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A Biocultural Dialogue between Thoreau and Taoist Thought: Rethinking Environmental Ethics, Nature, Spirituality and Place

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Abstract: A fundamental question of the 21st century centers around the role and place of humans in their environment. Given the great acceleration of consumptive practices engaged in the 20th century, humans stand on the brink of a 6th extinction event. In order to determine our place and role in our global environment, we need to reflect on where we are and what the future will be—we need to focus on the habits of our “co-inhabitation” of the planet. Given the positive and negative impacts of international and global activities, intercultural dialogues are necessary for the care of the ecology of the planet, and one of the most prescient dialogues is between Eastern and Western world views. While much comparative research has been conducted regarding the connection between American Transcendentalism and Chinese ancient philosophy, relatively little philosophical work has been conducted to demonstrate the connectivity between Henry David Thoreau and Taoism. Yet there are, in fact, profound similarities between the American naturalist and Chinese philosophy, in particular Taoism. This paper aimed to discover and manifest the connection and similarities between the philosophy of Thoreau and the ancient worldview of Taoism. Through this comparative study and intercultural dialogue, we seek to trace historical precedents and intercultural dialogue between American Transcendentalism and ancient Chinese philosophy in order to explore the groundwork for a new vision of environmental awareness in order to promote a better future with a community of co-inhabitants and emphasis on the well-being of all.

Keywords: Thoreau; Taoism; nature; co-inhabitants; ethical practice



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1. Introduction

“The World is Burning” appears to be the common mantra of today’s environmental activists, and there is some merit to the claim. With a projected degree differential of 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2050 (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2018), increases in extreme drought conditions (Naumann et al. 2018), and rapidly rising levels of urbanization and resource shortages coupled with globalization that promotes monocultures in timber and farming and cultural homogenization, it appears that the world in which we live has become, both literally and figuratively, a consolidated mass that requires only a match to spark the tinder for global catastrophe. According to Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), that match has been struck and we humans are the source of the conflagration. They contend that we have reached an epochal change and, in geological timescales, we have arrived at the Anthropocene era of the Quaternary period. This is to say that humans have the ability, means, and conceptual disposition to significantly alter the planet’s climate and ecological conditions. While an unofficial designation in geological time scales, current indicators suggest that we are irrevocably transforming our planet in unprecedented ways, and not for the better. Extractive processes, population density, resource allocation and transportation, ecological degradation due to armed conflict, oceanic and atmospheric pollution, and petroleum dependency all provide evidence for this claim.

Perhaps, however, the claims of Crutzen and Stoermer are too modest; in more extreme terms, Justin [McBrien \(2016\)](#) claims that we are not merely in an Anthropocene era, but, instead, we find ourselves in the midst of an era more properly called the Necrocene. In this more hyperbolic language, we are not merely significantly changing our planet through anthropogenic activities, rather, we are actively engaged in behavior that causes extinction events. According to McBrien, the global-capitalist culture and its habits of personal acquisition at the expense of others are creating the conditions for a 6th extinction event. According to [Ceballos et al. \(2017\)](#), current projections have global extinction of species populations at nearly 30% with a global estimate of extinction rates at 100–1000 times greater than in previous natural history. Echoing Crutzen and Stoermer, McBrien concludes that our current historical epoch is not merely global climate change, but a change that is fundamentally aligned with eradication, extinction, and death.

This Necrocene era, while dramatic, is not without precedent. Nearly three decades earlier E.O. [Wilson \(1988\)](#), marks two conceptual orientations that presage the scientific, economic, and political landscape today. Into the 1990s, authors like Bruno [Latour \(2004\)](#) were continuing this line of inquiry, demarcating the difference between two fundamental human conceptual schemata—biophilia and necrophilia. The former designates a “life loving” orientation and creates conceptual dispositions that celebrate living organisms and ecological complexity. The latter, the “death loving” attitude, necrophilia, retains a selfish disposition that creates the conditions for destruction and extinction. To compound and highlight these ominous sentiments [Soga and Gaston \(2016\)](#) document that the abovementioned extinction events are furthered by an extinction of experience as well. Not only are humans changing and destroying global systems, but we have internalized this necrophilic tendency and we have begun to lose the ability to experience a biophilic orientation. This is to say that changing attitudes towards nature have begun to remove the desire and ability to experience and enjoy nature. From scientific evidence to economic practices to the conceptual attitudes underlying our behaviors, the world does indeed seem to be burning, and burning due to anthropic causes—global climate change indeed!

The above-cited facts and conceptual schemata suggest that in order to recover the ability to appreciate nature, we need to re-orient our conceptual apparatus and change our “conceptual lenses”. This is to say we need to alter the way we think and our practices concerning ourselves and the world around us. In other words, we need a biocultural ethic ([Rozzi 2012](#)) that can ameliorate, both doxastically and in praxis, and respond to the current trends of anthropogenic climate change. One such philosophical position, nascent in its formation, exists through intercollegiate and international collaboration between universities in the United States and Chile, through the Sub-Antarctic Biocultural Conservation Program ([Rozzi 2013](#)). This transdisciplinary program is a collaboration between biological sciences, philosophy departments, indigenous peoples, artists, ecologists, professors, students, and even school children. Through combined efforts, practitioners seek to create transformative experiences by means of which people can re-connect, re-appreciate, and re-consider human-nature interactions in the effort to conserve nature, culture, and biological diversity. Such a program re-envisioning both how and why we should practice conservation through the use of multi-scalar interactions and conceptual lenses. Inherent in the practices of biocultural ethics and conservation is the observation of our habitats, the co-inhabitants of those occupying habitats, and the habits of the co-inhabitants ([Rozzi 2012](#)). These “3-Hs” of biocultural ethics provide the conceptual “change of lens” that may be required to transform our behavior—to pull us back from the abyss of the Necrocene and to prevent the extinction of experience. Such practices of observation, symbolic language usage, and re-conceptualizing the organisms within a habitat are not without precedent, we find several historical examples that presage this now systematized approach, in particular in the wisdom and practices of Henry David Thoreau and Taoist philosophy. This comparative and intercultural study aims to offer some insights into the conceptual, practical, and ethical orientation of humans and nature.

2. Thoreau

An exploration of the historical record and the wisdom of philosophers is always thought-provoking. Frequently, we turn to the historical record to find an illustration of a conceptual way of viewing the human-nature interaction that can provide examples and traction for our endeavor to transform the way we think and act in regard to our planet. Thus, we turn to the historical account of Henry David Thoreau to offer insight into ways one can encounter and engage with nature—a way that informs our conceptual lenses.

2.1. Reverence—A Conceptual Habit

During his sojourn at Walden Pond, Thoreau claims to have “returned to nature”. He simplifies his life, removes himself from the trappings of society that encouraged a homogenization of experience and reconnects with his beloved woods so that he could learn what nature could teach him. This very idea of immersing oneself in one’s habitat to experience, observe, describe, and communicate these experiences is at the core of the proposed re-orientation of our thinking, i.e., a biocultural ethic. Thoreau’s experiences, conceptualization, and communication with/about nature provide a highly personalized, descriptive account of a spiritual engagement with nature that conceives nature as more than mere resource.

In his writings, we find Thoreau largely speaking with reverence toward nature. Thoreau writes admiringly of the wilderness of Walden Pond, citing his long “rambles” through the woods, encountering the flora and fauna of his New England habitat. He praises the cycles of nature, engaging with them as a denizen of the forest and documenting how he, in his own turn, responds to the geographical and climatic conditions of his habitat. His praise for nature and the processes of nature remind of us songs of praise and worship that we find among the ancients. Thoreau writes:

Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system . . . (Walden, Thoreau 2004, pp. 87–88)

And he continues to remind us of the hymns of the ancients when he writes:

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise . . . I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer’s requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. (Walden, Thoreau 2004, pp. 88–89)

The spiritual renewal and cosmic perspective Thoreau gained from nature is one of the explicitly listed reasons why he went to live in the woods. Thoreau’s appreciation and praise of nature arise from his deep connection with the geographical, topological, and biotic elements of his habitat. One might say that Thoreau went to the woods to see the woods for themselves, but, importantly, it was not merely to see, but to be in a community with nature and to celebrate its various forms by communicating hymns of praise to his readers.

2.2. Caution—Concerning Domestic Habits

While Thoreau offers praise to scenes of nature and the wilderness surrounding Walden Pond, there is an ambivalence towards other scenes we might call nature today. Thoreau, while not condemning agricultural practices, is wary of them. By and large, Thoreau regards agriculture as a necessary, and potentially restorative, human practice.

He describes with relish his own agricultural practices i.e., the tending of his beans, and speaks respectfully of the products of his harvest for the sustenance of his livelihood while at Walden. He is more skeptical, however, of larger-scale agriculture and ownership of lands. In Chapter 1, “Economics”, Thoreau cautions his readers about ownership of property and inheritance when he describes the conditions of his landed neighbors and their constant struggle to maintain homesteads free of debt. His concern is not so much about the natural processes of agriculture, but, rather, how our possessions often take possession of us, rather than serving to promote our flourishing and spirituality. Thoreau suggests for his neighbors

the farmers of Concord, who are at least as well off as the other classes, I find that for the most part they have been toiling twenty, thirty, or forty years, that they may become the real owners of their farms, which commonly they have inherited with encumbrances, or else bought with hired money,—and we may regard one third of that toil as the cost of their houses,—but commonly they have not paid for them yet. It is true, the encumbrances sometimes outweigh the value of the farm, so that the farm itself becomes one great encumbrance . . .

and once

the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him. As I understand it, that was a valid objection urged by Momus against the house which Minerva made, that she “had not made it movable, by which means a bad neighborhood might be avoided;” and it may still be urged, for our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them; and the bad neighborhood to be avoided is our own scurvy selves. (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 33)

Because of the difficulties involved in the ownership, maintenance, and labor of many farming enterprises, Thoreau’s praises of nature do not extend to the typical cast of agricultural activities. It is not the practice of agriculture to which Thoreau objects, but, rather, how it is commonly practiced amongst his neighbors—Thoreau himself engages in farming activities of a much more attenuated style (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 196).

While some agricultural activities may be required for our sustenance, Thoreau prefers, rather, a cosmic connection with wilderness—a connection that rejuvenates his spirit while connecting him with the deeper processes, cycles and inhabitants found in natural settings. One can appreciate nature, and tend and nurture it in order to sustain ourselves, but, generally speaking, the current trends of agriculture and husbandry see the flora and fauna of nature through a misguided and mercenary conceptual lens. Even though we need agricultural practices for our maintenance, we need, even more so, a strong connection with the land, plants, and animals, a deep, cosmic respect and celebration/communication for the habits and co-inhabitants involved in our practices.

2.3. *Lives of Co-Inhabitants*

One striking example of Thoreau’s engagement with nature, and the creatively symbolic description he provides, arrives in his description of ants in the chapter entitled “Brute Neighbors”. In this passage, Thoreau finds himself at this wood pile witnessing a contest between two ants. Upon further examination, Thoreau notices that it is not a singular “duellum” but an interspecies “bellum” with its concomitant antagonists—red and black ants. Furthering his description Thoreau writes:

The only battlefield I ever trod while the battle was raging; internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other. On every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers never fought so resolutely. I watched a couple that were fast locked in each other’s embraces, in a little sunny valley amid the chips, now at noonday prepared to fight till the sun went down, or life went out. The smaller red champion had fastened himself like a vice to his adversary’s

front, and through all the tumbling on that field never for an instant ceased to gnaw at one of his feelers near the root, having already caused the other to go by the board; while the stronger black one dashed him from side to side, and, as I saw on looking nearer, had already divested him of several of his members. They fought with more pertinacity than bulldogs. Neither manifested the least disposition to retreat. It was evident that their battle-cry was “Conquer or die”. (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 229)

While obviously not the clinical language of science today, Thoreau’s description provides details concerning the practices of two ant species engaged in the territorial habits of the combatants—documenting how the two different species attempt to dispatch their opponents, even remarking upon the arrival of a new combatant to the fray, marking its time, and joining in the contest. As important as the empirical documentation of the habits of the ants in this anecdote is, the way Thoreau describes this encounter with nature is the point. Thoreau does not elect to merely describe the means by which the ants engage in their contest, but, importantly, he analogizes the contest to the activities of human behavior. Citing Homer and other Greek forebears, Thoreau represents the activities he witnesses much the same as human combat. These myrmidons, he asserts, are Achilles and Patroclus, Spartan soldiers and even New Englanders, fighting for principles and not merely for simple economic motivation. Thoreau writes “I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea; and the results of this battle will be as important and memorable to those whom it concerns as those of the battle of Bunker Hill, at least” (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 230). Through this metaphoric language Thoreau narrows the species gap, understanding that ants dwell in a certain habitat, perform certain habits and that these very habits are akin to the habits of humans. Ants fight for principles, principles the same (or similar) to humans, thus transforming mere objects of empirical observation into organisms much like the observer himself—co-inhabitants with the same (or similar) motivations to engage in a contest. In doing so, Thoreau finds himself a witness on a living battlefield, re-conceptualizes what he is witnessing, and understands that ants and humans are closer than one might initially report.

2.4. Creative Communication

This symbolic/metaphorical language is no accident. The purpose is not merely clever representational accounting. The title of the chapter indicates that ants, and other animals e.g., ducks, geese, milkweed, fox, partridge, otter, etc. are in fact neighbors sharing the same space, the same habitat, engaged in their specialized way of life, but entitled to occupy the habitat along with Thoreau. The kinship Thoreau feels with his neighbors and the consideration he pays to them offers a historical insight, proto-conservation ethics, if you will, that biocultural ethics wishes to encourage.

Within the larger scope of *Walden*, Thoreau is continually documenting habits and habitats e.g., his own in “Economy” and others in “The Ponds”, “Visitors” and “Winter Animals”. Thoreau anticipates the 3-Hs of biocultural ethics in his summary of the time he spends at Walden Pond. With liberties, one might wish to creatively re-interpret Thoreau’s own declaration

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (*Walden*, Thoreau 2004, p. 90)

in a more contemporary way . . .

I went to the woods to deliberately engage with nature, to reduce homogenizing influences, and to see if I could not learn to live as a co-inhabitant with my fellow inhabitants, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had overlooked the vast life of which I am a part.

In general, it may be asserted that Thoreau has a deep respect for nature and natural processes. He even makes allowances for agriculture and husbandry, if pursued with the

proper conceptual framework. His connection to nature provides a historical antecedent for the more contemporary re-conceptualization of a biocultural ethic. This is to say, we may take presage from the writings of Thoreau should we want to re-formulate our thinking and re-connect ourselves to nature, wilderness, and human activities. Yet, Thoreau is not the only historical forebear to which such a renewed conceptual framework may refer; from Eastern traditions, we find a different but analogous precedent in Taoist philosophy.

3. Taoism

The connection between humans and nature has been one of the major themes in the history of Chinese thought, especially in Taoist philosophy—specifically, in the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi—in which a deep care for nature and the environment is embedded. This nature-based system of thought has not only remained an influential part of Chinese culture but the continued exploration and contemplation of nature have become a major driving force in the development of Taoist philosophy. The thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi in the pre-Qin period have been linked with contemporary environmental issues and gained widespread recognition (Goodman 1980; Callicott 1987). As representatives of the Taoist school, Laozi and Zhuangzi's profound wisdom provides important sources that may enable changes in our conceptual and practical engagement with the world. They may provide alternative ideas for a change of lenses that may help combat the contemporary worldview we find in the Anthropocene/Necrocene era.

Scholars such as David Chai, Roger Ames, Chuang-Ying Cheng, and James Miller have contributed to a body of literature that documents the growing shift toward Eastern thought as an alternative to the predominant Western neoliberalism. For example, David Chai (2016) suggests we consider the Taoist concept of nature and emphasizes how it arises from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Furthermore, he emphasizes the multi-scalar levels of reality found in Taoist thought, primarily as a way to re-conceptualize how we understand nature at varying systems-level analyses. Roger T. Ames (1986) addresses how Taoism offers a perspective to think about the process of world-making and the construction of attendant ethics. James Miller (2017) demonstrates how Taoism's holistic understanding of nature can provide a new definition of flourishing for both the biotic elements and the world itself. The above studies show that the insights of Taoist philosophy into the global environmental crisis have opportunities to transform our way of thinking. This cohort of scholars represents a fraction of the myriad ways that one might re-conceptualize the lenses through which we view and interact with our environments, particularly by re-centering our understanding of the inhabitants, co-inhabitants, and systematics of our habitual engagements.

In addition to those larger-scale Western-Chinese dialogues based on Taoist and environmental perspectives mentioned above, a handful of scholars have been conducting intercultural studies of American transcendental philosophy and Chinese religion(s). For example, in *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott*, Arthur Christy (1960) draws a connection between Thoreau and Hinduism. In the second example, one which has received less treatment in the literature, we find similarities between Thoreau and Chinese Taoism as well. Moreover, the connection between Taoism and the writings of Thoreau are both often considered integral to contemporary environmental thought. In the book, *Fifty Key Thinkers for the Environment* (Palmer and Cooper 2000) both Zhuangzi and Thoreau are considered as the foundational philosophers of environmental thinking.

In Taoism, there is a deep care for nature. The understanding of nature reflects how Chinese culture constructs a relationship between humans and their surroundings. Chinese philosophers constructed systematic thinking that nature is the supreme guide and principle for all things and life on earth. Influenced by Taoism, Chinese culture has formed multidimensional emotions and attitudes towards nature through long-term farming practices, that have gradually evolved into beliefs, ideas, actions, and thinking patterns that are different from Western paradigms. People often superstitiously believe in nature, worship

it, observe it, revere it, respect it, and love it. Fundamentally speaking, the concept of nature and its multidimensional meanings in the Chinese context are based firstly on an ethical orientation; that is, to accept and recognize the right of existence of all things in the world.

3.1. *Tao—The Way of Nature*

The primary principle of Taoism is Tao. Tao, which literally means “way”, is seen as the origin and force of all beings and has very rich connotations in Laozi and Zhuangzi’s thoughts. In chapter one of *Tao Te Ching*, it says,

Tao can be talked about, but not the eternal Tao. Names can be named, but not the eternal nature. As the origin of heaven-and-earth, it is nameless; As “the mother” of all things, it is nameable. (Lao 1961, p. 3)

An incomplete description of Tao is a central theme in Taoist texts, especially in *Tao Te Ching*. The outstanding nature of incompleteness and the recognition of epistemic barriers is critical in the foundation of Taoist philosophy. Since Tao is seen as the ontological origin and foundation of all beings, it also becomes the cosmic force that permeates every natural process and all entities. Tao embraces everything and can be understood as a transcendent force that cannot be described in words. The essence of Tao is “nature”, yet “nature” here does not only refer to the natural world in the scientific sense, but also refers to the inner attributes of the universe or the principle of evolution of all things. Everything is in accordance with the principle of the way (Tao), and nothing can escape from the regulations of it. Tao can include all beings, and the way that nature works and functions manifests Tao.

In the Chapter 25 of *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi writes,

Humans follow the ways of earth. The Earth follows the ways of Heaven, Heaven follows the way of Tao, Tao follows its own way. (Lao 1961, p. 51)

This quote shows the basic structure and relationship of the cosmos—including people, the Earth, Heaven, and the Tao. While people’s existence and life on Earth follow the basic ways related to the Earth, it also indicates transitive connectivity to larger scales. Moreover, by being connected to and following the ways of the Earth, it indicates that people should not be separated from the land, but, rather, should consider themselves connected to it and should respond to the circumstances found in the terrestrial sphere, e.g., weather patterns, cycles, growth, and fellow organisms/ecosystems. Here, it is important to notice, Nature does not merely mean the natural world, but, rather, things as they are, or what comes naturally. Nature refers to the essence of everything, and the law that the universe follows. Compared to traditional Western thought, Nature in Taoism has a more profound connotation. Nature encompasses everything in the natural world, but, importantly, it is also the origin and product of the laws of the cosmos; that is, Tao-Nature represents the Chinese cosmology and worldview. In the connection between Earth and Heaven (cosmos), people are linked with the land, the cosmos, and the Tao itself. Tao is the law of creation in the universe, it generates and changes everything. Tao emphasizes the nature of the universe and its operation, which includes the natural world and the human world, and Taoism advocates that human beings should conform to the natural law, respect nature and follow its law.

The Tao itself abounds in the workings of human societies, the land, and the cosmos with its transcendental force. Because Tao presents itself in the being, function, and evolution of all things, human exceptionalism has no place in Taoist philosophy. For the sake of a biophilic future, people must ponder, learn, and practice how to co-exist and co-inhabit with the land, the earth, and the heaven.

3.2. *Coexistence and Co-Inhabitation*

Taoism values coexistence and upholds that people and all things on earth can live together. Coexistence and co-inhabitation are an integral part of a Taoist vision of ecological civilization. In one sense, biophysical nature is a manifestation of Tao—the natural world

is a product of the dynamics of Tao. In a second sense, Tao is also the dynamics of human relationships. It operates and functions in the existence and practices of humans and it operates and functions in the existence and practices of other-than-human beings. Combining Taoist philosophy with biocultural ethics, we find that Tao can be understood as a profound connection that runs through all things, echoing precisely the links among co-inhabitants, habits, and habitats as a new way of understanding the biological and cultural connectivity between humans, other-than-human organisms and the world writ large.

In the writings of Zhuangzi, we find an even stronger articulation of this idea. Zhuangzi observes that Tao is the harmony and “the unity of heaven and humans”, advocating that human beings and all things in nature are equal and interdependent symbioses. In Zhuangzi’s writings, we find rich depictions of natural and imaginary scenes encompassing mountains, forests, and birds, as well as fictional and exotic animals. These illustrations are not merely derived from people’s simple empirical observations and perceptual experiences, they also convey an intuitive sense of connectivity that many have with nature. As [Sylvan and Bennett \(1988\)](#) suggest, Taoism promotes a general view that “engenders fluid hierarchies without power struggle”. In the chapter of *Qi Wu Lun* (《齐物论》), “On Regarding All Things Equal”, Zhuangzi claims, “Heaven and Earth share the same life with me, and the myriad things are one with me” ([Lynn 2022](#), p. 37). The message contained in the writings suggests that humans and other-than-human beings in nature are a unity or equal parts of existence. This equity requires humans to have an attitude of co-existing and co-inhabiting with nature rather than dominating all other-than-human beings.

In the same chapter, Zhuangzi expresses, “That is, it takes the ‘wild horses’, the dust, and the breath that all living creatures have been using for each other to breathe.” ([Lynn 2022](#), p. 4). All things in heaven and earth are the result of the operation of the breath of Tao. All the things in the world—whether it be megafauna, microscopic organisms, grains of sand, or the smallest particle—are the result of the power of Tao. This framework transcends anthropocentrism and can build an ethical reflection with an emphasis on the coexistence and co-inhabitation on the earth.

3.3. Wu Wei—Ethical Practice When Engaging with Nature

Since the pre-Qin period, Taoism has developed an ethical practice to direct people to engage with nature. People are asked to engage with nature in a natural way that sometimes requires them to step aside from nature in order to think about nature in a more holistic way. It is noteworthy that the idea of humans as external to nature and separate from its processes does not conflict with the above-mentioned notion of unity, because it is for an epistemological purpose—that by temporarily placing oneself external to nature—one can understand oneself (and other species) as members of a larger unity in nature. The subsequent human products also become part of nature, not separated from it. In short, by placing oneself outside of nature, one can return to it more mindful and engaged. This re-conceptualization can maintain the intrinsic value of nature and conserve biodiversity, as it requires that humans cease to be the center of all values. This moral practice can be found in the principle of *wu wei*.

As Patricia Okker states, someone with this disposition develops “their belief in the practice of *wu wei*” ([Okker 1987](#)). *Wu Wei* (无为), in Chinese, means non-doing or non-action, a key to Taoist philosophy. It is significant for reflecting on human actions and associated consequences. It is a recognition and acknowledgment that human actions are part of nature, and *wu wei*, not acting, allows people space to comprehend this deep connectivity. In Taoism, there is opposition to human beings’ defiance and separation of nature, and it advocates thinking about nature in an inclusive way, with the purpose of maintaining the intrinsic value and diversity of nature.

In Taoist philosophy, one sees that human nature follows its own ways, but that humans often reach an epistemic limitation. In our understanding of nature, one such epistemic constraint is viewing the natural world merely as a resource. *Wu wei* encourages us to step back from acquisitive actions to contemplate the other-than-human co-inhabitants

involved in our acquisitive practices. Consequently, Taoism will endorse that humans cannot always exploit nature because of the insights gained in the practice of non-action. By practicing *wu wei*, we restructure our concepts and practices. By pausing and contemplating the unfolding of Tao in its many forms, of which we are only one aspect, it commands us to be thoughtful about our engagements with the natural world. Throughout human history, there is plenty of evidence that excessive, hasty, and imprudent human behaviors can cause serious consequences with devastating impacts on the planet. This wisdom of non-action, or doing nothing, is not a conceptual game, but an awareness of human self-discipline with an introspective, reflective, and humble attitude toward the coexistence and co-inhabitation with others. This self-discipline requires an active and ethical consideration of all other aspects of nature, from species to habitats, and from places to the land. The idea of *wu wei* or non-action, is necessary for human beings to think about our habitation on the planet and its consequence with a reflection on alternative habits of being.

4. A Dialogue between Thoreau and Taoism

Although Taoism and American Transcendentalism emerged at different historical periods in world history and in different socio-historical contexts, the similarities in the idea of nature, wilderness, and spirituality demonstrate a shared wisdom and value in terms of the relation between human beings and nature. The parallels between Thoreau and Chinese Taoism have been examined by relatively few scholars. According to [Chang \(1985\)](#), the classical Chinese text on Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism were available for the transcendentalists in New England at that time. As [Lewis and Bicknell \(2011\)](#) states, “The scholarly evidence is well established that the Transcendentalists’ engagement with Asian belief systems proudly influenced their world.” (p. 14). [Okker \(1987\)](#) once described Thoreau as “an American Taoist Sage”. [Versluis \(1993\)](#) wrote, “Thoreau’s natural contemplation closely parallels the Taoist love for and absorption into nature.” (p. 93). Lin Yutang, once writes about a general comparison between Thoreau and Chinese thoughts,

Thoreau is the most Chinese of all American authors in his entire view of life, and being a Chinese, I feel much akin to him in spirit. I discovered him only a few months ago, and the delight of the discovery is still fresh in my mind. I could translate passages of Thoreau into my own language and pass them off as original writing by a Chinese poet, without raising any suspicion. ([Lin 1938](#), p. 128)

Liu’s writing suggests a potentially illuminating dialogue between Thoreau and Chinese Taoism. For instance, in *Zhuangzi*, especially in the “inner chapters” (《内篇》), many exquisite observations describe how people engaging with nature reflects people’s embodied experiences with nature, as the author’s activities e.g., wandering in the mountains, his observation of birds, butterflies, fish, etc. develop many philosophical meditations. In the writing, many unusual things—for example, “exceptions” of the natural world, e.g., hunchbacks, and the physically and mentally disabled also appear in his thinking. We find similar comparisons, even flights of fancy in Thoreau’s writing as well. Thoreau describes his embodied experiences rambling through the woods and the characters he discovers there. In a similar vein to *Zhuangzi*, Thoreau even describes flights of imagination and the discoveries he finds in the narratives he crafts.

Thoreau and *Zhuangzi* write in a similar style, using metaphorical language to convey messages of wisdom through stories, fables, and vivid descriptions of nature. For example, in the chapter of *Xiao Yao You* (《逍遥游》), “Spontaneous Free Play”, the author uses the metaphors of water and a boat to narrate the relationship between humans and nature. In another example, the author writes:

if an accumulation of water is not ample enough, it won’t have the strength to support a big boat. Upset a cup of water onto a dip in the hall floor, and a mustard seed can serve as a boat on it, but if you place a cup there, it will get stuck, for the water will prove too shallow and the boat too big. ([Lynn 2022](#), pp. 4–5)

These metaphorical expressions figuratively express how the dis/proportional relationship between a thing and its environment can affect the operation of that particular thing. In other words, a thing cannot be separated from its habitat. In another example, Zhuangzi continues:

So, if the accumulation of wind is not ample enough, it won't have the capacity to support the Peng's great wings. This is why it takes ninety thousand tridents to provide such wind beneath, for only then will nothing block its progress when it strikes at the wind and bears the blue sky on its back. Only then does it take aim at the South. (Lynn 2022, p. 5)

Likewise, just as a Peng (鹏), a giant bird, would need enough aerodynamic power to fly,

the bird's flying habits cannot be separated from its environment. Metaphorically, humans are like birds and nature is like the wind. Without the carrying capacity of nature, human societies and cultures cannot exist and perform their dynamic processes. Zhuangzi uses these metaphors and analogies to emphasize the deep connectivity between human beings and nature.

Like Zhuangzi, we find creative communicative metaphors in the writings of Thoreau—his description of his neighbors as co-inhabitants with rich lives and narratives of their own reflect how both humans and other-than-humans share in the interdependency of life narratives.

One can also find similarities between the recommendations for an ideal lifestyle in Thoreau and Taoism. They both advocate a simple life and pursue spiritual liberation and spiritual enrichment. Taoists endeavor to return to simplicity, where one should resist the temptation of material things and maintain peace of mind; Thoreau also advocates for simplicity in living with a robust appreciation for our natural settings.

Thoreau truly saw that most people were living a burdensome and miserable life, and the extreme pursuit of material things led to this situation. In order to liberate one's spirit, Thoreau recommends simplicity—economic, habitual, and even intellectual simplicity. For Thoreau, most luxuries and comforts of life are not only unnecessary but also hinder human progress. Once people inherited farms, houses, livestock, and farming equipment, they became slaves to the land. Material life can become a burden and people can become "owned" by their property and the tools of their own tools. In "Life without Principle", Thoreau reflected upon how civilization may compromise human nature.

Both Thoreau and Taoists believed that human beings and nature are in harmony and unity, Thoreau at Walden Pond embodies the practices advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the practice of transcendental reflection and immersion in nature. Thoreau, influenced by Emerson, believed that communication between man and nature would purify man's mind, and his spirit would be tempered and liberated. By co-habiting with others in nature, man can improve himself and achieve an ideal life. In a sense, Thoreau felt Tao in the perception of animals and plants around him. On the origin of all things, Thoreau accepted Emerson's worldview that the ineffable origin of all things is an eternal unity. Thoreau pursued harmony with nature all his life. He regarded nature and God as one and regarded natural phenomena and all things in the universe as representations of the omnipresent and supreme God. In Thoreau's case, nature is the law of the universe, a manifestation of the cosmic source, sometimes referred to as God.

While for Taoists, "Tao" is the source of all things, Taoists find Tao in everything. Nature is actually the embodiment of "Tao", and to respect nature as the embodiment of "Tao" is to respect "Tao". It is supreme, inscrutable, yet omnipresent, and is the fundamental force controlling the development and change of all things in the infinite universe. In Taoism, man pursues a harmonious relationship with nature, which is also his spiritual quest.

However, the differences between values and approaches are also worthy of more discussion and exploration. For example, the understanding and definition of nature in Chinese Taoism and American Transcendentalism are different. For the Chinese, nature

is seen as a principle of cosmology and it is more neutral as a guide for the operation of the universe as well as human life. American Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, romanticize and idealize nature in a way to transform God into nature. For example, Thoreau sees nature as a manifestation of divinity (a considerably more anthropomorphic concept), an expression of God's creative power, and a spiritual guide for human activity. In terms of spirituality, Transcendentalists relate it to the importance of self-cultivation and self-development which often leads to a form of individualism. While, for Taoism, individuals always exist and develop along with other things in the universe, with an emphasis on the equality of all things and the importance of living in harmony with others.

Their understanding of nature and spirituality also shaped their appreciation of farming and wildness differently. For Thoreau, wildness is more valuable and appealing than farming, as the latter is always related to economic and social concerns. While, for Taoists, nature is the embodiment of Tao and it is everywhere in the universe, in both wildness and farming. Farming, as a human activity, also follows the law of nature and Tao. Farming manifests the harmony between nature and human beings, and farming is a lifestyle and cyclical process wherein human beings cultivate a deep connection with nature. And while these subtle differences do exist between Taoism and Transcendentalism, both agree that humans can and should engage with nature, both in the wilderness and (possibly) in agriculture. Both activities (if pursued properly) cultivate personal growth, a restructured conceptual framework, and a cosmic connection to the world around us.

5. Conclusions

The central theme of this paper is to present a re-conceptual orientation coupled with a methodical philosophical approach to transforming the lenses through which people view the world. Within the systematicity of Biocultural Conservation, a biocultural ethic, we find precedent for the need to find alternative conceptual and practical means through which humans can address the enormous power to transform their world. In global terms, the historical record of human activity is not promising. We are in the midst of potentially cataclysmic alterations, primarily due to our conceptualization of nature as a mere resource and not as a meaningful entity for which we must have consideration. These practices have resulted in the state of affairs we find the world in today.

The outcome, we contend, is not inevitable, and there may be solutions to the crises we face. However, it will require a fundamental change in the way we view our environment, the world, ecosystems, and our roles within. We do not, on the other hand, have to start from scratch—there are precedents from which we might draw inspiration. The naturalist philosophy of American transcendental philosophy, particularly that of Henry David Thoreau, provides a good start. From Eastern thought, we find a complementary conceptualization in Taoist philosophy. Both Thoreau and Taoism provide descriptions, exhortations, and imperatives to re-think ourselves not as separate entities from nature, but, rather, as members of a community, with kinship relations—the same ontological origin, similar yet different motivations for behavior, practices, and habits that transcend species boundaries—and it is this newfound sense of connectivity that compels us to re-orient our thinking to begin solving the world's current problems. This idea, that of kinship and connectivity, resonates throughout biocultural conservation; it is the reverberation of transdisciplinary research, drawing from varied and often overlooked sources, that entreats us to work as a community of co-inhabitants for the preservation and well-being of all.

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