

The Chinese Views of Nature, Naturalness, and Understanding of Nature

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I

The most typically Chinese views of Nature, Naturalness, and Understanding of Nature can be found in Confucianism and Taoism. These two views are in many ways contradictory to each other and yet on the other hand also share many characteristics in common. In this section I would like to discuss some of these characteristics first, and then I would like to discuss their different views of nature, naturalness, and understanding of nature in the following sections. When these Chinese views are grasped, their contrasts and comparisons with Western views should become manifest.

It seems that the Chinese has an intrinsic dislike for sharp dichotomies. Although in Chinese thought there has always been the contrast between the Yin and the Yang, they are understood to be two necessary ingredients of the same process. No matter whether we choose to follow Confucianism or Taoism, we fail to find the sharp distinction between Supernaturalism and Naturalism, Naturalism and Humanism, or Humanism and Sub-human type of Materialism in Chinese thought.

Tao, as understood by Confucianism or Taoism, has always been functioning in the universe and cannot be separated from the world even for one moment. It should never be identified as a thing, and yet its function is manifest in all things and should never be considered apart from these things. There is a total lack of the contradiction between supernaturalism and naturalism in Chinese thought. Such thoughts as God as the Wholly Other have never entered the Chinese mind; and transcendence and immanence are always understood as a pair of complementary concepts for Chinese philosophers.

Acknowledgement: This paper was first presented at an international conference organized by Institute of Intercultural Research held in Kyoto, 1974, and has not hitherto been published.

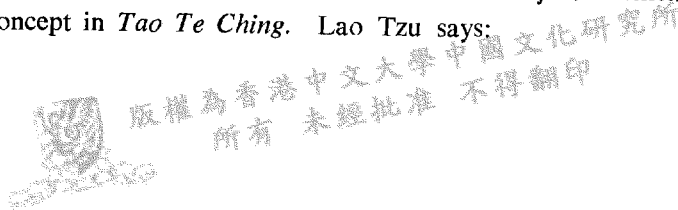
Moreover, man has always been regarded as an intimate part of nature. His development is regarded as a part of the development of the natural process. It is indeed true that man is a standout in nature, but there is no need to separate him from the rest of nature. In fact he has to depend on other parts of nature to sustain his life. Again, there is a total lack of the sharp distinction between naturalism and humanism in Chinese thought. Both Confucianism and Taoism have taught a philosophy of harmony between Heaven and man, i.e. between the source of all things and life-forms in the world and the highest creation in the natural process of transformation. It seems to be utterly futile to separate man from nature and vice versa.

To say that man must follow the natural course, however, does not mean that man must follow his natural impulses and instincts without any restraint. On the contrary, man must subject himself to strict discipline in order to be able to follow the natural course of things. Although in one sense nothing in the world can depart from the Way (Tao), in a different sense, however, it is easy for man to be lured to deviate from the Way and must suffer from the evil consequences that follow. But there is nothing that can prevent men from a reunion with the Way so long as the right effort is being exerted. And the highest ideal of a sage is that he no longer needs to make any effort to follow the Way, because he can do so in such an effortless and hence natural way and becomes a free man. His freedom is much like that of a skilful worker in full command of his technique, certainly not that of someone who can only follow his natural impulses and caprices. Thus, what is natural is not just a fact, but rather a norm which grows out of a true understanding of nature. For this reason the concepts of value and fact are not identical with and also not separable from each other. Ideals and values are in principle realizable in the world but should not be confused with the actual values found in a given society. Thus the Chinese philosophers are not reductivists in value theory, even though they do not need to seek for the source of values in the other world.

I believe an understanding of these above-mentioned characteristics is essential for an understanding of the Chinese views of nature, naturalness, and understanding of nature. To sum up, the Chinese do not need to go beyond nature to look for Tao, and yet it must take a cultured man to achieve a true understanding of Tao. Culture and nature thus become two interdependent concepts in the Chinese traditions. In the following I shall try to reconstruct the different approaches to nature in Confucianism and Taoism. First, Taoism, and then Confucianism.

II

The Chinese term of which Nature is a translation is "Tzu-jan," which first became an important concept in *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu says:



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Man models himself after Earth,
 Earth models itself after Heaven,
 Heaven models itself after Tao,
 And Tao model itself after Nature.¹

There are various interpretations of the last statement in the passage. Some took Tao and Tzu-jan to be two different things, others thought they are really one. But the general thrust of the thought contained in the statement is clear: the Way to be followed is the Way of Nature. And since Nature has shown a way for us to follow, it should never be understood as a static concept. Greek ideas like the Parmenidean Being are totally foreign to the Chinese mind. Moreover, an understanding of the Way of Nature is not just a theoretical matter, it has important practical consequences, as a man of Tao is modelling himself after Nature.

Now the issue becomes: How does Lao Tzu understand the Way of Nature. For Lao Tzu,

Tao invariably takes no action, and there is nothing left undone.²

Elsewhere, he gives us more elaboration:

The Great Tao flows everywhere.
 It may go left or right.
 All things depend on it for life, and it does not turn away from them.
 It accomplishes its task, but does not claim credit for it.
 It clothes and feeds all things but does not claim to be master over them.
 Always without desires, it may be called The Small.
 All things come to it and it does not master them;
 it may be called The Great.
 Therefore (the sage) never strives himself for the great,
 and thereby the great is achieved.³

Lao Tzu discovers that,

Reversion is the action of Tao.
 Weakness is the function of Tao.
 All things in the world come from being.
 And being comes from non-being.⁴

1 Wing-tsit Chan, trans. and comp., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 153.

2 *Ibid.*, p.158.

3 *Ibid.*, p.157.

4 *Ibid.*, p.160.

The paradox lies in the very opening statement of *Tao Te Ching*:

The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Named is the mother of all things.⁵

Cosmologically, it is this nameless Tao which serves as the creative origin of all things. Functionally, it is also non-being that provides us the greater utility. Lao Tzu has made the following remarks:

Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.
Clay is molded to form a utensil,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends.
Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends.
Therefore turn being into advantage, and turn non-being into utility.⁶

It is clear then Lao Tzu's teaching of non-being should never be understood as a kind of nihilism.

Act without action.
Do without ado.⁷

Such is Lao Tzu's understanding of the Way of Nature.

When the Way of Nature is truly understood, the sage cannot fail to act accordingly.

Therefore:

Being and non-being produce each other;
Difficult and easy complete each other;
Long and short contrast each other;
High and low distinguish each other;
Sound and voice harmonize with each other;
Front and back follow each other.
Therefore the sage manages affairs without action (*wu-wei*)
And spreads doctrines without words.
All things arise, and he does not turn away from them.
He produces them, but does not take possession of them.

5 *Ibid.*, p.139.

6 *Ibid.*, pp.144-145.

7 *Ibid.*, p.169.

He acts, but does not rely on his own ability.

He accomplishes his task, but does not claim credit for it.

It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him.⁸

It is in this sense that only a sage can act in a natural way after the model of Tao or Nature. Here we find the great ambiguity that lies in the adjective: "natural." What is natural for a Taoist Sage may not appear to be natural for the conventional type at all. This explains why,

When the average type of men hear Tao,

They half believe in it.

When the lowest type of men hear Tao,

They laugh heartily at it.

If they did not laugh at it, it would not be Tao.⁹

On the other hand, what appears to be natural for the conventional type is only artificial human bondages for the Taoist. The conventional mind has always moved within the realm of relative distinctions; it tends to elevate the beautiful, the good, and the high, and condemns the ugly, the evil, and the low. In effect, why should a man of common sense care about what is invisible, inaudible, formless, vague and elusive? But for Lao Tzu,

When the great Tao declined,

The doctrines of humanity (*jen*) and righteousness (*i*) arose.

When knowledge and wisdom appeared,

There emerged great hypocrisy.

When the six family relationships are not in harmony,

There will be the advocacy of filial piety and deep love to children.

When a country is in disorder,

There will be praise of loyal ministers.¹⁰

His advice is:

Abandon sageliness and discard wisdom;

Then the people will benefit a hundredfold.

Abandon humanity and discard righteousness;

Then the people will return to filial piety and deep love.

Abandon skill and discard profit;

8 *Ibid.*, p.140.

9 *Ibid.*, p.160.

10 *Ibid.*, pp.148-149.

Then there will be no thieves or robbers.
 However, these three things are ornament (*wen*) and not adequate.
 Therefore let people hold on to these:

Manifest plainness,
 Embrace simplicity,
 Reduce selfishness,
 Have few desires.¹¹

Obviously it must take strict discipline to fight against man's "natural" idiosyncrasy in order to achieve the kind of "naturalness" of a Taoist sage. Hence, a Taoist philosopher like Lao Tzu may be against certain features of what we call "civilization," but it would definitely take a "cultured" man to become a man of nature. It is here we find the delicate relationship between nature and culture in the Taoist tradition. For an understanding of Nature man must work hard to discard his conventional views in order to follow his light of nature until someday he can act in such a natural way that he will not transgress the Way, then he becomes a Taoist sage who is no longer alienated from Nature, or better still, becomes one with Nature.

Chuang Tzu, of course, introduced important new features and further sophistications in Taoist thought. But what has been said about Lao Tzu can certainly be applied to Chuang Tzu and later Taoist philosophers as well. Hence I shall not go into further details and will move on to discuss the Confucian attitude toward Nature, Naturalness, and Understanding Nature.

III

It is far more difficult to explicate the Confucian attitude toward Nature, Naturalness, and Understanding of Nature. There are important developments within the Confucian school since Confucius, and conflicting views are being recorded. I can only give some clues to approach this difficult problem.

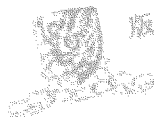
Confucius himself rarely talked about Nature. As his disciple Tzu-kung observed:

We can hear our Master's [views] on culture and its manifestation, but we cannot hear his views on human nature and the Way of Heaven [because these subjects are beyond the comprehension of most people].¹²

Like Socrates, Confucius' main interest lies in human problems. But he did not seem to have drawn as sharp a contrast between nature and man as Socrates. On

11 *Ibid.*, p.149.

12 *Ibid.*, p.28,



the contrary, it seems that he shared the view of the Taoists in taking Nature as his model. The following anecdote in *The Analects* is extremely interesting.

Confucius said, "I do not wish to say anything." Tzu-kung said, "If you do not say anything, what can we little disciples ever learn to pass on to others?" Confucius said, "Does Heaven (*T'ien*, Nature) say anything? The four seasons run their course and all things are produced. Does Heaven say anything?"¹³

But his understanding of Nature seems to be quite different from the Taoist view. Once,

Confucius, standing by a stream, said, "It passes on like this, never ceasing day or night!"¹⁴

Neo-Confucian philosophers like Ch'eng I and Chu Hsi thought Confucius was thinking about the unceasing operation of the universe. If this interpretation is true, then Confucius was admiring Heaven as the creative origins of all things. The emphasis apparently shifts toward the creative power of the Way rather than its reversion as has been emphasized by the Taoists. Even if we refuse to read much into this little anecdote, later Confucian philosophers did develop a metaphysics of creativity not inconsistent with Confucius' spirit. And it was Mencius who gave more definite formulation of ideas along the general direction provided by Confucius. Mencius said:

He who exerts his mind to the utmost knows his nature. He who knows his nature knows Heaven. To preserve one's mind and to nourish one's nature is the way to serve Heaven. Not to allow any double-mindedness regardless of longevity or brevity of life, but to cultivate one's person and wait for [destiny (*ming*, fate, Heaven's decree or mandate) to take its own course] is the way to fulfil one's destiny.¹⁵

Heaven here, I must hasten to point out, is the creative source of all things including man and nature. Mencius' approach of the problem shows the typical way how Confucian philosophers combine a deep-seated faith in humanism (immanence) with an ultimate concern of the metaphysical origin of all things (transcendence). Man does not need to depart from his own way in order to gain an insight into the metaphysical principle of creativity, on the contrary, in order to do so he must exert his own mind or human-heart and develop to the utmost extent what is within his

13 *Ibid.*, p.47.

14 *Ibid.*, p.36.

15 *Ibid.*, p.78.

own nature. Simply by doing this, he would naturally know Heaven. Once he has found his ultimate commitment, he knows exactly how to conduct himself amidst the vicissitudes of life, and accept his destiny with a sense of magnanimity. For Mencius,

Children carried in the arms all know to love their parents. As they grow, they all know to respect their elder brothers. To have filial affection for parents is humanity, and to respect elders is righteousness. These feelings are universal in the world, that is all.¹⁶

And again,

Form and color (our body) are nature endowed by Heaven. It is only the sage who can put his physical form into full use.¹⁷ Here, the contrast with the Taoist attitude becomes clear. For a Taoist like Lao Tzu, to practice humanity and righteousness is to follow artificial human conventions and to work against the Way of Nature. For a Confucian philosopher like Mencius, however, it is natural for us to practice virtues like humanity and righteousness. Consequently, their understanding of Nature is different, the Taoists emphasize on reversion, the Confucianists emphasize on creativity and hence hold a positive attitude toward the development of civilization and human institutions. But there are similarities too. Both teach a philosophy of union between man and Heaven, it is not simply that man should never be separated from Heaven, he must positively take Heaven as his model. And both put much emphasis on discipline, for it is only through a cultivation of insight and discipline of behavior can one hope to be one with Tao. In the Confucian tradition as well as in the Taoist tradition, it takes a cultured man to become natural. It is interesting to note Confucius' own review of his learning process. He said;

At fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty my character had been formed. At forty I had no more perplexities. At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven (*T'ien-ming*). At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing moral principles.¹⁸

It is in this sense he became a totally natural and hence free man. Mencius' type of thought was further developed in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Commentaries in The Book of Changes*. His views on human nature being

16 *Ibid.*, p.80.

17 *Ibid.*,

18 *Ibid.*, p.22.

good and Heaven being the creative source of all things were adopted as the orthodox views of the Confucian school.

There were indeed opposite views in the Confucian school. For example, Hsün Tzu challenged Mencius' view by asserting that human nature is evil and lay exclusive emphasis on man's action to correct such nature. Again, Heaven was identified with the external natural world. Hence, instead of feeling awe before it, man should work on it in order to turn it to our advantages. But Hsün Tzu's views were suppressed throughout the ages and were not taken seriously by most Confucian scholars.

The philosophy of union between Heaven and man had also been twisted in the Han dynasty to mean that there is a correlation between changes in natural phenomena and human events. Thus, an eclipse of the sun would entail disaster on the earth. The rise of such theories of course do have their historical reasons. But we fail to find any foundation of such thought in either Confucius' or Mencius' thought.

In Neo-Confucianism after the impact of Buddhism and Taoism, Confucian philosophers tried to revive some of the insights of Confucius and Mencius in combination with cosmological speculations. The story is too complicated to be told here, suffice it just to quote one important document in the following: Chou Tun-i's "An Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate."

The Non-ultimate and also the Great Ultimate (*T'ai-chi*)! The Great Ultimate through movement generates yang. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil. Through tranquillity the Great Ultimate generates yin. When tranquillity reaches its limit, activity begins again. So movement and tranquillity alternate and become the root of each other, giving rise to the distinction of yin and yang, and the two modes are thus established.

By the transformation of yang and its union with yin, the Five Agents of Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth arise. When these material forces (*ch'i*) are distributed in harmonious order, the four seasons run their course. The Five Agents constitute one system of yin and yang, and yin and yang constitute one Great Ultimate. The Great Ultimate is fundamentally the Non-ultimate. The Five Agents arise, each with its specific nature.

When the reality of the Non-ultimate and the essence of yin, yang, and the Five Agents come into mysterious union, integration ensues. *Ch'ien* (Heaven) constitutes the male element, and *k'un* (Earth) constitutes the female element. The interaction of these two material forces engenders and transforms the myriad things. The myriad things produce and reproduce,



resulting in an unending transformation.

It is man alone who receives (the material forces) in their highest excellence, and therefore he is most intelligent. His physical form appears, and his spirit develops consciousness. The five moral principles of his nature (humanity or *jen*, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness) are aroused by, and react to, the external world and engage in activity; good and evil are distinguished; and human affairs take place.

The sage settles these affairs by the principles of the Mean, correctness, humanity, and righteousness (for the way of the sage is none other than these four), regarding tranquillity as fundamental. (Having no desire, there will therefore be tranquillity.) Thus he establishes himself as the ultimate standard for man. Hence the character of the sage is 'identical with that of Heaven and Earth; his brilliancy is identical with that of the sun and the moon; his order is identical with that of the four seasons; and his good and evil fortunes are identical with those of spiritual beings.' The superior man cultivates these moral qualities and enjoys good fortune, whereas the inferior man violates them and suffers evil fortune.

Therefore it is said that 'yin and yang are established as the way of Heaven, the weak and the strong as the way of Earth, and humanity and righteousness as the way of man.' It is also said that 'if we investigate the cycle of things, we shall understand the concepts of life and death.' Great is the *Book of Changes*! Herein lies its excellence!¹⁹

Thus, man's life is intimately related with the evolutionary process of nature. In fact, it is a part of such natural process. And yet in this natural process, man also stands out from the rest of nature. His norms are parallel to the attributes of nature, and yet they have received their special characteristics. The development of this line of thought has culminated in Chu Hsi's thought which has been highly praised by scholars like Joseph Needham as a kind of organic understanding of nature reached by intuition before the advent of contemporary scientific achievements as against a mechanical understanding of nature. Chu Hsi's thought was, however, attacked by the Lu-Wang school. From the viewpoint of Lu-Wang, Chu Hsi's interpretation of *ko-wu* in *The Great Learning* to mean "investigation of things" has put too much emphasis on the study of external nature, which is irrelevant to the establishment of one's ultimate concern. Hence they advocated a revival of Mencius' approach which concentrates on working out the potentialities within one's own mind or heart. And Wang Yang-ming has been able to develop still another type of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.463-464.

philosophy of union between Heaven and man within the Confucian tradition. In his *Inquiry on the Great Learning*, Wang said,

The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person. As to those who make a cleavage between objects and distinguish them between the self and others, they are small men. That the great man can regard Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body is not because he deliberately wants to do so, but because it is natural to the humane nature of his mind that he do so. Forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things is not only true of the great man. Even the mind of the small man is no different. Only he himself makes it small Hence, if it is not obscured by selfish desires, even the mind of the small man has the humanity that forms one body with all as does the mind of the great man. As soon as it is obscured by selfish desires, even the mind of the great man will be divided and narrow like that of the small man. Thus the learning of the great man consists entirely in getting rid of the obscuration of selfish desires in order by his own efforts to make manifest his clear character, so as to restore the condition of forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things, a condition that is originally so, that is all. It is not that outside of the original substance something can be added.²⁰

From Wang's viewpoint, therefore, only by realizing the great potentiality within oneself can he hope to understand the creative origin of all things and to form one body with it, this goal cannot be achieved by investigation of external things. It is clear that the difference between Wang Yang-ming and Chu Hsi is a rather subtle one within the Confucian school. Both advocate the union between Heaven and man, both acknowledge that the ultimate metaphysical principle is a principle of creativity, and both emphasize discipline as the only way to "manifest the clear character" that is originally with us. The difference lies in that to reach the same goal they adopt different ways, and of course, also involved is a subtle difference in the understanding of the Way.

IV

Now some concluding remarks are in order.

(1) In major Chinese traditions, there is simply an absence of a sharp distinction between naturalism and humanism. Therefore, when these two terms are used to characterise Chinese thought, they should never be understood in their conventional

20 *Ibid.*, pp.659-660.

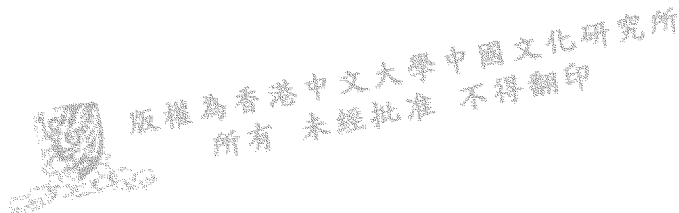
sense, so that naturalism should never be pitted against humanism or vice versa.

(2) Nature, for Chinese philosophers, is always understood in dynamic terms, as the Chinese have developed only the understanding of Tao, not the Concept of Being. Only a Taoist like Lao Tzu would understand the way through the process of reversion, while the Confucian philosophers through the process of creativity.

(3) It must take great insight and strict discipline to enable a person to become one with the Way and to become "natural." Hence, "Naturalness" should never be understood in terms of one's natural instincts or impulses. It means instead the realization of certain great potentialities within himself.

(4) It follows that an understanding of Nature depends on how a man can develop his insight into his own nature and the creative origin of all things. External nature is never understood on its own terms, it is always intimately related with the human life. Since the Chinese refuse to see Nature in the abstract, they fail to develop a thoroughgoing mechanical explanation of the universe. This may have hindered the scientific progress in China to a certain extent. But, ontologically, the Chinese have been able to avoid what Whitehead called: "Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness."

(5) Since it takes a cultured man to understand his own nature as well as the creative origin of all things, culture and nature are mutually complementary terms, it is through a combination of the two that the life of man will attain its highest fulfilment and satisfaction.



中國人的自然觀

(中文摘要)

劉述先

一九七四年在京都舉行一次國際學術會議討論各不同民族文化的自然觀，本人負責對中國人的自然觀作一簡述。本來打算將該文收在一論文集之中，後因故計劃未完成，始延至今日發表。文中所提出的基本論點，到現在為止，並無重大改變，特此聲明。

中國先哲的自然觀，應以儒、道兩家為主。佛家雖對中國哲學思想的發展有深遠的影響，但其起點卻是印度的世界觀、人生觀的基設，故不在本文討論的範圍之內。

儒、道兩家的觀點雖有許多互相差異乃至刺謬之處，但卻也有許多相似乃至共同的體會，必須加以細察，從而把握到中國先哲共同信奉的自然觀。

無論儒家也罷，道家也罷，都深信只要順應道的自然，就可以體現一種豐富而健康的人生。兩者都屬於天人合一的型態，只不過道家反對人爲的制度，以之爲違反自然；儒家則認爲由仁心的擴充，沛然莫之能禦，自然會產生合乎情理的典章制度。但人道必須以天道爲模楷，則兩家並無異詞。討論了儒、道兩家的自然觀之後，我有以下的一些觀測提供讀者參考：

(一)、在傳統中國思想之中找不到超自然主義與自然主義，或自然主義與(寡頭)人文主義的二元對立，所以西方對於自然主義的一些觀念未必能用於中國思想的了解之上。

(二)、中國思想缺乏希臘式的「存有」(Being)觀念或者基督教的超越上帝觀念。道在流行中見，既超越而內在。

(三)、中國人必須經過嚴格訓練始得妙合自然，這種思想與西方所說的自然本能或者自然衝動之類可謂完全拉不上關係。

(四)、對於自然的了解乃完全依賴於個人的造境。中國人與自然不隔，故缺乏西方那種抽象的機械自然觀，可能對於科學量化的發展是一種妨礙，但在哲學上則不會犯上懷德海所謂「錯置具體性的謬誤」(Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness)。

(五)、只有有文化修養的人才能把握內在的本性或自然，故對中國人而言，文化與自然也不能了解成爲兩個互相對立的概念，而要把它們當作兩個相輔相成的因素來看待。