not just living systems but also the inorganic: rivers, seas, storms, rocks, and mountains. It helps to invoke the "natural" when framing our current environmental predicament: having lost touch with what is natural, we have allowed the artificial and technological to overwhelm us and drive our activity to a point where we're endangering our survival as a species. Since the problems arising from climate change are global in nature, and China has become central to any solution to them, it makes sense to include such a seminal thinker as Zhuangzi in our approach. His ideas can be made more accessible to the non-specialist by way of a comparison with Nietzsche, whose ideas about nature and the natural are equally helpful but have often been poorly understood. They both take philosophy as a way of life rather than a purely theoretical undertaking, and so the following exposition of their ideas is less an exercise in the history of philosophy than an inquiry into their contemporary relevance for human flourishing in the context of the natural world.

Environmental discourse from a decade or two ago, with its concern to "Save the whales," "Save the rainforest," and so forth, was able in some cases to draw fruitfully from the Daoist tradition with its appreciation of the intrinsic value of other species and beings. (Not that many of the people intent on killing the whales or destroying the rainforest noticed, or cared.) Nowadays, with global warming posing such an enormous threat, the urgent task has become the anthropocentric "Save the humans!," which makes less pressing the need to appreciate the intrinsic value of others. But even when the goal is saving the human race, the anti-anthropocentric ideas of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche continue to be of help.

### Undermining Anthropocentrism

There are two terms in the *Zhuangzi* that roughly correspond to our "nature" and "natural." The first is *tiān*, which means "the heavens" or "heaven": what we see when we step outside and look up and around (no connotation of a realm beyond this world). *Tiān* is often used as

shorthand for *tiāndì*, "heaven and earth," and so refers to the natural world as a whole—sometimes as distinguished from the realm of human society. And yet *tiān* is not only the nature that surrounds us, but also nature as it works from within, through the human body and what we call its "natural functions." The second term is *zìrán*, which refers to a process of spontaneous self-unfolding, as exemplified in the way natural growth proceeds, from the inside out, interacting with various external conditions. The paradigm is the seed that turns into a tree (if it doesn't turn into part of a bird first). The body is a major zone of *zìrán* insofar as its natural functions are regulated by the autonomic nervous system, over which we can exercise no conscious control. Processes like the secretion of bile from the liver are "spontaneous" in the Daoist sense, "self-regulating" in the parlance of modern physiology. *Zìrán* refers to the way the powers of heaven and earth operate through all natural processes—except for ordinary human beings, in whom the practices of socialization and acculturation thwart their natural spontaneity.<sup>5</sup>

In a story from the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the Sophist Huizi has been given some gourds, which he tries to use in the usual way as water containers or dippers. However, this doesn't work because they are too big, even when he splits them in two, and so he ends up smashing them to pieces in frustration. On hearing this sad tale, Zhuangzi asks Huizi: "How is it that you never thought of making it into an enormous vessel for yourself and floating through the lakes and rivers in it?" (2009, 8). His friend was stuck in a particular perspective of utility, fixated on the gourd as something to put water in, and so he overlooked the possibility of putting himself in the water and using the gourd to keep on top of it. Nothing wrong, then, with employing the perspective of utility when appropriate, but beware the danger of getting stuck in it and so losing flexibility.

Zhuangzi goes on to point out that the perspective of utility is often irrelevant. Several stories in the fourth chapter of the *Zhuangzi* have as their theme the usefulness of being useless, where the perspective of utility is reversed. In one of them, a master carpenter arrives in a village where there is a gigantic oak tree that's regarded as sacred. He dismisses it with hardly a glance as "worthless lumber." The tree later appears to him in a dream and points out that trees useful to humans suffer insult thereby: "thus do their abilities embitter their lives. That is why they die young, failing to fully live out their natural life spans." Does the carpenter suppose that the oak could have grown so huge if it had been useful? The tree's dream speech ends with a nice ontological twist:

5. David Cooper in his excellent *Convergence with Nature: A Daoist Perspective* (2012) discusses attitudes toward "nature" in the *Zhuangzi*, but offers a more quietistic reading of Zhuangzi than mine.

Moreover, you and I are both beings—is either of us in a position to classify and evaluate the other? How could a worthless man with one foot in the grave know what is or isn't a worthless tree? (ibid., 30)

Caught in a particular perspective of utility, where the tree appears as a mere thing, the carpenter is shaken out of his anthropocentrism by the sacred oak's monologue. The tree points out that reciprocity of perspectives—which highlights their both being finite and impermanent beings subject to death—grants them a salutary ontological parity.

Nietzsche was an ardent anti-anthropocentrist throughout his career—as expressed by Zarathustra's initial proclamation of the Overhuman: "The human is something that shall be overcome" (2005, §3). In an early discussion of Heraclitus, Nietzsche cites with approval his view that "the human being does not by any means occupy a privileged position in nature" (*PLAG*, §7). The contemporaneous essay "On Truth and Lie in the Extramoral Sense" begins with an evocation of the insignificance of the human intellect in the context of the vastness of the world's space and time, and then takes a nice entomocentric turn.

Only its possessor and generator takes the human intellect so pathetically, as if the axes of the world turned on it. But if we could empathize with the mosquito, we would realize that it too swims through the air with the same pathos and feels within itself the flying center of this world. (*TL*, 875)

In one of his last books, *The Antichrist(ian)*, Nietzsche writes that the human being "is by no means the crown of creation" and that "every being, alongside him, is at a similar stage of perfection"—an idea confirmed by our contemporary biology. He goes on to call the human "the most failed animal, the sickliest, the one who has strayed from its instincts in the most dangerous way—though admittedly, for all that, also the most interesting animal!" (*AC*, §14). Zhuangzi would agree that among animals the human alone has strayed from its natural instincts, has been obliged by society and state to turn some drives against others in order to repress or suppress them. His diagnosis of the human condition would be less grim than Nietzsche's (he was after all acquainted with a smaller portion of the history of the species), but would share a concern with the ways alienation from natural instincts cripples human flourishing.

An episode in the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* puts the anthropocentric perspective thoroughly in perspective in a way that is unmatched in the history of philosophy. Two characters are discussing whether one can "know what all things agree in considering right," by way of the prior question of whether humans can know what it's like to be non-human. One of them asks which beings among a variety of

animals (including the human) know the best places to sleep in, or the best things to eat. Then:

Monkeys take she-monkeys for mates, bucks mount does, male fish frolic with female fish, while humans regard Mao Qiang and Lady Li as great beauties—but when fish see them they dart into the depths, when birds see them they soar into the skies, and when deer see them they bolt away without looking back. Which of these four "knows" what is rightly alluring? (2009, 18)

We humans like to think that of course we know what is what in the world, but this last question shows just how petty that presumption is. Only when we learn to check the drive to regard the world from the standpoint of what's in it for us, and so slip out of the anthropocentric perspective, can we come to know things as they are, imbued in their depths with mystery. It's not the human perspective that's special, better than the perspectives of other beings, but it's the human ability to realize its perspective *as* a perspective that's distinctive. And perhaps—who knows?—those who practice playing with perspectives are better at knowing what it's like to be a bat, for instance, than bats are at knowing what it's like to be a human.

The good Daoist, by entertaining a range of perspectives and adopting opposite points of view, can find "the axis of the Way," "the Course as Axis," between all the various "thises" and "thats" generated by our value judgments. By letting all things "bask in the broad daylight of Heaven," the sage is able to "remain at rest in the middle of Heaven [nature] the Potter's Wheel"—and thereby to entertain and appreciate any possible perspective as they cycle around and through him (ibid., 12 and 14).

Nietzsche prided himself on his ability "to switch and transpose perspectives," and his perspectivism turns out to be similar to Zhuangzi's. He often characterizes "perspectivity" as "the basic condition of all life"; and since "there is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing,'" it would seem all the more difficult for us finite humans to get beyond anthropocentrism when dealing with the natural world.<sup>6</sup>

Because, for Nietzsche, the human intellect is ineluctably perspectival in its view of itself and the world, it is incapable of determining:

how far the perspectival character of existence reaches or whether it even has any other character, whether an existence without interpretation loses its "sense" to the point of becoming "nonsense,"

6. See *Ecce Homo (EH)*, "Why I am so wise," §1; *Beyond Good and Evil (BGE)*, preface and §§34, 188; and *On the Genealogy of Morality (GM)*, third essay, §12.

whether on the contrary all existence is not essentially existence that interprets. (JS, §374)

Leaving aside the question of whether something other than the intellect may be able to determine such a thing, he continues:

Today at least we are far from the laughable immodesty of decreeing from our own little corner that it is permissible to have perspectives *only* from this corner. Rather the world has become “infinite” for us once again: insofar as we cannot dismiss the possibility that *it includes within itself an infinity of interpretations.*

Nietzsche is one of the few philosophers after Zhuangzi to have embraced that dizzying possibility: not only multiple interpretations from each human being, but also from all other living and non-living beings.

### Acknowledging Limitations

The idea of nature (the *phusis* of the ancient Greek thinkers as much as the *tiān* of their Chinese counterparts) tends to involve some kind of limits. A central idea in Daoism is the cyclical reversal that conditions natural processes, whereby the forces of light or heat or dry increase to an extreme, and then reverse and give way to the forces of dark or cold or wet, which in turn increase to an extreme—and the cycle continues. As Laozi puts it:

Violent winds do not last a whole morning,  
 Torrential rains do not last a whole day.  
 What is behind these occurrences?  
 It is the heavens and the earth.  
 But if heaven and earth cannot sustain things for long,  
 How much less the human being.  
 (2003, 111)

The limits set by nature can be temporal, as in the case of an allotted life-span for each kind of creature, or spatial, as when the size of an ecosystem restricts the numbers of a species within it.

Temporal and spatial limits are germane to Zhuangzi's understanding of both *tiān* and *zìrán*.

Life and death are fated, and that they come with the regularity of day and night is of Heaven—that which humans can do nothing about, simply the way things are. (2009, 43)

Heaven assigns years to every kind of thing, which may last out the allotment, or be cut short, eaten by some other creature, or else, as in

the case of the tree good for lumber, cut down by humans and then put to use. Humans too are subject to limitations, a fact they often forget because of the vast range of their understanding. Zhuangzi writes:

The flow of my life is bound by its limits; the mind bent on knowledge, however, never is. If forced to follow something limited by no bounds, the bounded [current of life] is put in danger. And to meet this danger by enhancing knowledge even further, that merely exacerbates the danger. (ibid., 21)

The early Nietzsche often mentions the need to keep the “drive for knowledge” (*Wissenstrieb*) in check, preferably by some kind of aesthetic or artistic drive, so that the human being does not, like Goethe's Faust, succumb to hubris (BT, §18).

In the notion of *zìrán* as “spontaneous self-unfolding” the *zì* means “self,” and yet the Daoists always understand the self-unfolding of any particular process as occurring in the wider context of “the ten-thousand things.” Although the *zìrán* of each particular phenomenon in a sense curtails the unfolding of others lower on the food chain, it does so only within limits. If a species of herbivore begins to over-consume the plants on which it lives, its numbers will correspondingly diminish and its self-unfolding come to an end. The life span for a lower denizen of an ecosystem is usually the time it lives before being eaten by something else—so that for beings other than humans “a natural death” in the sense of dying of old age is relatively rare.<sup>7</sup>

Early in his career, Zhuangzi had apparently subscribed to the so-called “Yangist” philosophy of the time, which advocated paying attention to the health of the body, shunning material possessions, and keeping oneself as free as possible from unnecessary ties to the world. He appears to have undergone some kind of conversion experience, from a self-centered life to a realization of his inextricable involvement in the relational network of the natural world (Graham 1981, 117). The *Zhuangzi* contains only two stories about the individual Zhuangzi that call him by his full name (Zhuang Zhou). In one of them he is wandering in the park at Diao-ling when a huge magpie flies past him, so close that it brushes against his forehead, before perching in a grove of chestnut trees. He readies his crossbow and is about to take aim when he notices a cicada basking in a patch of shade. Then he sees praying mantis snatch the cicada, “at the sight of profit forgetful of its truest prompting”—since it is now itself exposed to the magpie poised behind it.

7. See John Terborgh, “Can Our Species Escape Destruction?” (2011).

"Hmm!" said Zhuang Zhou uneasily. "It is inherent in things that they are ties to each other, that one kind calls up another" [or, as Burton Watson translates: "one creature calls down disaster on another"]. (Zhuangzi 2009, ch. 20; Graham 1981, 118)

Suddenly he realizes that the gamekeeper is onto him and so he runs out of the grove as fast as he can.

Once back home, he is depressed because he's been forgetting how vulnerable he is. In response to a concerned disciple he explains:

When the strange magpie brushed against my forehead I strayed into the chestnut grove and forgot my truest prompting, and then the gamekeeper took me for a criminal.

The sight of the insects and the magpie preying on each other prompts Zhuangzi to think about life in a network of relations of eating and being eaten, where the prospect of gain (in the form of a good meal) can jeopardize the one who desires. There's a sense that in this situation, armed as he was with a sophisticated weapon, Zhuangzi regarded himself as top predator and thereby in some sense safe above the fray. But then to find his immersion in the processes of mortal life suddenly falling under the eye of the gamekeeper makes him realize his own vulnerability.

Nietzsche wasn't acquainted with the *Zhuangzi* but would have found all this wonderful. Though he doesn't talk much of the limitations set by nature, he takes such limits for granted, following in this respect mentors like Heraclitus, Montaigne, and Emerson. Nietzsche's favorite among Emerson's essays, "Fate," has it that "the book of Nature is the book of Fate." Strokes of fate from natural phenomena are

pebbles from the mountains, hints of the terms by which our life is walled up. . . . We cannot trifle with this reality, this cropping-out in our planted gardens of the core of the world. (1983, 949)

In this vein, a note by Nietzsche on "the naturalizing of the human" advocates acknowledging that "We can protect ourselves only a little in the great matters: a comet could smash the sun at any moment" (*KSA* 9:11 [228]).

Nietzsche takes up another theme from Emerson, concerning times when "the world reaches its perfection," into his later idea of "love of fate," which is crucial to the thought of eternal recurrence. Several times in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* "the world becomes perfect" in the sense that all opposites that we customarily separate appear as radically interconnected, as inherently belonging together. As Zarathustra sings:

Just now my world became perfect, midnight is also midday —  
Pain is also a joy, a curse is also a blessing, night is also a sun.  
(2005, "The Drunken Song," §10)

To the extent that we can affirm eternal recurrence, what is fated—what we are inclined to reject as totally other to our selves, those outcroppings of world's intractable core into the gardens of our lives—is to be affirmed as after all belonging necessarily to the greater economy of our selves.

Did you ever say Yes to a single joy? Oh, my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe as well. All things are chained together, entwined, in love.  
(*ibid.*)

Who we are is dependent on the entire relational network of the world, where the fated chains that bind and keep us entwined turn out to be chains of love.

But let us return to the social construction of nature, to ask how Nietzsche and Zhuangzi would respond to such a notion. It turns out that they are both aware of the problems created by anthropomorphic projections onto the non-human world, and propose comparable solutions.

### Dehumanizing Nature

A salient feature of Nietzsche's reflections on the natural world is his emphasis on the way human experience of nature from epoch to epoch (and from place to place) is conditioned by various kinds of fantasy projections, ranging from subjective caprice to impositions of humanly created regularities.<sup>8</sup> He often writes as though it were impossible to withdraw such projections and impositions from the actual world, as in his challenge to the sober realists:

That cloud there! That mountain there! What is "real" about those?  
Try taking away the phantasm and the entire human *contribution!* Yes,  
if only you *could!* (*JS*, §57)

But then he describes his own "task" as "the dehumanizing of nature and then the naturalizing of the human, after it has attained the pure concept of 'nature'" (*KSA*, 9:11 [211]).<sup>9</sup> A corresponding task, as he writes in *The Joyful Science*, is the "dedivinizing" of the natural world—as a prelude to our being able to "*naturalize* ourselves with pure, new-found, newly redeemed nature!" (*JS*, §109). Several passages in Nietzsche's

8. See, for example, *HH*, §§8 and 111; *DM*, §§17, 23, 31, 142, 423, 424, 426, and 427.

9. The theme reappears in *KSA* 9:11[238].

subsequent work suggest that he might have succeeded in “purifying” his experience of nature and then renaturalizing himself.

On the issue of projection, there’s a challenge Nietzsche makes to the Stoics (in *Beyond Good and Evil*) that could as well be addressed to the Daoists, who similarly advocate living “in accordance with nature” (BGE, §9). The question is how could they possibly live in accordance with the “indifference beyond measure” that is nature? Isn’t life itself, Nietzsche asks, a process of “evaluating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting-to-be-different [from nature]”? If the Stoics are going to live as philosophers, they will be subject to the tension between life and wisdom (so vividly exemplified in Zarathustra’s love for his two feminine figures, his **Wild Wisdom** and his beloved Life).<sup>10</sup> Life, being natural, is limited and perspectival; while wisdom demands a kind of indifference, corresponding to the noble indifference of nature as a whole, which results in a more open and broader engagement with the world.

Nietzsche accuses the Stoics of projecting their own morality (of self-tyranny) onto nature, while claiming to be reading it off from it; of pretending to derive their philosophy from nature, while tyrannically recasting nature in their own (Stoic) image. But he then turns this point into a claim about *all* philosophy:

It always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to “creation of the world,” to the *causa prima*. (BGE, §9)

This first mention (in *Beyond Good and Evil*) of “will to power” puts into question the philosophy that Nietzsche is presenting in this book, which now appears to be a process of creating the world (including the Stoics) in his own image. So how are we to understand his next challenge to natural philosophy—to the modern physicists, who claim to have discovered the “lawfulness of nature” (§22)? Well that, too, is interpretation: a projection of the “democratic instincts of the modern soul” onto a nature that is ultimately will to power, a system of “tyrannically ruthless and unrelenting enforcement of claims of power.” And before any philosophers friendly to physicists can protest, Nietzsche considerably steps in for them: “Given that this too is only interpretation—and you will be eager enough to raise this objection?—well, so much the better” (ibid.). Another interpretation, yes; but so powerful as to be not just any other one.

Lacking space to consider how the Stoics, or the physicists, would respond to Nietzsche’s challenge, let us consider what Zhuangzi would

10. See Nietzsche 2005, “The Dance Song” and “The Other Dance Song.”

say to it. The early Daoists were well aware of the way human projections onto the powers of heaven and earth prevent our fully experiencing them and letting them turn our activities in the world, and Zhuangzi locates the source of such projections in the human fondness for value judgments and discriminating thought. The “characteristic human inclinations” consist in using the heart-mind to “affirm some things as right and negate others as wrong.” By contrast, the sage has managed to drop these characteristics, “not allowing likes and dislikes to damage him internally, but instead making it his constant practice to follow along with the way each thing is of itself, going by whatever it affirms as right” (2009, 38). For human beings to be able to act naturally in this way takes practice, practice in loosening the restrictions resulting from socialization (restrictions that Zhuangzi expresses in terms of Confucian mores).

To achieve greater flexibility and openness, one needs to empty the heart-mind (the Chinese *xin* covers the sense of both terms) of all the conceptual clutter that’s been accumulating since one was socialized into a language. According to Zhuangzi, “The genuine human beings of old breathed from their heels, while the mass of men breathe from their throats.” This refers to meditative practice that “balances the *qi* energies” that compose the body, and also involves “fasting the heart-mind” (Zhuangzi 2009; 26, 40, and 52–3).<sup>11</sup> This fasting dissolves sedimented judgments and prejudices in the mind, and loosens habitual reactions in the body, so that the energies of heaven and earth can flow through unimpeded and keep the practitioner on course.<sup>12</sup>

One of the *Inner Chapters* imagines an exchange between Confucius and his favorite disciple, Yan Hui, who is planning his strategy for a diplomatic embassy to a neighboring ruler with a reputation for being a willful tyrant. Confucius warns his student against “having something in mind and then doing that thing”: such planning is inappropriate, because ineffective. Yan Hui will do better to practice “fasting of the heart-mind,” emptying himself of all preconceptions of what might happen in his meeting with the young tyrant. Confucius urges him to listen not with the ears, but rather with the energies that are his body:

The vital energy is an emptiness, a waiting for the presence of beings. The Course alone is what gathers in this emptiness. And it is this emptiness that is the fasting of the mind. (Zhuangzi 2009, 27)<sup>13</sup>

11. For more on this topic, see the Zhuangzi section of my essay “Awe and Humility in the Face of Things: Somatic Practice in East-Asian Philosophies” (Parkes 2012).

12. “The Course” is Ziporyn’s translation of *dào*, “the Way.”

13. A. C. Graham translates this passage: “As for ‘energy,’ it is the tenuous that waits to be roused by other things. Only the Way accumulates the tenuous. The

If he can attenuate his physical presencing to a configuration of energies attuned to the way of heaven and earth and attentive to the current circumstances, Yan Hui will act as the appropriate agent for the task—essentially by keeping out of the way (so as to stay with the way) and letting natural forces, and relevant residues of social experience, move him spontaneously.

As if in anticipation of the difficulty, experienced and highlighted by Nietzsche, of developing a naturalistic philosophy that draws from nature purified of human projections, Zhuangzi begins the sixth of the seven Inner Chapters with the statement: “To understand what is done by Heaven, and also what is to be done by Man, that is the utmost.” A sure sign of the human, however, is desire in the sense of craving, as evidenced in the fact that for most people “Their preferences and desires run deep, but the Heavenly Impulse is shallow in them.” By contrast, “the genuine human beings of old”:

Receiving [life], they delighted in it. Forgetting about it, they gave it back. This is what it means not to use the mind to push away the Course, not to use the Human to try to help the Heavenly. (ibid., 39–40)

It's not a matter of getting rid of what comes from being human, but rather of keeping it in dynamic balance with what comes from nature: “For neither the Heavenly nor the Human to win out over the other; that is what I call being both Genuine and Human, a Genuine Human Being” (42, translation slightly modified).<sup>14</sup>

To attain this condition requires not only breathing from the heels but also prolonged somatic practice that attunes the entire musculature to the dynamics of natural energies. The exemplar is the swimmer whom Confucius encounters below the huge waterfall at Lu, an old man who is able to swim in waters so turbulent that fish and turtles couldn't swim there. When Confucius asks him how he does it, he replies:

I enter into the navels of the whirlpools and emerge with the surging eddies. I just follow the course of the water itself, without making any private one of my own. (81)

Several similar stories portray individuals who in addition demonstrate an almost super-human skill in the use of various implements. There is Cook Ding, the carver of ox carcasses, the hunchback who catches cicadas

attenuating is the fasting of the heart” (1981, 68).

14. A similar idea is found in the outer chapters: “Don't let the human extinguish Heaven, / Don't let deliberation extinguish destiny” (Graham 1981, 17 and 149).

using a sticky rod, the daemonic ferryman at Shangshen, Woodworker Qing who fashions bellstands, and Wheelwright Bian with his mallet and chisel (22, 78–9, 81–3). In each case their native talent has been honed by disciplined practice. By forgetting “characteristic human inclinations,” reducing what Nietzsche calls the “human contribution” to the minimum, these figures are able to take their nature straight, keep their experience pure, and thereby act with perfect efficacy.

### Renaturalizing the Human

So what does Nietzsche's task consist in, this “naturalizing of the human with pure, new-found, newly redeemed nature”? How did he find this pure nature, redeemed from human contamination, and what effect does it have on the human who is naturalized by it? I have described elsewhere how Nietzsche found it, in the sense of how he came to experience it (Parkes 2011, 96–8). Briefly: he engaged in vigorous exercise outdoors for “six to eight hours a day” (as he often writes in his letters), whether in cities like Venice or Turin, or in landscapes along the Mediterranean coast or in the mountains of the Upper Engadin. He sometimes called it *marschieren*, marching; we might call it “hiking”: in any case it was a meditative exercise that emptied and opened out the mind and transported the body into energetic flow.<sup>15</sup>

And how did he find this pure nature, in the sense of what was it like and did he like it? His practice allowed him to experience natural phenomena (in Zarathustra's words) “redeemed from their bondage under Purpose,” with each particular process illumined by “the Heaven Accident, the Heaven Innocence, the Heaven Contingency, the Heaven Exuberance” (2005, “Before the Sunrise”). The resonance between these heavens and the Daoist *tiān* are profound—just like “the abyss of heaven” that Zarathustra sees, and addresses, above him. Unlike sunshine, which always comes from a particular direction, the illumination of the pre-dawn sky is uniform and without directionality: no bias, no light casting dark shadow, as if everything were its own source of illumination.

Life lived in this way, with the human well natured, feels just right but is also uncertain, in its fragile finitude and utter contingency. So how do we deal with this condition, with the possibility that “a comet could smash the sun at any moment”?

To the naturalizing of the human belongs readiness for the absolutely sudden and thwarting. . . . —The *sudden* is constantly there in the smallest things, even in every nerve. . . . the *enduring* is that wherein we

15. See *EH*, “Why I Write Such Good Books” and “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” §4.

can't see the changes because they're too gradual and subtle. (KSA 9:11 [228])

Readiness for the thwarting means being ready to go at any moment, renouncing the fiction of the substantial and separate I (not to mention the immortal soul), and seeing through the illusion of duration, so as to realize our implication in the utter momentariness of natural processes, constant suspension in the Heraclitean flux of arising and perishing. Since the products of scientific technology afford us relatively more forewarning of, and protection from, the sudden and thwarting powers of nature, we feel less bound by such limitations than our forebears did. But it's a Faustian delusion to believe that we can overcome the powers of heaven and earth, the natural forces on which human life depends; and this belief tends to stiffen the body heroically against streaming with the flow.

Nietzsche comes to see that the process of naturalizing the human is intimately connected with the work of culture and even the practice of morality. He claims that every moral code is "a piece of tyranny against 'nature' . . . a long coercion", and draws an analogy with constraints on artistic creativity, where deliberate self-coercion prepares the artist for great things.

The wondrous thing is that everything on earth that exists or has existed in the way of freedom, refinement, boldness, dance and masterful sureness . . . has developed only thanks to the "tyranny of such arbitrary laws" [meter and rhyme in poetry]; and in all seriousness, it is not unlikely that precisely this is what is "nature" and "natural." (BGE, §188)

Here Nietzsche understands moral codes and humanity's highest cultural and artistic achievements as resulting from self-imposed tyranny against the nature in us, our nature—yet a tyranny exercised, in performing the work of culture, *by nature*, through a second nature within ourselves.

What is essential, it seems, "in heaven and on earth," is that there should be *obedience* for a long time and in one direction: that way there emerges . . . something for whose sake it's worth living on earth: virtue, art, music, dance, reason, spirituality—something enlightening, refined, wild and divine.

In its tyrannical demand for prolonged obedience, which also results in much squandered energy, "'Nature' shows herself, as she is, in her entire extravagant and *indifferent* magnificence, which is an outrage but also noble." She does not mind how many beings go under in her drive to have other beings emulate her. Although she outrages by her magnificent

indifference, she is at the same time "noble"—and thus worthy of human emulation. This is the sense in which nature can serve as a standard for the renaturalization of humanity, which has too long suffered under regimes of anti-natural moralities deriving from Platonism and Christianity. Not only can nature, when understood holistically, serve as a model for sensible (non-neurotic) human behavior, but she also teaches the self-discipline necessary for the higher work of culture.

Nietzsche had suggested in his untimely meditation on history that human nature is in part given by nature and in part a process of creating a second nature, or culture, through disciplined working of what is given (HL, §3). Now it turns out that the imperative to work oneself into something worthwhile, as well as the energies required for the task, come from nature herself. So it looks as if the Stoics are right after all in thinking that nature allows herself to be tyrannized—not because Stoics are so adept at self-tyranny, but because it's the way of nature to tyrannize herself, in the sense of pitting particular species against competitors and hostile environments.

If this all sounds rather far from Daoism, we need to recall that for Nietzsche self-mastery is a means and not an end in itself (TI, "Forays of an Untimely Man," §14).<sup>16</sup> An unpublished note about the affects makes the pattern clear:

To take the affects into service may involve tyrannizing them for a long time. . . . Eventually one gives them back their freedom with confidence: they love us like good servants and ultimately go where our best inclines. (KSA 11:40 [42])

This relaxing of self-mastery is seen again when Nietzsche presents a paradigm of the highest type of human being in the person of Goethe, whose greatness lay in his ability to actually live his ideal.

Goethe conceived of a strong, highly cultured human being, adept in a range of physical skills, self-controlled and with reverence for himself, who can dare to grant himself the full range and richness of *naturalness*, and who is strong enough for this freedom. . . . He disciplined himself into a totality, he created himself. (TI, "Forays of an Untimely Man," §49)

Now this sounds closer to Zhuangzi's sense of it, as exemplified in a figure like Cook Ding, who has spent decades perfecting his art. It's also similar to the Japanese appropriation of the "way" (*dào*, Jpn. *dō*) of the various arts, which requires prolonged self-discipline in the unnatural "form" of the *kata* (Nietzsche's "tyranny of arbitrary laws") before the

16. See the discussion in chapter 9 of Graham Parkes, *Composing the Soul* (1994).

master affirms one's maturation to the stage where control is relaxed and you act naturally.

It is true that Nietzsche's understanding of nature as an arena of "tyrannically ruthless and unrelenting enforcement of claims of power" sounds as if it has a lot more "tooth and claw" than the Daoist's field of *qi* energies. But if we read the field as one of interpreting will to power (which corresponds to the Chinese *dé*), Zhuangzi would have no trouble with the idea that the mantis interprets the cicada, the magpie the mantis, and Zhuang Zhou the magpie, as appetizing lunch to be caught by means of tooth and claw—or, in the case of the human predator, by means of a weapon like the crossbow.<sup>17</sup>

Following the human, we ask after the way by stopping to ponder alternatives in our hearts and minds, then direct ourselves to act in one way, aim at one end, pursue one goal rather than another. Better to follow the natural way, by engaging the body in physical practice: doing, rather than stopping to ponder. Some of the practice is stationary, sitting oriented toward emptying the heart and mind of clutter, but the paradigm is activity: moving the body in relation the ways others, people and things, are moving; paying attention to opportunities for enhancing the entire dynamic unfolding of the world.

### Following the Ways of Nature

Having seen the similar subtleties with which both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche distinguish the human from the natural, let us turn, in conclusion, to a brief consideration of several fields of current concern where the advantages of preserving this distinction are evident.

But let us first recall the sacred oak in the story from the *Zhuangzi*, which was "broad enough to give shade to several thousand oxen," and think how we might go about trying to replicate such a phenomenon using the latest available technologies (30). We would hardly know where to start and couldn't produce even a single leaf—and yet the tree effortlessly (*ziran*) produces thousands of them, each one unique and perfectly formed. But we *can* employ technology for less ambitious projects that follow "the way of nature," and there is a whole new field of science called "biomimicry" that is working on this. Practitioners do things like "analyze how spiders manufacture a waterproof fiber five times stronger than steel; study how electrons in a leaf cell convert sunlight into fuel; and develop medicines for humans by observing what animals eat."<sup>18</sup>

17. See Roger Ames's essay, "Nietzsche's 'Will to Power' and Chinese 'Virtuality' (*dé*): A Comparative Study" (1996), which lays out the ground well but without, in my opinion, pursuing the parallels far enough.

18. See Janine M. Benyus, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature* (1997).

A further distinction is helpful here, between two different kinds of technology: one that works by following, or integrating itself into, natural processes, and another that instrumentally imposes human will onto natural processes in order to push them beyond their limits. In Daoist terms, one can distinguish *wuwei* uses of technology from ways that are *yowwei*: the former work in harmony with the forces of heaven and earth (sailboats, wind turbines), while the latter tend to disrupt them (nuclear fission, GMOs)—so that in the long term their effects can be harmful.<sup>19</sup> But there's a more insidious consequence to unthinking over-use of technology, which Zhuangzi noticed some 2500 years ago.

A young disciple of Confucius' comes across an old man who is laboriously fetching water in a pitcher from a well, in order to water his vegetable garden. He explains to him that there's a contrivance called a well-sweep that would make his work much easier, and asks whether he wouldn't prefer to use it. The old man replies testily that he knows all about such contraptions but would be "ashamed to make such a thing." His reason is that contriving and employing such contraptions gives the user a tricky mind-set and a "machine-heart", which closes one off from the workings of the way (Zhuangzi 2009, 186). The earliest German translation of this text puts the point in a vivid image that anticipates Heidegger's ideas about the limitations and dangers of what he calls "calculative thinking": "If one has a machine-heart [*Maschinenherz*] in one's breast, one loses pure simplicity" (Zhuangzi 1969, 136).<sup>20</sup>

Another chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, which calls into question the value of too much knowledge, focuses particularly on the tendency for knowledge to turn into the kind of cleverness that develops technologies that disrupt the dynamics of natural systems.

Much cleverness in the use of crossbows and arrows, traps and nets, plots and schemes, throws the birds of the sky into disorder. Much cleverness in the use of hooks, bait, nets, poles, and lures throws the fish of the water into disorder. Much cleverness in the use of traps, snares, and lattices throws the beasts of the woodlands into disorder. Then cleverness turns into cunning, like a kind of gradual poisoning, rigidifying [what are provisional and temporary distinctions] . . . and casting the people into a muddle of disputation. (2009, 65; translation slightly modified)

19. See my essay, "Lao-Zhuang and Heidegger on Nature and Technology" (2003).

20. One could also translate the Chinese term, *jixin*, "contraption heart" or "contrivance heart." Henrik Jäger points out in his commentary on this episode that, while the *ji* originally had the positive senses of "inventive, ingenious, calculating, planning," another important Daoist text, the *Huainanzi* (second century BCE), uses the term with the same negative connotation of "machine" (Jäger 2009, 150).

The objection to the use of tricky technology again concerns its effect on the mind-set and behavior of the user, as well as the disruption of the forces of heaven and earth. The passage also suggests that as early as Zhuangzi's time technological innovations in hunting and fishing were beginning to damage ecosystems. Nowadays, armed with high-tech fishing and hunting equipment (radar, night-vision gunsights), humans are able to annihilate entire species of animals, birds, and fish.

Although Nietzsche doesn't write about technology at length, he well understands the consequences of the machine age. In the course of listing the various types of hubris exhibited by modern man, he observes:

Our whole attitude toward nature nowadays is hubris: our rape of nature with the help of machines and thoughtless ingenuity in technology and engineering. (*GM*, third essay, §9)

The effects of such mindless ingenuity have since transformed natural ecosystems as never before, by introducing elements that are synthetic as opposed to natural. Before the Industrial Revolution there was no such thing as "waste" in the sense of "refuse" or "trash." In natural ecosystems it's all biodegradable: the decaying remains of everything that dies gets consumed by something else, and what at first might look like waste always turns out, in the larger natural cycle, to be food for something else.<sup>21</sup> Then, in the wake of the Second World War, came the synthetics revolution with its slogan of "Better Living through Chemistry." This phenomenon introduced a flood of synthetic chemical compounds, and mountains of plastic, into the biosphere—unnatural substances that can't be taken up into the natural cycles of ecosystems. This produces a new kind of waste that's extremely difficult to deal with and leads to, as we are now beginning to realize, a variety of long-term problems.

The manufacturers of synthetic chemicals have assured the public all along that they don't pose a health hazard for humans, and their profits are huge enough to ensure, through political lobbying, that regulation of their production remains non-existent or lax. The long-term health effects of exposure to even low doses are difficult, and take a long time (by definition), to determine. It's a situation where it would clearly be more prudent to exercise the Precautionary Principle rather than trust the blandishments of the profiteers. Witness the enormous, and well-funded, backlash after Rachel Carson drew attention to the dangers of DDT in her book *Silent Spring*. And consider the case of the

21. This is the "Waste equals food" idea elaborated in the fourth chapter of William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (2002).

synthetic "endocrine-disrupting chemicals" that are widely used in manufacturing and so pervade the modern environment, and which even in small doses affect the hormonal systems of animals and humans. According to a 2009 report by the Endocrine Society:

The evidence for adverse reproductive outcomes (infertility, cancers, malformations) from exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals is strong, and there is mounting evidence for effects on other endocrine systems, including thyroid, neuroendocrine, obesity and metabolism, and insulin and glucose homeostasis. (Diamanti-Kandarakis 2009, 293)

If this weren't bad enough, the adverse effects are insidiously long-lasting:

Effects of endocrine disrupting chemicals may be transmitted to further generations through germline epigenetic modifications or from continued exposure of offspring to the environmental insult. (ibid.)

Subsequent studies have replicated such findings and published the results, warning of those dangers, but the industry funds strong political opposition to calls for government regulation for the sake of public health.<sup>22</sup> All of this is a fine example of what happens when we allow what comes from the human to damage what is natural: it comes back on us, with unpleasant consequences.

Considering the category of "natural foods," we of course encounter a great deal of "greenwashing"—as evidenced in products bearing lists of "all natural ingredients" where many items are unpronounceable, multi-hyphenated names of chemical compounds. (Here's an area where a Confucian "rectification of names" is long overdue.) Until recently all food was natural; but since the advent of industrial agriculture, much of our food is grown on synthetic fertilizers rather than in soil, sprayed with chemical pesticides, and injected with genetically modified organisms. In the obscene case of factory farming, the animals are boxed and caged instead of being outside eating grass and so forth, and injected with growth hormones to artificially accelerate their maturation, as well as antibiotics to combat the diseases and infections caused by their captive state. All this, as usual, for reasons of profit.

Since the 1950s there has been a huge shift, led by the United States, away from natural food toward "processed" food, into which all the nutrients lost in the process of processing are then reintroduced

22. See, for example, Vandenberg et al. 2012.

at the end.<sup>23</sup> The problem is that, just as “nutrition” is a scientific abstraction from the actual nourishing potential of foodstuff, when you employ “fortification” to make up for the destruction of the vitamins and minerals through processing, the human body doesn’t absorb them as efficiently as when they’re in the original food. As Michael Pollan has noted: “Since the widespread adoption of synthetic nitrogen fertilizers in the 1950s, the nutritional quality of produce in America has, according to USDA figures, declined significantly” (2007). As Daoism more generally teaches: the significance of any particular phenomenon is dependent on its context.

Finally, the most important role played by the distinction between “what comes from Heaven and what comes from the human” is in the fatuous debate, still continuing in some benighted quarters, over anthropogenic global warming. This debate was effectively settled years ago, yet the climate skeptics and global warming deniers continue to maintain that the warming trend since the Industrial Revolution could be a result of “natural variation” in the climate, especially in the amount of radiation coming in from the sun. The distinction between the natural and the non-natural is crucial here: it makes all the difference between a world that is habitable and a planet that is ravaged by “extreme weather events” and thus riven with avoidable strife.

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23. See, for example, Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006) and *In Defense of Food* (2009).

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