Conceptual Foundations for Environmental Ethics: A Daoist Perspective

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The concepts *dao* and *de* in the *Daodejing* may be evoked to support a distinctive and plausible account of environmental holism. *Dao* refers to the totality of particulars, including the relations that hold between them, and the respective roles and functions of each within the whole. *De* refers to the distinctiveness of each particular, realized meaningfully *only* within the context of its interdependence with others, and its situatedness within the whole. Together, *dao* and *de* provide support for an ethical holism that avoids sacrificing individuals for the sake of the whole. The integrity and stability of the whole are important not because the whole is an end-in-itself but because those conditions assist in preserving the well-being of the constituent parts. In other words, the ethical holism supported in the *Daodejing* does not present individuals and wholes in mutually exclusive terms, but sees them in symbiotic relation, allowing for events to be mutually beneficial, or mutually obstructive, to both. In addition, two other Daoist concepts, *wuwei* (non-action) and *ziran* (spontaneity), provide further support for this construction of holism. If the distinctiveness of particular individuals is valued, then unilateral or reductive norms which obliterate such individuality are inappropriate. In this regard, the methodology of *wuwei* allows for the idea of individuals developing spontaneously in relation to others. According to this view of holism, individuals manifest and realize their integrity *in relation to others in the environmental context*, achieving an outcome that is maximally co-possible within those limits, rather than one that is maximally beneficial only for particular individuals.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Daoist classic, the *Daodejing*, has often been cited for its complex, metaphysical insights regarding the nature of reality and the theory of relations between individual things and beings. There is a growing body of literature on the application of Daoist thought to contemporary debates about the environment.[1] The literature ranges from basic proposals, such as a reexamination of

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[1] Prominent collections include *Environmental Ethics* 8, no. 3 (Winter 1986); *Philosophy East and West* 37, no. 2 (April 1987); and J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, eds., *Nature in Asian*

the human relationship to nature,[2] to more complex arguments which utilize certain Daoist ideas in order to provoke a reassessment of assumptions and categories in contemporary thought.[3] Some include suggestions that the aesthetic order which underlies Daoist thought provides important conceptual frameworks for environmental philosophy.[4]

Such explorations into the relevance and effectiveness of Daoist philosophy as applied to contemporary environmental problems should be taken seriously, albeit with care. For instance, there are chapters in the *Daodejing* that appear to advocate primordial simplicity (19, 25, 32, 37, 62, 80),[5] which some thinkers have sought to appropriate in the service of their own naturalistic outlooks:

> In the Far east the man-nature relationship was marked by respect, bordering on love, absent in the West. . . . Chinese Taoists postulated an infinite and benign force in the natural world. . . . Taoism fostered love of wilderness rather than hatred.[6]

> The first clear expression of ecological thinking appears in ancient China from about the sixth century B.C. . . . The Taoists resented [the] meddling [of the Confucianists] and believed all could live in spontaneous harmony with nature. They offered the most profound and eloquent philosophy of nature ever elaborated and the first stirrings of an ecological sensibility.[7]

These assertions need to be carefully investigated, however. One needs to ask whether the dictum to "live in spontaneous harmony with nature" provides sufficient justification, conceptual resources and motivational force for an effective environmental ethic.

In this essay, I attempt to avoid simplistic applications of Daoist philosophy and aim to demonstrate that it provides critical conceptual tools for addressing

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Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

[2] Po-Keung Ip, "Taoism and the Foundations of Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 5 (1983): 335–43.

[3] See, for example, Chung-ying Cheng's "On the Environmental Ethics of the Tao and the Ch'i," *Environmental Ethics* 8 (1986): 351–70.

[4] See Roger Ames, "Taoism and the Nature of Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 8 (1986): 317–50; R. P. Peerenboom, "Beyond Naturalism: A Reconstruction of Daoist Environmental Ethics" in *Environmental Ethics* 13 (1991): 3–22; Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry* (New York: Julian Press, 1963); Chung-yuan Chang, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); and Kirill Thompson, "Taoist Cultural Reality: The Harmony of Aesthetic Order," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17 (1990): 175–86.

[5] The numbers here refer to chapter numbers in the *Daodejing*; this system of referencing (bracketed numbers) will be used throughout this essay unless otherwise indicated.

[6] Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 192–93.

[7] Peter Marshall, *Nature's Web: Rethinking Our Place on Earth* (New York: Paragon House, 1992), p. 9.

certain debates in environmental philosophy. I argue that, both in its key concepts and in its anti-anthropocentric tenor, the *Daodejing* provides a justification for an environmental ethic that reaches beyond humans, individuals, or species. This project draws upon both the metaphysical and ethical resources that are available in the *Daodejing* to justify an environmental ethic which espouses a holistic perspective but which nevertheless recognizes the integrity of individuals.

The second section of the essay explores the Daoist concept, *de*, both in secondary commentaries and in the *Daodejing* itself. The third section investigates two sets of related concepts in the *Daodejing*. The first is the concepts *dao* and *de*, focusing primarily on their interdependence, and the second is the notions of *wuwei* and *ziran*. I argue, with reference to these four concepts, that the Daoist notion of interdependence may be invoked to support a pluralistic account of value in the context of holism. The final section reviews various significant themes such as anthropocentricism, human-nature dualism, and holism, in the light of Daoist philosophy. I also establish that Daoist philosophy provides important philosophical and ethical resources for dealing with contemporary environmental issues.

II. INTERPRETATIONS OF *DE*

De, often translated as "virtue," is one of two cardinal concepts in the *Daodejing*, the treatise on *dao* and *de*.[8] However, some scholars have noted with concern that analyses of Daoist philosophy have too frequently failed to accord the concept *de* the significance it is due.[9]

There is a range of possible meanings of the concept *de* deriving from its usage in the chapters of the *Daodejing*. The term is commonly translated to mean moral principle or virtue in the conventional sense, indicating one's moral cultivation. This approach has been taken in various ways by Chinese scholars such as Lionel Giles,[10] Wing-tsit Chan,[11] and D. C. Lau.[12]

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[8] The terms *dao* and *de* (Pinyin transliteration system) correspond to *tao* and *te* (Wade-Giles system commonly used in earlier literature) respectively. The Pinyin system is used in this essay because it is more up-to-date and widely used.

[9] With the oldest existing versions of the *Daodejing* excavated from the Han tombs at Mawangdui in China in 1973, the bamboo strips on which the texts are inscribed are arranged in such a way that the final forty-four chapters of the received text, the *De Jing*, are placed first. Hence, a translator of the Mawangdui *Daodejing* has labelled his translation the "*Dedaojing*." See Robert Henricks, *Lao-tze Te-tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Texts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989). See also Ames, "Taoism and the Nature of Nature," esp. sec. 4: "Taoism Misnamed."

[10] Lionel Giles, *The Sayings of Lao Tzu* (London: John Murray. 1907).

[11] Wing-tsit Chan, *The Way of Lao Tzu* (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill, 1963). Chan writes, "[t]he main objective of [the *Daodejing*] is the cultivation of virtue or *te*" (pp. 10–11).

[12] D. C. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963). Although Lau contemplates a richer interpretation of *de*, he proceeds very quickly to dismiss the significance of that

However, the interpretation of *de* to denote moral goodness is unsatisfactory because it overlooks the vagueness of the text regarding questions of ethics or axiology. Additionally, the interpretation of *de* as "virtue" or "moral principle" neglects the Daoist criticism of existing norms and values. The *Daodejing* is incisive in its criticism of contemporary values and virtues in the ancient Chinese context.[13] This criticism was, at its most fundamental level, a universal rejection of the all-too-human activity of promoting values which are superficial and unnecessarily dichotomous, divisive and hence, which tend to mislead:

> When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,
> There arises the recognition of ugliness.
> When they all know the good as good,
> There arises the recognition of evil. . . . (2)
>
> The five colors cause one's eyes to be blind.
> The five tones cause one's ears to be deaf.
> The five flavors cause one's palate to be spoiled. . . . (12)[14]

Against this background of scepticism regarding conventional values, the interpretation of *de* to denote a conventional sense of moral goodness would sit uneasily with Daoist philosophy. The problem with this interpretation is compounded by the fact that there is another term in the *Daodejing*, *shan*, which does refer to moral goodness, and which at times occurs in the same passage with *de*.[15]

It needs to be noted, however, that Wing-tsit Chan's and Lau's analyses of *de* are not confined to human ethical action. Both scholars recognize multiple interpretations of *de*. Chan argues that *dao* is the ontological source from which all things derive their existence, and *de* refers to the particular instantiation (the essence, so to speak), of each existing thing:

> . . . *te* is Tao endowed in the individual things. While Tao is common to all, it is what each thing has obtained from Tao, or its *te*, that makes it different from others. *Te* is then the individualizing factor, the embodiment of definite principles which give things their determinate features or characters.[16]

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interpretation, together with the role of *de* within the *Daodejing*. He writes: "In its Taoist usage, *te* refers to the virtue of a thing (which is what it 'gets' from the tao). In other words, *te* is the nature of a thing, because it is in virtue of its *te* that a thing is what it is. But in the *Lao tzu* the term is not a particularly important one and is often used in its more conventional senses" (p. 42).

[13] See *Daodejing* 5, 18, 19, 20, 38.

[14] Chan's translation from *The Way of Lao Tzu*. This translation is used throughout this essay, unless otherwise specified.

[15] See *Daodejing* 8, 27, 30, 49, 54, 61 and 81.

[16] Chan, *The Way of Lao Tzu*. Chan's interpretation of *de* is based partly on a traditional definition of the term which draws from its homophone, *de* (to obtain). See Chan's comments on p. 11.

According to Chan's analysis, *de* may be understood within an overarching framework, *dao*, within which individual beings manifest their distinctiveness. In this way, an emphasis on *de* is an emphasis on the particularity or distinctiveness of individual beings. Additionally, the theme of relationality is also important: each thing embodies its particular *de within* the contextual environment of *dao*.

Similarly, Lau's analysis highlights the connection between *de* and *dao*, explicitly drawing out the interdependent nature of all existence. On his definition, *de* refers to the *integrity* of being a particular thing, rather than to its ability or willingness to conform to predetermined standards. The ontology is particularly interesting because all things are seen to embody their distinctive natures *in and through their common origin, dao*. It is unfortunate, though, that Lau's analysis stops short of fleshing out this ontology.[17]

Chan's and Lau's claim that *de* signifies individuality within the context of the whole is articulated in the *Daodejing*:

> When one cultivates [*de*] in his person, it becomes genuine [*de*]
> When one cultivates [*de*] in his family, it becomes overflowing [*de*]
> When one cultivates [*de*] in his community, it becomes lasting [*de*]
> When one cultivates [*de*] in the world, it becomes universal. . . . (54)

Here, there is a strong suggestion that the respective function of each individual thing is context-specific rather than normative, and also that *de* generates different ends in each of these contexts.

Other Daoist scholars such as J. L. Duyvendak,[18] Arthur Waley,[19] and Max Kaltenmark[20] provide interpretations of *de* which are multidimensional. Duyvendak contends that the archaic sense of the term is actually a morally neutral one, signifying some kind of magic power rather than moral goodness: "good conduct," in a naturalistic sense and spontaneous manner, is the older sense of the term; "good conduct" in a human and ethical sense only came into use later, due partly to Confucian influence.

In a similar tone, Waley contends that the term *power* is a more appropriate translation of *de* because the earlier usage of *de* allows for *de* to be understood as bad as well as good, not unlike the Indian karma in the following respects:

> *Te* is anything that happens to one or that one does of a kind indicating that, as a consequence, one is going to meet with good or bad luck. It means, so to speak,

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[17] Lau, *Lao Tzu*, p. 42.

[18] J. L. Duyvendak, *Tao Te Ching: The Book of the Way and Its Virtue* (London: John Murray, 1954).

[19] Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

[20] Max Kaltenmark, *Lao Tzu and Taoism*, trans. Roger Greaves (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

the stock of credit (or the deficit) that at any given moment a man has at the bank of fortune.[21]

Kaltenmark offers a compelling analysis of *de*. His study is particularly insightful because it is multifaceted and accommodates different conceptions of *de*. Quoting Marcel Granet's study of Chinese thought, Kaltenmark states that *de* is "the ideal efficacy that becomes particular as it becomes real."[22] He also notes that *de* is generally used with positive connotations, though his analysis strives to retain the original sense of potency, which may be good or bad. He suggests that

> . . . [*te*] always implies a notion of efficacy and specificity. Every creature possessing a power of any kind, natural or acquired, is said to have *Te*. . . . [*Te*] has varied meanings ranging from magical potency to moral virtue. But the latter is a derived meaning, for originally *Te* was not necessarily good. . . . Nevertheless, *Te* is generally used in the good sense: it is an inner potency that favorably influences those close to its possessor, a virtue that is beneficent and life-giving.[23]

Kaltenmark's articulation of the concept *de* has the advantage of recognizing and allowing for a range of understandings of the concept that are necessitated by the cryptic and piecemeal nature of the text.

Based on the discussion of *de* in this section, two important features of *de* may be detected: (a) there is a strong suggestion of an intrinsic relatedness between individuals within the framework of the *dao*. Relations are intrinsic rather than extrinsic in that individuals are determined in part by their respective places in the *dao*. Here, the remarks of Chung-ying Cheng, who contrasts a superficial notion of the term *environment* with its deeper (Daoist) sense, are pertinent:

> [According to a superficial sense of the term, environment means] simply "the surroundings," the physical periphery, the material conditions and the transient circumstances. . . . [However, environment] cannot be treated as an object, the material conditions, a machine tool, or a transient feature. Environment is more than the visible, more than the tangible, more than the external, more than a matter of quantified period or time or spread of space. It has a deep structure as well as a deep process, as the concept of Tao indicates.[24]

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[21] Waley, *The Way and Its Power,* p. 31. Waley's view of *de* is predicated on correlative thought. The theme of correlative thinking assumes an intrinsic relatedness between all things and beings, covering a wide sweep of all existence including cosmic forces, all species and natural objects, and even aspects of human life such as government. Chinese scholar A. C. Graham provides a comprehensive account of correlative thinking in "Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking," Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, Occasional Paper and Monograph Series, no. 6, 1986.

[22] Marcel Granet, *La Pensee Chinoise* (Paris, 1934), p. 303; cited in Kaltenmark, *Lao Tzu and Taoism,* p. 27.

[23] Kaltenmark, *Lao Tzu and Taoism* pp. 27–28.

[24] Cheng, "On the Environmental Ethics of the Tao and the Ch'i," p. 353.

A corollary to the theme of intrinsic relatedness is that of *interdependence* of individuals. The interdependent relation between the self and others within the context of the whole engenders a relational and contextual concept of the self. Within such a structure, individuals can only achieve full realization *in the context of* their interdependence with others.

(b) Associated with the deeper notion of environment articulated in (a), *de* seems to provide the specifications for an individual's *integrity* in the context of its relations with other individuals. Within an environment where interdependence is emphasized, the integrity of individuals is important as it is necessary to prevent the obliteration of individual distinctiveness, interests and needs, which might too easily be subsumed under the rubric of the whole.

These two features—interdependence and integrity—are held in a finely tuned balance. The individual seeks and attains meaning *within* contextual and relational boundaries and affiliations. However, if these are overly restrictive, the integrity of the individual will be diminished or eradicated. Hence, *de* is important in setting the extent of self-determination. *De* refers to (a development or cultivation of) the distinctive characteristics of individuals. Yet, the sense of integrity is far removed from any suggestion of independent, separate existence. In the view of the *Daodejing*, severe fragmentation of the different forms of life is brought about partly by the imposition of a rigid axiological framework upon all aspects of existence; this cuts up the uncarved block, so to speak (see *Daodejing* 28).

III. INTERDEPENDENCE AND INTEGRITY: *DAO* AND *DE* ALLOWING FOR SPONTANEITY: *WUWEI* AND *ZIRAN*

The paradigmatic *dao* of Heaven is inclusive (73), standing in contrast to the tendencies of the human world to create inequalities (77). The method of *dao* is to treat all equally: ". . . Heaven and earth unite to drip sweet dew. Without the command of men, it drips evenly over all" (32).

Additionally, the interdependence of things within the whole is implicit in the idea that all draw benefit from *dao* (34, 81). This theme of *dao* benefiting all things is effectively epitomized by the action of water:

The best [man][25] is like water,
Water is good; it benefits [*li*] all things and does not compete with them.
It dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain.
This is why it is so near to Tao (8)

From an ontological point of view, the concept *dao* signifies the shared

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[25] Chan (*The Way of Lao Tzu*) adds the word *man* at this point in the statement. Chan states that some interpreters have taken the phrase to mean the best man, while others take it to mean the "highest good." In Chan's view, both interpretations are possible (see pp. 113–14). However, I prefer to ellipt the word because the addition narrows the applicability of these ideas to humankind.

context within which all things exist. In the case of the natural environment, this assertion is, at one level, undeniably true: all species and beings that live within the natural environment are ontologically connected; beings encroach on others, they contribute to and extract from their natural environments and, most importantly, they share the same biosphere.

However, an understanding of *dao* from a purely ontological point of view can be limiting. At points in the *Daodejing*, the concept is referred to not as an ontological reality but as a metaphysical ideal. In this latter sense, *dao* is an abstraction, not an actual existence. In other words, it also functions as a conceptual tool or a psychological device to assist in the visualization of an ideal state of affairs whereby particulars come together in fulfilment of their particular *de*, in a way that is maximally possible within an environment that includes multiple others. This vision draws from an integration of the concepts *dao* and *de*.

The metaphors that the *Daodejing* is renowned for also illustrate the inclusivity of *dao*. Collectively, the images of the infant, water, rivers and seas, the female, and the valley exemplify the qualities of softness [*rou*],[26] weakness [*ruo*],[27] quietude [*jing*],[28] and non-assertiveness [*buzhen*].[29]

It may appear that these characteristics make a virtue of submissiveness in order to facilitate a realization of a harmonious whole. On such a view, the integrated whole is achieved at a cost to some individuals: they are required to be non-assertive, still or weak. On this interpretation, Daoism would collapse into a trivial and implausible holism, one that calls for the unconditional denial of the integrity of individuals. However, it is clear that some key passages in the *Daodejing* challenge such a trivial holism:

> Tao produces them.
> Te fosters them.
> . . . They always come spontaneously.
> . . . (Tao) produces them but does not take possession of them.
> . . . It leads them but does not master them.
> This is called profound and secret te. (51)[30]

There are two key phrases here which recognize the importance of integrity. That "tao produces them but does not take possession of them" (*sheng er buyou*) could be translated to mean "to produce or to assist in (their) growth *but* not to possess (them)." Similarly, that *dao* "leads them but does not master them" (*chang er buzai*) expresses the view of leading without dominating. Within the context of the passage, there is a strong suggestion that the holistic

[26] *Daodejing* 10, 36, 43, 76, 78.
[27] Ibid., 36, 52, 55, 76, 78.
[28] Ibid., 15, 16, 26, 37, 39, 45, 57, 64.
[29] Ibid., 8, 22, 66, 68, 73, 81.
[30] The sentiments in this passage are echoed in *Daodejing* 2 and 10.

perspective does not entail the negation of individual or distinctive features or concerns.

Furthermore, it is striking that *dao* and *de* are mentioned together, highlighting the themes of interdependence and integrity. *De* is that distinctiveness, integrity, or excellence of each individual thing that can be realized only in the context of the whole, the ideal *dao*. A Chinese scholar, Roger Ames, expresses a similar view of the *dao-de* polarity:

> . . . [*te*] denotes the arising of the particular in a process vision of existence. The particular is the unfolding of a *sui generis* focus of potency that embraces and determines conditions within the range and parameters of its particularity. . . . Just as any one ingredient in the stewpot must be blended with all of the others in order to express most fully its own flavor, so harmonization with other environing particulars is a necessary precondition for the fullest self-disclosure of any given particular.[31]

Ames' conceptualization of *dao* and *de* is not unlike the account expressed in this paper in that it stresses the maintenance of integrity of individual beings while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of context and environment. Ames also makes the important point that the individual-environment nexus should not be seen as dichotomous. In other words, while the individual may be restricted by various aspects of its environment and by its relations with others, this restriction is not necessarily a negative condition.[32]

The maintenance of the integrity of each individual entity is also espoused in two integral Daoist concepts, non-action (*wuwei*) and spontaneity (*ziran*):

> He who takes action fails.
> He who grasps things loses them.
> For this reason the sage takes no action (*wuwei*) and therefore does not fail.
> He grasps nothing and therefore he does not lose anything.
> . . . He learns to be unlearned, and returns to what the multitude has missed (Tao).
> Thus he supports all things in their natural state (*ziran*) but does not take any action. (64)

Scholars have often puzzled over of both these concepts, notorious for their ambiguity. The first, *wuwei*, is most frequently though somewhat misleadingly translated as "non-action." This translation evokes a sense of passivity and

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[31] Ames, "Taoism and the Nature of Nature," p. 331.

[32] Ames takes issue with the fact that reasoning in Chinese philosophy is not reducible to, or cannot be subsumed under existing categories in Western philosophies. However, where the ideas in this paper might differ from Ames' is in the latter's suggestion that an aesthetic rather than logical order is fundamental in Chinese thought (as contrasted with Western science) in ibid, pp. 320–26. While the distinction between aesthetic and logical order is meaningful and useful, Ames' assertion that the aesthetic order is the ground of Chinese cosmology may neglect or omit other integrated modes of operation such as the moral or the rational (or reasonable).

inaction, rendering any suggestions for activity or change incoherent. Some scholars have argued that the interpretation of *wuwei* as "non-intrusive action" or "non-interfering action" is more philosophically profound and interesting.[33] These latter translations support a meaningful rendition of the concept *wuwei* both at the sociopolitical level (arguing against the imposition of artificial, conformist and universally binding norms) and at the metaphysical level (acknowledging the inappropriateness and fatality of imposing egocentric or anthropocentric norms upon other individuals or species).[34]

The term *ziran* has often been translated as "nature" or "natural." It functions both as a noun, corresponding with the notion of the natural environment, or as an adjective which means "spontaneous." Chapter twenty-five illuminates this concept:

> There was something undifferentiated and yet complete,
> Which existed before heaven and earth.
> . . . I do not know its name; I call it Tao.
> . . . Tao models itself after Nature (*ziran*).

It needs to be noted that the commonly used translation of *ziran* as "nature" is misleading, locating in the concept *ziran* an inherent concern for the natural environment. However, the unquestioning ease with which Daoist thought has been adopted to address certain issues in environmental philosophy has recently been brought under scrutiny by scholars such as Ramachandra Guha:

> The detection of a "love of wilderness" and of the "first stirrings of an ecological sensibility" in Daoist thought reflect a selective reading of the Daoist texts as well as conjecture regarding the intention and attitudes of the early Daoists toward environmental concerns. . . . such utopic renditions of Daoist thought need further to be justified in the face of ecological disasters in Chinese history. [35]

The interpretation of the message of the *Daodejing* as supporting naturalistic primitivism also leads to triviality. Either human beings belong to the realm of the natural—in which case the dictum to be natural, like *dao*, is superfluous—or they do not—in which case the dictum to be natural is a misdirected aim.[36]

The alternative translation of *ziran* as a principle or as a *modus operandi* is

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[33] See the comprehensive discussions of *wuwei* by Benjamin Schwartz, "The Ways of Taoism," in *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), and Angus C. Graham, "Heaven and Man Go Their Own Ways" in *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing, 1989).

[34] See *Daodejing* 5, discussed later in this section.

[35] "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," in Andrew Brennan, ed., *The Ethics of the Environment* (Brookfield, Vt.: Dartmouth, 1995), pp. 239–52.

[36] Peerenboom, "Beyond Naturalism."

both more plausible and fruitful.[37] On this interpretation, *wuwei* and *ziran*, understood in combination, provide a coherent picture of Daoist non-assertiveness: *allowing* for the spontaneity of any one individual requires the other, or others, not to impose unnecessary constraints on this individual.[38] In other words, *wuwei* expresses the methodology of *dao* which, in respecting the integrity of individuals, allows room for their *spontaneous* development.

Cheng alludes to this latter interpretation of *ziran* in his views on environmental ethics inspired by Daoist philosophy:

> . . . tzu-jan (*ziran*) is not something beyond and above the Tao. It is the movement of the Tao as the Tao, namely as the underlying unity of all things as well as the underlying source of the life of all things. One important aspect of tzu-jan is that the movement of things must come from the internal life of things and never results from engineering or conditioning by an external power.[39]

Cheng identifies *ziran* not merely in ontological terms, but also as a process, a "movement." His analysis also links *ziran* with the notions of *de* (the "internal life of things") with *wuwei* (not being conditioned by an external power).

In the application of *wuwei* and *ziran* to environmental thought, it may be argued that those who share in the Daoist insight will refrain from imposing a human-centered perspective on all things and will not expect the myriad creatures (*wanwu*) to conform to human norms.[40] Kirill Thompson, who argues for an aesthetic organization inherent in Daoist philosophy, suggests that

> . . . in a Taoist world characterized by aesthetic order, each particular from flea to red giant emerges as a center of things, a bona fide point of reference. . . . Significantly, none is intrinsically better than any other; our preferences among them simply reflect our own perspectives and cannot be given any ultimate justification.[41]

The organizational picture presented by Thomson is supported by *Daodejing* 5, which opens with

> Heaven and Earth are not humane *(ren)*,
> They regard all things as straw dogs.

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[37] This understanding of *ziran* as spontaneity, when applied to the final sentence in chapter sixty-four, would read, "[the Daoist sage] supports all things in their spontaneous development by not taking any action that interferes with their spontaneity." The translation of *ziran* as "spontaneity" instead of "nature" in chaps. 23, 51, and 54 is also particularly effective.

[38] See *Daodejing* 12, 18, 19, 20, 37 and 53.

[39] Cheng, "On the Environmental Ethics of the Tao and the Ch'i," p. 356.

[40] *Daodejing* 4, 5, 25, and 64.

[41] Thompson, "Taoist Cultural Reality: The Harmony of Aesthetic Order," p. 177.

The sage is not humane.
He regards all people as straw dogs.

D. C. Lau, a scholar of Chinese thought notes in his translation that "[i]n the *T'ien yun* chapter in the *Chuang tzu* it is said that straw dogs were treated with the greatest deference before they were used as an offering, only to be discarded and trampled upon as soon as they had served their purpose."[42]

Apart from its anti-anthropocentric tone, the notion of straw dogs is philosophically interesting, its significance reaching beyond issues of instrumentality. While the straw dog serves a certain function within the sacrifice, it is also *central* to it; without the straw dog, the sacrifice loses its fuller, broader and richer significance, and perhaps cannot proceed at all. In this way, the issue of the straw dogs—a symbol for "all things" (*wanwu*)—transcends debates on intrinsic and instrumental value. The tone of *Daodejing* 5 impels us to see everything as holding its distinctive significance *within the context of the dao*.

From this analysis, the two sets of concepts, *dao* and *de*, and *wuwei* and *ziran*, are seen in their fullest cooperation: the recognition and valuing of individual distinctiveness (*de*) entails an appreciation of its spontaneous expression (*ziran*); allowing for (*wuwei*) spontaneity, on the other hand, is not simply idiosyncratic and uncoordinated self-fulfilment. The realization of each individual is meaningful only within the context of its relatedness and responsivity to others within the whole (*dao*). The affirmation of the value of individual beings *within the environmental context* feeds into a complex holism which emphasizes both the integrity and interdependence of individuals.

IV. A DAOIST PROPOSAL FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

Anti-Anthropocentricism

A major theme that cuts across many debates in environmental philosophy is that of anthropocentricism. At its most general level, anthropocentricism, construed as the inability or unwillingness of human beings to accord moral standing or moral consideration to other species, has been held responsible for the degraded state of the natural environment and for the extinction of species.

The issue of anthropocentricism has been at the centre of debates about the nature and scope of environmental ethics. A number of environmental ethicists see anthropocentricism as the basic problem in environmental ethics. They argue that to construct an environmental ethic based on human concerns is to beg the question about the need for environmental ethics to address the issue of human-centeredness in environmental thought.

For instance, Val Plumwood, articulating an ecofeminist philosophy, argues against integrating "nature" into an essentially anthropocentric model. Plumwood

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[42] Lau, *Lao Tzu*, p. 61.

sets up five features that a viable, non-hierarchical and non-anthropocentric environmental ethic should include. These are

(a)   the acknowledgment of dependency between human beings and other beings (the well-being of other species is not merely accidentally or externally related to that of human beings and vice versa);

(b)   the avoidance of radical exclusion of human beings from other beings (radical exclusion denies the possibility of continuity and community between the human and the nonhuman; a proper resolution requires not just a recognition of similarities and differences but also a recognition of a complex, interacting pattern both of continuity and difference);

(c)   the avoidance of merely incorporating other beings within the notion of humanity (Plumwood calls this an "assimilating" strategy which may result in other species being seen as inferior humans);

(d)   the avoidance of instrumentalism at all costs (a viable environmental ethic should consider other beings and species, and the natural environment, not merely as means to human ends); and

(e)   the avoidance of homogenization or stereotyping (involving a recognition that the beings within the natural environment are not homogenous; other species have some different needs from those of human beings and different individuals and species have their distinctive characteristics and interests).[43]

The view in the *Daodejing* described in this essay incorporates the points articulated by Plumwood. In response to Plumwood's concerns, the philosophy of the *Daodejing* as outlined in this essay may be presented as follows:

(a$_1$)   The perspective of the *dao* presents an ideal inclusive whole that does not permit the mere assertion of human priority. The flourishing of *dao* is predicated upon the well-being of individuals within the *dao*. Hence, the assertion of independence on the part of human beings, or any other being or species, will be ultimately futile because it severs essential interdependencies between beings.

(b$_1$)   The Daoist criticism of the Confucian project of creating a human cultural identity, distinct and separate from all other species and the natural environment, addresses this concern of radical exclusion. Daoism deems human institutions, ranks and hierarchies as "unnatural" because they remove continuities and similarities between humans and their natural environment.

(c$_1$)   Daoist axiology is irreducible to one group, kind or species, or even

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[43] Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge Publishing. 1993), pp. 48–55.

to the whole. Daoist thought strongly urges a transcendence of the merely human. It is also sceptical regarding the values that are upheld by humankind, and imposed on all aspects of human and nonhuman existence. In particular, the concepts *wuwei* and *ziran* support a conceptual system that recognizes the integrity of each individual and allows for their spontaneous development, within the parameters of its environment.

(d$_1$) The rejection of conventional values involves an overturning of dualism through a shattering of dualistic pairs, embodied in the *dao-de* polarity. This rejection of dualism entails a rejection of the unconditional valuing of all that is human as deserving absolute priority. Additionally, it is not the case that only human beings possess non-instrumental value. The theme of intrinsic relatedness of beings and species is one that casts doubt on the whole debate regarding which beings have intrinsic value and which others have only instrumental value. First, it blurs the clear individuation and separation of particulars. Second, it endorses a multitiered value system where relationships, in addition to individuals, are valued.

(e$_1$) The *Daodejing* recognizes the integrity of individuals within the whole and seeks to promote their well-being within the context of the whole. The valuing of individuals also prompts a recognition of a multiplicity of needs, interests and values.

The depth of the philosophy of the *Daodejing* lies not merely in the fact that it is able to respond to the requirements of a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic as proposed by Plumwood. It could also provide a more thorough evaluation of the issue of anthropocentricism itself, which has been intensely debated. Some philosophers reject the methodology of merely extending existing normative ethical theories to include nonhuman species, individuals and entities in our moral consideration.[44] Others argue against anthropocentricism inherent in existing normative theories, contending that the only viable environmental ethic is one with a non-anthropocentric, ecological focus.[45]

In response, there are arguments against the viability or plausibility of a non-anthropocentric ethical system, instigating some to make a distinction between *weak* anthropocentricism and *strong* anthropocentricism.[46] While anthropo-

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[44] See, for example, John Rodman, "Review Discussions: The Liberation of Nature?" *Inquiry* 20 (1977): 83–145; Richard and Val Routley, "Human Chauvinism and Environmental Ethics," in Don Mannison, Michael McRobbie, and Richard Routley, eds., *Environmental Philosophy* (Canberra: Australian National University, Research School of the Social Sciences, 1980), pp. 96–99.

[45] See, for example, Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecological Movement," *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100, and Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

[46] Defenders of weak anthropocentricism include Eugene Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value," in Max Oelschlaeger, ed., *After Earth Day: Continuing the Conservation Effort*

centric environmental ethics may fall anywhere within this range—and, indeed, the credibility of the distinction has been questioned—the key difference between weak and strong anthropocentrism is not that the latter lacks any tangible concern for the natural environment. Rather, strong anthropocentrists in general perceive the appreciation of value, and the act of valuing, as essentially human enterprises. In that connection, they normally move on to posit that the concerns of nonhumans or the natural environment are only instrumental or secondary to human concerns and hence are only worth pursuing or preserving within that framework. In contrast, the range of weak anthropocentric theories uphold that at least some nonhuman interests are morally considerable, although they may be overridden by human ones. Here, again, the distinctness of such positions from non-anthropocentric views has been challenged.[47]

The *Daodejing* circumvents debates about whether environmental ethics should seek to be anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric. It bypasses debates on whether individuals, entities, or species possess intrinsic or instrumental value, proposing instead to understand value in terms of the individual's place within the whole. The value of the straw dog within the context of the whole is neither *only instrumental* nor *only intrinsic*. When applied to environmental issues, the analogy is clear: individuals, species, or entities are *situated in*, and *connected to others within,* the natural environment. In this context, they seldom, if ever, possess only intrinsic value or only instrumental value. It is perhaps through this method of moving beyond both debates on anthropocentrism, and intrinsic versus instrumental value, that environmental ethics can begin properly to consider the ethical development of human attitudes and behavior within the natural environment.

AGAINST HUMAN SEPARATENESS AND OTHER DUALISMS

It has been asserted that anthropocentric attitudes are based partly in a commitment to the view that humans are separate and independent of other species and the environment. Such a perspective is, in turn, often linked to a dualistic framework set up between humans and other species, such as that between man-nature, subject-object, master-slave or dominant-dominated. This fundamental dualism is problematic as it is associated with the viewing of humans as discontinuous with, independent of, superior to, and perhaps even antithetical to, the natural environment. Such a perspective is damaging not only for the natural environment but for humans as well. It legitimizes a false

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(Denton, Tex.: University of North Texas Press, 1992). Those who propose versions of strong anthropocentricism include William Baxter, *People or Penguins: The Case for Optimal Pollution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974). See also Bryan Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentricism," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984): 131–48.

[47] See Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentricism."

dichotomy between humans and the environment, and it warrants, specifically, the mastery, domination and exploitation of the natural environment by human beings.[48] Additionally, such assumptions of the human-nature dichotomy tend to oversimplify aspects of connectedness between humans, other species, and the environment, and thus restrict a full and proper evaluation of ethical issues, often presenting these as simplistic trade-offs.

The *Daodejing* questions the human tendency to assert independence from all other existing beings.[49] It upholds a concept of the related self as basic. All beings are determined in part by others in their environment. There is not one being that successfully maintains independence from all others in its environment. Each being seeks fulfillment within the boundaries and parameters in its environment. In this context, the curtailment of the immediate needs and interests of particular individuals and groups is not seen as necessarily, or always, negative. Ideally, individuals in that context are able to pursue their interests in a maximal way *within their environment*.

In a fundamental way, the rejection of dualism and its corresponding assertions of separateness of the human species from others, touches on issues of human identity. The *Daodejing* urges a reevaluation of the conceptual framework that asserts *independent* human existence. It is perhaps paradoxical that such an attempt to cast doubt upon the significance of human independence actually creates the conditions for the development of a far richer and more substantial meaning of human identity.

HOLISM AND INTEGRITY

Within environmental philosophy, holism is articulated in a variety of ways. It operates in many ecocentric accounts, with a variety of meanings.[50] However, holism has not received universal acceptance amongst environmental philosophers. Some philosophers are rightly critical of certain versions of environmental holism because they may neglect the needs of individuals.[51]

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[48] See Plumwood (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, chap. 2: "Dualism: The Logic of Colonisation."

[49] *Daodejing* 2, 5, 7, 19, 32.

[50] There are fine distinctions made between some versions: *metaphysical holism* (that wholes exist apart from their part and may be more real than their parts), *methodological holism* (which asserts that in order to understand the constituent parts, we need to understand various phenomena associated with the whole), and *ethical holism* (that moral consideration should be extended to wholes). See the discussion in Joseph DesJardins, *Environmental Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2001), pp. 176–77.

[51] For example, Eric Katz, "Organiscism, Community and the 'Substitution Problem,'" *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985): 241–56; Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); and Don Marietta, Jr., "Environmental Holism and Individuals," *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988): 251–58.

R. P. Peerenboom, in his attempt to apply Daoist views to environmental ethics, relies on a holism with some consideration of outcomes:

> . . . no individual or species or specimen is a priori entitled to protection. . . . No single criterion is privileged as *the* criterion. When conflicts arise, the focus turns not to adjudicating according to a fixed rule who is right and who is wrong, but to achieving a harmonization of the disparate interests that will benefit all.[52]

Peerenboom is cautious, however, that such harmony may be merely conceptual. He writes:

> While this interpretation may be philosophically promising . . . [o]ne wonders of how much assistance it will be to the environmental philosopher faced with real-life problems. . . . In actual practice, this process of balancing interests to attain an equilibrium is susceptible to the politics of power . . . [because of] real *dis*parity as some members exercise a greater influence over the end result than others: some are conductors, composers, and maestros; others are bit players.[53]

Peerenboom is a little pessimistic regarding the applicability of Daoist philosophy to contemporary environmental debates. It is clear that the "process of balancing interests is susceptible to the politics of power." However, this is not a problem specific to a Daoist environmental ethic. Peerenboom himself makes this point later in the same essay, that these problems surface in every ethical system.

Indeed, the fact that there are power differentials should be engaged with directly, instead of avoided, in environmental debates and negotiations. The contention here is that Daoist philosophy can provide more to environmental ethics than Peerenboom allows it to. As argued previously, holism in Daoist philosophy maintains a sense of individual integrity. The balance between the interdependence of all things and the maintenance of their *de*, their individual excellences, allows for the realisation of a whole that is not merely the sum of its parts. Rather, the integrity and the stability of the larger whole is valued not because the whole is valued as an end-in-itself, but because these conditions combine to assist in the preservation of the well-being of its constituent parts. Furthermore, the principles of *wuwei* and *ziran* highlight the importance of acknowledging the distinctive identities of the many. The endorsement of non-dominating or non-intrusive action is a corollary of the imperative to recognize and allow for the spontaneous development of (the many) others. The legitimacy of individuals in their distinctiveness should be adopted as a fundamental feature of any environmental ethic.

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[52] Peerenboom, "Beyond Naturalism," pp. 20–21.
[53] Ibid., p. 21.

This view of the self-in-relation and self-in-context necessitates a fundamental change in conceptual frameworks, particularly in philosophies where identity is construed in essentially individualistic and atomistic terms. On this view, impartiality or detachment, for example—or more generally the requirement to treat all like cases alike, irrespective of the individuals or factors involved—would not be accorded priority. Rather, decision making would involve taking into account the particulars involved and the relationships that obtain between them, in the context of the whole.

It is also obvious that a viable holistic theory must account for conflict of the sort Peerenboom refers to, where there are power imbalances. The issue of conflict is not simplified within a Daoist axiology proposed in this paper. Indeed, it should be expected that a Daoist assessment of values would culminate in a multitiered account that resists unitary evaluations which reduce or assimilate a wide variety of particulars to the standard. Such an assessment *should* yield a more complex entanglement of issues: a proper resolution will take into account the interests of individuals, species and of the whole, together with the relevant relations that obtain between individuals within the whole. Clearly, in certain situations, conflict may facilitate development or precipitate positive change.

The view articulated in this paper transcends a simplistic view of the whole as a mere sum of its parts. In this more complex view, the whole is not more important than, or independent of its parts; rather, an adequate understanding of individuals comes only when we view them relative to the system of interdependencies in which they exist. Daoist philosophy provides the basis for valuing human *and* nonhuman individuals and species, and for a proper acknowledgment that individuals may also possess value by virtue of the relations in which they stand, with other beings in the context of the whole.

From a holistic perspective, it is clear that not all individuals or groups may achieve their desired outcomes on any one issue and that, at times, compromise is essential. Within the framework of the *Daodejing*, negotiation and compromise are to be understood in the context of the whole. If this view is accepted, then, like conflict, compromise is not necessarily or always negative. That compromise may have positive effects or outcomes is predicated on a related and contextualized self. Both individuals, and the relations that hold between them, are morally significant. Hence, decisions could be made, for example, that entail a loss for the individual, but which enrich a particular other or others. In this way, the loss suffered by that individual is not a complete or absolute loss. Holism in the *Daodejing* refers to a comprehensive harmony between the realisation of individual excellence (*de*) within a context of interdependent, mutual enrichment (*dao*).

In a Daoist environmental ethic, what is ultimately sought is not the satisfaction of all parties concerned but rather a *maximally* coherent and superlative state of affairs. How this ideal condition might be attained is best demonstrated through analogy. Here, an analogy from philosophy of religion is helpful.

Philosophers of religion and theologians have been concerned with the issue of god's attributes, noting that the set of them taken together—omnipotence, omniscience and maximal goodness—may appear to be internally inconsistent. For instance, doubts have been articulated regarding the traditional understanding of omnipotence, that god is able to do *everything*; such questions include god's powers to overturn logical necessities, to change god's own past, or to conduct evil acts.

A traditional response is that god is capable of evil acts, but will not bring them about because god is good. However, this response is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, this approach could lapse into a circularity regarding the definition of good and evil. Second, and more significantly, it does not deal with the root of these problems regarding god's different attributes. The traditional methodology of assessing god's attributes has been to take each of these characteristics in turn, and to discuss them independently of god's other attributes. Such a strategy isolates the different attributes and fails to conceive of them as properties embodied by the one being; the result is a fragmented picture of the one being who embodies these attributes.

A solution that has come up in response to this difficulty is one that emphasizes the need to see god as the embodiment of these different characteristics, and appropriately to construe the latter in interplay. On this view, one should see the different characteristics of god not in isolation, but as embodied by the one being. God, in his exercise of abilities, consistently achieves a maximally satisfactory state of affairs. In other words, ". . . the rationale behind ascribing great-making qualities to God is to make explicit the emphatic, central belief that God is perfect or maximally excellent."[54] On this view, god possesses, in the best way possible, his great-making properties: god has the "*greatest compossible* [co-possible] *set of properties*."[55] In practical terms, this would mean that "[i]f God's being perfectly good in any way limits God's being all-powerful, it does so only in a fashion that, overall, contributes to the excellence of God."[56]

This approach to the issue of god's attributes in the philosophy of religion could benefit discussion on environmental holism. In particular, the notion of compossibility calls for a recognition and acceptance that, from the point of view of the whole, a maximally fruitful outcome is not necessarily one that attempts to ensure the full satisfaction of all parties involved. The application of this idea to debates about environmental holism yields significant results: decisions are made *neither* exclusively for the whole and against the individual, *nor* for the individual and against the whole. Indeed, from the point of view of compossibility, it would appear that such characterizations of holism

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[54] See Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 74.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

are naïve and simplistic. An example of this unhelpful oversimplification of issues is in the presentation of issues regarding the northern spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest ancient forests as a simplistic trade-off between those owls and loggers ("Owl versus Man"),[57] ignoring significant factors such as aspects of the shared environment, other interdependent species which share that habitat, and biodiversity.

In order to achieve a maximally compossible state of affairs in an environmental context, the diversity of beings, species, and habitats needs to be taken in to account. It may strike some that the notion of compossibility evoked here, and applied to environmental ethics, is too hazy to be useful. However, a holistic environmental ethic which seeks to recognize all involved, including the relations between beings, their respective places within the environment and both the short-term and long-term effects of particular decisions, will necessarily be wide-ranging and multifaceted.[58]

That the measure of what is maximally compossible in the case of environmental ethics is not a mere sum of individual happinesses, forces human beings to examine the bases of anthropocentric thinking. Such a holistic environmental ethic, when applied to real-life situations in the contemporary setting, does not necessarily seek a return to the primitive, antitechnological and anti-developmental way of life: a rejection of anthropocentricism is not necessarily anti-humanitarian. The insights of the *Daodejing* apply both to the *process* and *attitudes* according to which decisions are made about the natural environment. *Wuwei* is a *methodology* that allows for spontaneity (ziran), recognizing variety and complexity in value, rather than simplicity and unitariness. Additionally, the *Daodejing* prompts a critical awareness of the self-in-environment and of interdependence between individuals, species and habitats within the earth environment. This perspective, coupled with an *attitude* prepared to negotiate and to accept compromise in some situations, would lead to some very significant changes in existing behavioral and consumptive patterns.

The Daoist model proposed here is a potent one in challenging the selfishness and shortsightedness of anthropocentricism by arguing that there are no empirical or moral grounds for asserting human superiority and independence. Additionally, the holistic framework provided by Daoist thought provides a stimulus for reassessing human identity beyond the isolated and insulated immediate environments. These elements will provide the bases for a rich and fruitful environmental ethic.

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[57] Cover story, "Owl versus Man," *Time Magazine,* 25 June 1990. The report article itself is not as polarized as the cover suggests, but the point here is how such issues are commonly distorted and misrepresented.

[58] A Chinese scholar, Chung-yuan Chang, trans., *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), suggests that Daoist philosophy upholds a holism that strives to achieve the best "unity of multiplicities." Chang's idea resembles the notion of compossibility discussed here.