



Co-Becoming

Reconceptualizing the Human Condition

Edited by
Bing Song · Mark McConaghy

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Ishii were instrumental in organizing a group of transnational scholars to visit Fukushima Prefecture on the east coast of Japan to learn about the efforts of local people in the region to re-build in the wake of the nuclear disaster that took place there in 2011. Led by engaged local citizens and philosophers such as Tao Yōichi 田尾陽一, located in the village of Iitate, such efforts are not simply directed at utilitarian economic considerations, but aim to redefine humanity's relationship to land, water, and locality. They are an important attempt to model a practice of co-becoming. As readers will discover in the pages that follow, this trip to Fukushima left a deep imprint on the scholars assembled here.

The editors would also like to thank Professor Young-seo Baik from Yonsei University for his engagement with this project, bringing as he did with him the important concept of the "core site"—spaces in which the contradictions of modernity are most intensely felt. Fukushima is one such space, but there are many others across East Asia and the world, imbuing co-becoming thought with global purchase, even as it remains vigilantly attuned to the lived contradictions experienced in distinct localities. The editors would also like to thank Xiangchen Sun from Fudan University and Brook Ziporyn from the University of Chicago, both of whom came into this project at a later date, providing fresh eyes and critical insights, which sharpened the discourse around *gongsheng* immeasurably.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Worldview of Co-becoming and Reconceptualizing the Human Condition

Bing Song

1.1 CONTEXT

We are living through a time of rupture. Humanity has acquired the capacity to alter planetary systems, engineer life, and design artificial intelligence that rivals human intelligence; yet existential level crises abound. Ecological destabilization, technological acceleration, geopolitical fragmentation, and hot war flareups, widening inequality and social divisiveness, all converge into what many have described as polycrisis.

It is, however, not the first time humanity has faced such seismic shifts. The philosophical roots of the worldview of co-becoming emerged in earlier epochs of disorientation. The *Yijing* (易经) or *Book of Changes*, classic of the eleventh century BCE, articulated a cosmology of change and patterned transformation in an age of instability. Classical Daoism and Confucianism of the Axial Age emerged amid political disintegration and existential exhaustion, whereas Buddhism matured through centuries of civilizational upheaval. While these traditions differ in their orientation,

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goals, and paths to higher-order consciousness, they are similar in that they have offered a reconceptualization of the phenomenal world and what it means to be human and ways of inhabiting flux and embracing change.

This volume delves into philosophical foundations of the worldview of co-becoming and attempts to expound its contemporary relevance in global ethics and political, social practices. It argues that what is required is not merely policy reform or moral exhortation, but a shift in foundational thinking. At the heart of that shift stands the notion of co-becoming. Simply put, the notion of co-becoming (*gongsheng* in Chinese and *kyōsei* in Japanese, sharing the same two Chinese characters 共生) articulates a conception of the world as consisting of mutually embedding, co-existing, and co-generative entities.¹ It is introduced here to allow for a reconceptualization of the human condition as a state which is marked by mutually embedding, co-generative, and dynamically transformative entities.

The chapters collected in this volume deepen the inquiry initiated in *Gongsheng Across Contexts—A Philosophy of Co-Becoming* (*Gongsheng Across Contexts*), published in 2021. While the earlier volume mapped the cross-cultural emergence of the concept, the present collection advances further analysis of the ontological, methodological, ethical, and practical shifts required if co-becoming is to serve as foundational thinking befitting our time.

1.2 GONGSHENG (CO-BECOMING) AS ONTOLOGICAL FACT

Several essays in this volume converge on a shared ontological reorientation. They challenge the assumption that reality is composed of self-sufficient substances. Instead, they present a world of interpenetrating events, correlative processes, and generative transformation.

Hsi-san Lai understands *gongsheng* (co-becoming) as the “existential reality of nature and the basic principle of the continuous evolution of living beings.” Lai began with a textual analysis of foundational notions in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, which have grounded a Daoist brand of the philosophy of co-becoming, the most important of which are notions of *dao* (“道” invariably translated as “way” or “course”) and *yi* (一 one).

¹Bing Song and Yiwen Zhan, ed., *Gongsheng Across Contexts – A Philosophy of Co-Becoming?* Palgrave Macmillan 2024, p. 4.

At the most fundamental level, Daoism does not postulate a transcendent, singular course of truth (or essence/reality) external to things; rather, *dao* in Daoist thinking is best understood as one that does not depart from the processes of transformation. The ever-changing process may be temporarily captured by human perception in a particular manner, but it should not be regarded as the “constant Dao” (*chang dao* 常道). For the same reason, it is not possible to affix a “constant name” (*chang min* 常名) to such course. Daoist teaching cautions against substantializing *Dao* by analogizing it to water, which can never be substantialized as an object, and is constantly flowing, changing, and nourishing.

Yi, translated as “one,” “oneness,” or “unity,” is another key notion in Daoism, which shares conceptual similarity with *dao*, the course, and helps to shed light on the holistic unity of the course and its constituent intermingling yet differentiated things (humans and non-humans alike), which are mutually embedding and co-generative in the infinite web of relations.

This non-essentialist ontology offers a maximum degree of openness and possibilities and leaves room for alternative courses and creative imagination. Lai attributes all human conflicts to the unfortunate human tendency of substantializing one belief or value system while condemning non-conforming others as heresies or demonic forces deserving to be diminished if not entirely annihilated.

Roger Ames tackles the foundational reconceptualization from the cosmology derived from *Yijing*. In contrast to classical Greek ontology with its commitment to “essence” “attributes” dualism and categorical thinking, Ames created the neologism “zoetology” or *shengsheng lun* (生生论), translated as “the art of living.” This cosmology begins from “living” (*sheng* 生) itself as the motive force, which dynamically generates a world of boundless “becomings” and “gives us not ‘things’ that are, but ‘events’ that are happening.” With zoetology, persons will no longer be defined as self-contained, independent, autonomous agents. Instead, they will be defined “ecologically by the growth they experience in their intercourse with other persons and their worlds.” As such, Ames would rather rename “humans” as “human becomings” to reflect constant interactions and interpenetrations among human and non-human entities and their broader environments.

Similarly, Xiangchen Sun argues that the worldview of co-becoming represents a fundamental shift away from a metaphysics grounded in “Being” toward one grounded in generative life (*sheng* 生). Drawing on the *Yijing* and broader East Asian traditions, he maintains that reality is

not structured by static existence or antagonistic co-presence, but by ceaseless generation, relational embeddedness, and shared growth. The worldview of co-becoming challenges the ontological logic of separation, opposition, and fixed identity that underlies modernity. Instead of conceiving beings as isolated entities negotiating coexistence, it affirms a life logic in which differences are dynamically integrated and mutually nourishing. In this sense, co-becoming proposes a re-grounding of metaphysics itself: from substance and Being to relational, life-generating process.

Futoshi Hoshino, however, challenges the view about the desirability of *kyōsei* (the Japanese equivalent of *gongsheng*, sharing the same two Chinese characters 共生) as an ideal to be achieved. Instead, he argues that parasitism is more appropriate to depict the reality of our lives, that is, “lives that cannot exist without drawing upon the lives of others.” In fact, this framing of parasitism, in my view, does not come into conflict with, but is in fact included in, the ontological fact of “co-becoming.” The same Chinese characters 共生 have been used to translate “symbiosis” in the context of life sciences. Symbiosis in biology includes parasitism. In other words, parasitism is simply a form of symbiosis, merely reflecting a form of unbalanced and still ever-changing mutual embeddedness and intertwined existence. Likewise, the state of co-becoming, as an ontological fact, encompasses different forms of co-mingled existence, without regard to relative gains or losses calculated on an individuated basis. It ought to be the starting point and the background of any and every meaningful discussion.

The state of co-becoming does not presuppose any moral judgment or preference, although it does inform and shape how we understand the world and us, and how humans should conduct themselves accordingly. However, the term *gongsheng* or *kyōsei*, particularly in the East Asian political and social contexts, has been typically closely associated with positive narratives, and in opposition to the parasitic state of being. This explains the tendency of excluding parasitism from the framing of the notion of co-becoming.

Here I would like to emphasize that the state of co-becoming is first and foremost an ontological fact, regardless of how such fact has been ignored, abused, or seemingly often discarded by humans. It is the fundamental cognitive and interpretive framework for us to understand and evaluate ourselves and the world. No number of counter-co-becoming human deeds can reverse or change this ontological fact. The *Zhuangzi* made plain this view. When commenting on the foundational nature of the

unity of nature and humans (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一), the *Zhuangzi* noted: “[T]heir (meaning humans’—author’s note) liking of something was a oneness with it and their disliking of something was also a oneness with it; what they liked and what they disliked, their liking and their disliking, were all the oneness. Their oneness was oneness, and their non-oneness was also oneness.”²

In sum, as informed by the worldview of co-becoming, reality itself is relationally emergent. Human beings are not isolated entities but nodes within ongoing ecological, cultural, and cosmological processes. Violence often begins when partial perspectives are substantialized into absolutes. The worldview of co-becoming, by contrast, invites humility, softness, and yielding. It also impresses upon us to embrace differences, contradiction, and engage in mutual learning and reciprocal transformation.

1.3 METHODS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF CO-BECOMING

If reality is processual and dynamic, and all entities are mutually embedding and co-generative, then what epistemological tools should we use in understanding this world? What methodological shifts should we adopt in understanding who we are, and how we are related to others in our surroundings?

Rules of logic are among the most basic tools in understanding the world built upon substance ontology. Substance ontology grounds the classical rules of logic, which in turn guide the analytic process of understanding ourselves and the world. Ames took up this issue with respect to the law of non-contradiction in his essay. Substance ontology presupposes stable substances, fixed essences, and clear categorical boundaries. To define what something is requires excluding what it is not. Non-contradiction thus secures strict identity and underwrites, in the analysis of contemporary Chinese philosopher Tingyang Zhao, a “dictionary” model of knowledge, where the primary philosophical task is to determine “what is what.”

By contrast, according to the zoetological or *shengsheng* worldview articulated by Ames and Sun, reality is understood as ceaseless procreation, a field of ongoing events rather than discrete substances. Entities are

²“其好之也一，其弗好之也一，” “其一也一，其不一也一，” *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, translated by Brook Ziporyn, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2020, p. 55.

not self-sufficient bearers of properties, but relational configurations constituted through their dynamic interactions. Identity is focal and contextual, not fixed and exclusive. Within this process cosmology, opposites are not mutually exclusive contradictions but complementary poles in a dynamic relationship. Life and death, firm and yielding, advance and retreat are not absolute binaries but interdependent phases within continuous transformation. Each contains and generates the other. In the analysis of Ames and Zhao, the logic at work here is “grammatical” rather than categorical: meaning emerges from patterned relationships, not from definitions. As a result, the strict logical necessity of non-contradiction gives way to a model of productive polarity, where tension and transformation are constitutive of reality itself.

This does not mean that irrationality or rejection of coherence prevails. Rather, it reflects a different ontological starting point. Where substance ontology requires non-contradiction to preserve fixed identity, *shengsheng* or zoetological worldview understands identity as emergent within relational becoming. In a world defined by co-constitution and ceaseless change, reality is structured not by exclusion but by dynamic complementarity.

The *Zhuangzi* would go even further in dismantling the classic rules of logic by rejecting both the law of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle. In Lai’s essay, he introduced the *Zhuangzi*’s trademark paradoxical thinking and the doctrine of “walking on two roads” (*liang xing* 两行). Essentially *liang xing* means that two seemingly opposed views or states can be allowed to run their course simultaneously. The goal of the *Zhuangzi* was not to establish an alternative truth, but to dismantle our attachment to the idea of a “single, exclusive truth,” a corollary of the either/or binary thinking.

When commenting on the fierce debate between many different schools of thought at the time of the Warring States (475–221 BCE), Zhuangzi observed that the binary positions of that/this, right/wrong are in fact not mutually exclusive; they are intertwined in a relationship of mutual interlocking and interdependence. The affirmation of one side is built precisely upon the negation of the other. Without each other, neither side stands. Therefore, affirmation and negation simultaneously contain the paradoxical co-constitutive relationship. Zhuangzi’s “walking two roads,” by contrast, attempts to rise above binary opposition and accommodate and adapt to differences dynamically. When thinking along these lines, one

would recognize that the relationship between the two seemingly opposing views is of mutual implication and interdependence and that nothing is fixed or independent. This reveals the inadequacy and limitations of the classical rules of logic based on substance ontology. It also blurs the categorical boundaries among different entities, softens one's stances, and opens us to more possibilities for examining and evaluating the reality. This way of approaching the world, empowered by the worldview of co-becoming, eschews rigid principles, fixed path, or orientation, and embraces relational adjustment, gradual transformation, and contextual sensitivity.

In sum, the worldview of co-becoming commits to methodological complexity and embraces a mode of thought that can not only incorporate positive or negative statements but also open to other possible situations which are "neither this nor that" or "both this and that," acknowledging the finitude and partiality of all perspectives. This epistemological humility opens space for dialogue rather than ideological absolutism. Similarly, it calls for a softening of human desire—transforming self-centered expansion into a cultivated capacity for restraint, reciprocity, and shared flourishing.

1.4 ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS INFORMED BY THE WORLDVIEW OF CO-BECOMING

What are the ethical and practical implications of this non-essentialist ontology and notion of holistic unity?

Contrary to the usual impulse of moral realism by coming up with definitive and "objective" moral principles, Brook Ziporyn notes that the classical philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism shaping the worldview of co-becoming question the deterministic and thus limiting nature of such an exercise. This counter tradition would argue that true value is not found in fixed virtues or moral ideals, but in a deeper capacity to transform, include, and move beyond opposites and boundaries. If there are any "goodness" or moral principles to be advocated by the worldview of co-becoming, one of them has to be *tong* (通), that is, de-obstruction and open passage through all transformation amid difference. As Ziporyn summarizes, "[T]rue ethical and metaphysical value is not found in fixed forms or virtues, but in the power to become, transform, and encompass both sides of every contrary—an expansive,

dynamic, and paradoxical ontology of value that subverts and redefines traditional notion of goodness.”

Unfortunately, noted by Lai, human beings tend to erect obstruction and block open passage by adhering to what the Laozi has characterized as the deludedly hardened values of “self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification” (*zixian, zishi, zifa, zijin* 自见、自是、自伐、自矜). To allow for *tong* (de-obstruction and open passage), the Laozi preaches “softness” and “lowness” and admonishes people to practice “subtraction,” “yielding,” and “restraint.” This way, human beings are more likely to subsist and participate in the mutual completion of oneself and others.

The softening approach will also allow one to transform antagonism and competitive hostility into a mutual learning opportunity. Such practices of softness, humbleness, and yielding, much like the qualities of water, will lead one to possess the counter-intuitive or “obscure power of virtuosity” (玄德), enabling one to embrace all kinds of different views and things, even merging polar opposites.

In times of geopolitical strife, tension, and social divisiveness, advocating “softness” and “lowness” seems to be counter-intuitive and against the “*zeitgeist*” of the time. Indeed, this is a time when one is most used to and even motivated by confronting the “hardness” with yet more “hardness.” But this would lead to the downward spiral of a zero-sum game and mutual destruction for all. Therefore, against the backdrop of today’s pervasive “hardness,” the case for “softness” has never been more compelling.

Inspired by the worldview of co-becoming, Young-seo Baik questioned the adequacy of our current knowledge production system and proposed the concept of “Co-Becoming Humanities,” which advocates infusing science and humanities into an integrated and comprehensive learning focusing on inquiry seeking to guide the co-becoming of human and non-human entities. Baik insists that civilizational transformation must begin with a dual commitment: personal cultivation and structural reform. Ethically, he emphasizes the “mind-practice” of the knowledge activist, drawing on Won Buddhism’s Threefold Study—cultivating the spirit, inquiring into human affairs and universal principles, and making righteous choices in action. This framework integrates inner awakening, critical inquiry, and socially responsible action, redefining righteousness as what is mutually beneficial for self and others. Ethics is thus not abstract moralism but disciplined participation in relational life, grounded in gratitude, reciprocity, and a deepened awareness of interdependence among humans,

non-humans, institutions, and cosmic processes. Co-becoming thus becomes a lived political practice: transforming oneself and social reality simultaneously, fostering responsibility toward non-human beings, and cultivating communities capable of bridging spiritual renewal with institutional change.

Takahiro Nakajima draws the practical implications of *kyōsei* from the concrete historical and political tensions surrounding state sovereignty, nuclear energy, and local reconstruction in post-Fukushima Japan. He argues that *kyōsei* must not be understood as enforced unity under state power—such as the wartime slogan of “living and dying together” or the postwar identification of nuclear energy with national sovereignty—but as a lived, localized practice that reclaims agency from centralized authority. In the former, coercive contexts, the notion of co-becoming was distorted to impose uniformity in thinking and the forceful alignment of views and actions with the stated goals of state powers. The imposition of monolithic thinking and the sameness is the very antithesis to the notion of co-becoming, for which differences and diversity are the starting point for any meaningful interactions. Nakajima has correctly alerted us to actual and possible misuse of the notion of co-becoming to advance encroaching state powers and powerful interest groups.

Ultimately for Nakajima, *kyōsei* is grounded in the “personal,” which is neither private nor public, but a plural, relational “I” that remains open to others. Practically, this means fostering forms of being-together that acknowledge vulnerability, difference, and even moments of disconnection, while patiently rebuilding shared life through concrete acts of cooperation and mutual support.

1.5 CONCLUSION

This volume is a sequel to Gongsheng *Across Contexts*, deepening the inquiry. It invites people to consider the worldview of co-becoming as a candidate for a new foundational framework of thinking—one capable of guiding ontological, methodological, ethical, and political transformation.

I cannot close this introduction without acknowledging the momentous effort of a group of co-becoming thinkers who have extended an open invitation to the global community to engage in the thinking of global co-becoming (the Open Invitation). The Open Invitation calls for reimagining some of the foundational concepts and modes of thought that have shaped who we are, how we relate to one another, and how we engage with our broader environments.

In the true spirit of co-becoming, this Open Invitation is not advocating the abandonment of the achievements of modernity or to replace modernity's much prized notions of individuality, dignity, freedom, and rights, but to inquire about the possibility of enriching foundational underpinnings of the human condition. Climate change, technological acceleration, and geopolitical fragmentation and hot wars reveal that humanity is neither master nor spectator but participant. The worldview of co-becoming invites us to rethink reality as mutually embedding and co-generating and admonishes us to cultivate virtues of softness amid increasing rigidity.

If earlier ages of rupture generated philosophies of transformation, our own time demands no less. The survival of humanity, the flourishing of the biosphere, and the recovery of a meaningful good life may depend upon our capacity to move from isolated being toward conscious co-becoming. The task, then, is not to create co-becoming *ex nihilo*, but to become conscious participants in the processes that already constitute us.

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CHAPTER 2

Toward an Ontological Reset: Introducing “Thinking Global Co-Becoming: An Open Invitation”

Mark McConaghy

It is impossible to be alive in this moment and not feel as if something is terribly amiss with the current constitution of our world.

Ongoing kinetic wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East have brought heart-rending suffering to the people of those regions, with no conceivable end in sight. Whereas a generation ago politicians and pundits imagined a world integrated by globalization, in which increased economic interdependencies between Western capitalist powers and the rest of the world would lead to a strengthened global liberalism, today governments East and West are working to re-establish national sovereignty over supply chains, with whiplashing economic effects. Likewise, a generation ago our most courageous thinkers could imagine a world defined by cosmopolitan and forgiveness. Yet now even progressive Euro-American political parties are instituting tightened, and oftentimes inhumane, immigration policies, a response to the tremendous demographic changes that developed countries have experienced in recent decades. Virulent

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assertions of nationalist and civilizational particularisms, grounded in the older conceptual bedrocks of ethnicity, language, and family, have returned in full force, along with the gendered violence that they once sanctioned. Alongside all of this, the emergence of Large-Language Models (LLM) in the last five years, known in popular parlance as AI (artificial intelligence), has already had a transformative impact on the economic, geo-political, and cultural landscape of the modern world. Governments and universities are rushing to fund AI-related research; the battle for control over the semi-conductors which power AI software has already made a number of companies wealthy beyond all imagination, while fueling geo-political rivalry. Visions of a “great disruption” and even of a “great obsolescence” have come to dominate, with scholars, professors, writers, playwrights, film directors, editors, and even doctors fearing that their jobs will be replaced by AI that can accomplish tasks faster, cheaper, and more efficiently. The emergence of AI and its threat of mass unemployment, if not complete human obsolescence, seem to be a fitting development in an era when all earlier forms of solidarity, and even hope itself, have broken down.

What is to be done? What can be done?

“Thinking Global Co-Becoming: An Open Invitation” is a text that emerged from discussions held over the last two years by intellectuals working in Taiwan, Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Chicago, and beyond. They are a group of scholars who work with—and publicly teach—ideas and narratives from East Asia’s classical and modern humanist traditions. Motivated by a sense of deep concern, and indeed outrage, over the violent state of our world, this group of scholars began talking about what it would actually take for people within this world to not just co-exist among one another, but co-become (*gongsheng* 共生), that is, to give full play to the vitality and diversity of all life forms (*sheng*) in a globally shared commons (*gong*), allowing the myriad of things to flourish each according to their own beautiful, dazzling, particular lines of flight.

The following document invites scholars, artists, policy-makers, and citizens from countries all over the world to think about what a transnational, transcultural project of *gongsheng* could mean for the twenty-first century. The authors of the document are aware that intellectuals in Europe, organized around the Convivialist banner, have been engaging for over a decade in such public-facing intellectual work, and feel it is important to contribute to this conversation. Such scholars are also confident that the East Asian philosophical and historical tradition with which they work is an important resource to enrich these conversations. The

document is thus in part an attempt to build a bridge between the important work already done by Convivalists and the dynamic perspective on our global moment offered by East Asian philosophical frameworks.

The document is written in a firm belief that at this moment of poly-crisis, a profound and drastic ontological reset is required of the world. If we are to have any hope of forging a future of care over violence, provision over profit, we must first recognize the awesomely relational and correlative nature of our existence on earth. Nobody lives in total isolation, not just from human others, but from land and air, whose harvests sustain our bodies, whose biome sustains our breathing, whose soaring flora and fauna humble us with an understanding of our own limitations. A commitment to an understanding of being grounded in correlative mutualism rather than atomistic individualism is the first point of *gongsheng*. From therein flow the other critical points articulated in this invitation.

Technology has brought incredible technical and communicative innovation to our world, and yet data centers eat away at forests and farmland, while the extraction of fossil fuels pollutes skies and waterways. In short, the Anthropocene has sent the earth skeltering off its once sustainable axis. Likewise, the presence of smartphones in the pocket of every member of the global human family, young and old alike, has replaced the time of human interaction with the algorithmically controlled flow of digital imagery, leading to an addictive numbness of mind and body that seems impossible to overcome. If technology is to be truly skillful in its application, certainly it must nurture the vital energies of earth and human alike (point two).

The invitation possesses a most Daoist suspicion of objective claims to total knowledge and seeks to make the recognition of the partiality of our own experience the basis for a reconceptualization of global geo-politics (point three). If every nation has its own complex historical and cultural rhythms, no single society should be able to hegemonically impose a single, normative developmental pathway onto others, as if it was an objective good for all places at all times. It is only when such an impulse is rejected that a politics of friendship can replace a politics of hostility. Giving up the urge to dominate lies behind the invitation's call for softness (point four), in which a vulnerable openness toward the other, as an end in itself, emerges as the mechanism by which a space for creative transformation can be brought into being (breaking, once and for all, the cycle of violence and reprisal we are currently trapped in). The fifth and final point of the invitation is to be found in an engagement with the question of

religion, in which ecumenicalism is presented as being genuinely possible only if exclusivist spiritual systems develop within themselves mechanisms of comparative self-reflexivity. Here, the manifestly powerful capacity of various religions to engender forms of moral courage among believers, as well as empathy for the suffering of others, is marshaled toward a transcultural project of global solidarity.

The invitation may turn out to be an intriguing yet frustratingly idiosyncratic document for some readers, for they will find that its language does not conform to any dominant ideology. This is not a re-tread of a projective global liberalism. Nor does it claim what is needed now is to rearticulate the class struggle and find our inner proletarian. Neither does it call for a return to tradition, a scurrying back into the interior of a particular, unblemished, pure civilizational center. There is something for everyone in it, but likely not enough to satisfy anyone, which is a strategic choice. Its authors were multiple, and the diversity of the voices within the document reflects this. Marxists will find much to agree with the invitation's concern regarding "the oligarchic economy that envelops the entire world today," yet will likely be disappointed that the invitation refuses to endorse the notion of class struggle as a means of mediating social inequality. While liberals will find common cause regarding the invitation's expression of concern over the attenuation of the notion of a commonly shared life, they will be dismayed at the invitation's refusal to champion electoral democracy as the single most effective means for mediating social difference. Confucians will share the invitation's concern regarding atomistic individualism, but may find pause in its refusal to call for a return to the historical structures of the family, state, or social ritual as a means of addressing it. Anarchists will find the Daoist insistence on diversity as grounding ontology to be an important gesture, but will perhaps find the invitation does not go far enough in critiquing the state as a violent apparatus over social life.

In short, this text does not seek to replicate any singular ideological system or perspective. Rather, it eclectically draws on different East Asian traditions of thought to stage an ontological intervention, one that is decidedly upstream from more direct political and economic questions. It works on the level of how we conceptualize being itself, asking us to reset the basic coordinates of existence. Importantly, it does not present itself as a manifesto, trying to convince and cajole. It is, rather, an open invitation in the most enabling sense of the term: a gift offered to the world's readers to join in this conversation, to reset our very understanding of what it

means to exist on this planet, in the hopes that the cycles of violence that now grip us can be contested at the level of philosophical principle. It is a beginning, not an end, an opening toward a possibly different future, one that rejects the hopelessness that defines the now.

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Thinking Global Co-becoming: An Open Invitation

Hsi-san Lai, Bing Song, Xiangchen Sun, and Tsuyoshi Ishii

3.1 PROLOGUE: OUR WORLD BEGINS WITH GIFTING

Our world begins with reciprocal gifting. As we lift our gaze up to the celestial bodies, and look around to examine our surroundings, you and I exist in an inter-relational web of gifts that is both rich and diverse,

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coming to us from every direction. When we observe the myriad forms of nature, a simple yet profound truth is revealed: within its complex and diverse ecosystems, nature has evolved a form of biodiversity in which not a single thing is cast aside, each and every one being inalienably just what it is. All things, in their myriad wonder and splendor, coexist in a web of inter-relation where the Dao opens things up to one another, connecting them to form an integrated oneness, symbiotically prospering and coevolving. Within this web, no single thing can survive alone, nor can any single thing dominate. The cosmos teems with life, fortune and misfortune emerging together in interconnected patterns. Here, a thriving garden opens for humanity in which a thousand graces, the myriad of things, co-become.

The modern world has long forgotten the notion of the Dao opening things up to one another, connecting them to form a oneness. Humanity is in dire need of a new global ethics. We invite people from different civilizations to collectively reflect upon the modes and processes by which the myriad of things co-become, as we hope for a future of lasting peace. We hereby extend an invitation to the world to participate in this conversation regarding co-becoming, joining an open platform dedicated to critical discussion and reflection. Let us draw on diverse cultural traditions, sharing conceptual resources, as we jointly address the common challenges facing the world and create a sustainable future for humanity and all things. We aim to work toward the realization of an open global ethics grounded in an ethos of gifting, sharing, co-becoming, and collective thriving.

3.2 THE ONTOLOGICAL BASIS OF CO-BECOMING: EMBEDDED EXISTENCE AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Loneliness and alienation are pervasive in modern society. Atomistic, extreme individualism has generated a profound sense of despondency within isolated individuals, as they struggle with a sense of alienation that is almost insurmountable. This severely erodes personal well-being and a shared sense of community. This alienated, atomistic individualism also influences the way nation-states, religious groups, and even commercial organizations frame and pursue their own interests, further shaping and exacerbating struggles and conflicts among them. For example, ideological polarization amid great power rivalry, intense religious and cultural clashes, geopolitical warmongering, the massive displacement of peoples, the technological domination of humanity, ecological collapse and species

extinction, these and other crises have tested human survival in the modern world in brutal and unprecedented ways. Even now, development is proceeding at an exponential rate, pushed on by the accelerating proliferation of multiple systems left in unresolved superposition, profoundly threatening the existential conditions of the myriad of things (including humanity).

Faced with the pressing crisis of human survival, we urge humanity to collectively reflect upon our common existence, re-examine our existential principles, and fundamentally transform our relationship with the myriad of things. As such, we invite rigorous and committed individuals to ponder a philosophy of co-becoming with us. We advocate returning to the ideal of co-becoming embodied in the notion of *embedded existence and collective transformation*. The philosophical starting points for the thinking of co-becoming are the notions of *the interrelationality of existence*; *mutual embeddedness of the myriad of things*; *dynamic fluidity underlying all things*; and finally *collective evolution*. There is no single form of existence that is not encompassed by a larger environment. From the smallest particles surrounded by electron clouds to the largest planets encircled by galaxies, none of the myriad of things, from the smallest to the largest, can exist in isolation. The very definition of existence already encompasses a network of relationships characterized by an embedded interweaving. Mutuality pervades everywhere; interrelatedness connects all things. Myriad of things, through intricate causal connections, interweave and intertwine to form an inextricably correlative cosmos. This cosmos is formed by countless relational events interconnected and interdependent, evolving into an infinitely rich and diverse ecosystem. Not only does existence influence the evolution of relationality, but relationality also enriches the transformation of existence. Existence and relationality define one another. Co-becoming and mutual transformation are the grounding characteristics of ontology at its most foundational level. The interpenetrating and dense interconnectedness of individuals, objects, species, ecosystems, galaxies, cultures, subject and object, inside and outside—all manifest themselves at every moment and in every place. A sense of in-betweenness pierces boundaries of various kinds, revealing a common destiny grounded in an interweaving between the self and human others, as well as an interweaving between the human self and non-human others.

However, our current condition is such that what we are facing includes:

The ontological ground of *embedded existence and collective transformation* being on the verge of collapse, lost in an avalanche of ferocious conflicts.

The promise of a garden of beauty embodied by the notions of a thousand graces and the myriad of things co-becoming are on the verge of desiccation, being transformed into a desert wasteland.

Spurred on by this sense of concern and anxiety, we hereby issue an open appeal to the world, urging a return to the original existential foundation of co-becoming. We advocate starting anew from this existential basis, initiating a revolutionary shift in both epistemology and methodology, a transformation in modes of self-cultivation, and joint safeguarding of a shared global ethics. Through this intervention, we hope to provide both a diagnosis of the pressing crisis facing humanity and a remedy to address it.

3.3 CO-BECOMING RECOGNIZES THE MUTUALLY EMBEDDED NATURE OF THE SELF WITH NON-HUMAN OTHERS, RE-DEFINING *TECHNE* IN ORDER TO FACE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Among all the creatures of the world, there is one species called humans, whose men and women alone are capable of inventing various technologies that alter geology and climate, ushering the earth into the age of the Anthropocene. The emergence of this species has already decimated the biodiversity of ecological evolution, bringing entire ecosystems to the brink of collapse. Ironically, according to humanity's noble self-image—"man is the spirit of the myriad of things," "man is a rational animal," "man is a thinking reed," and so on—the presence of such an exalted species on earth should logically lead to a more prosperous ecology and a flourishing of all things. However, the reality is in fact just the opposite. As the rapid acceleration of the Anthropocene reaches a stage of complete domination, it has already resulted in environmental devastation, species extinction, climate imbalance, ecological catastrophe, and other dire phenomena. Modern technology also exhibits a most paradoxical logic: humanity must rely on the natural environment as a sturdy foundation for life, yet technological development and industrial expansion massively and continuously undermine this very foundation. Humanity today is caught in a double bind: technology has brought about tremendous progress, but it has also unremittingly produced environmental disaster. Driven by anthropocentric, utility-oriented, technocratic thinking, our current situation reminds us of the Titanic heading straight for the proverbial iceberg,

seemingly unable to change direction or slow down. Humanity created the Anthropocene, which announces itself as a mode of perpetual crisis for the earth.

If humanity is transforming the world and controlling all things through various technologies, we must ask: is what is beneficial to human beings also beneficial to the myriad of other things? If technology consolidates human self-interest while bringing tremendous harm to the myriad of other things, is it truly ideal? We can even wonder whether a planet without humans would not in fact be better both for the planet and for the myriad of things. Is it possible to draw on the indigenous and local cultural resources of the world to develop an environmental ethics that is capable of overcoming the crisis of the Anthropocene, building a future of genuine co-becoming among species?

When humans invented bows and arrows, swords, cell phones, rockets, atomic bombs, artificial intelligence, and other modes of *techne*, they often acted with a sense of *self-righteousness*, *self-satisfaction*, *self-aggrandizement*, and *self-glorification*, claiming to embody the standard by which all things and affairs would be measured. They unilaterally imposed standards of values grounded in various rules and regulations, establishing one-sided frameworks for determining utility. However, a focus on anthropocentrism, self-centeredness, and maximal utility and profit ultimately led to endless exploitation, creating a web of devastation that stretched across the world, in which both ourselves and all non-human others were harmed. When humans exploit natural and human resources without restraint, relentlessly controlling and exhausting them without leaving anything in reserve, the result is a technological disaster in which private gain becomes public injury.

We are not opposed to the use of technology. Rather, we advocate that humans make more skillful use of the technology, establishing a relationship of freedom with it that allows them to say both yes and no to it. Good technology is not based on unilateral control by human will. Instead, it requires humans to respect the nature and vitality of all things, understood within correlative relationships in which the existence of both the self and non-human others are mutually embedded. Human devices and technologies must be understood through the concept of refraining, that is, the ability to know how and where to withdraw into stillness, one that can produce a reasonable relationship between them and the humans that employ them. Here, the notion of refraining does not mean a unilateral abandonment of technology, but rather requires that when technology

encounters the heterogeneity of things, it must be made to understand how to maintain a space of non-coercive, creative transformation for them, allowing for the development of a collaborative relationship between objects and ourselves.

Only when technology is defined by a paradoxical sense of both action and refraining-from-action, assertion and passivity, will it avoid descending into a perpetual drive for conquest and domination, leading to pervasive violence and death. Only when human technology allows for this space of non-coercive preservation and transformation can it work to preserve the vitality of the myriad of things. Only in this way can humans, as the inventors of technology, transform its nature and harness its power in skillful ways. Therefore, we call for a fundamental rethinking of a foundational question: what is technology? We also call for a fundamental redefinition of the nature of technology, understood not as a destructive force, but as one that can work to preserve vitality. We do so in the hope that, in the face of the global crisis of ecological catastrophe and species extinction, humanity can engage in an epistemological transformation regarding *techné*, so that technology can truly help human beings cultivate a heart-mind that nurtures the vitality of the cosmos, opening an era of lasting peace among the myriad of things of the world.

3.4 HOW A MODE OF THOUGHT GROUNDED IN CO-BECOMING EMPLOYS A COMMITMENT TO METHODOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY TO TRANSFORM THE POLARIZED BINARIES OF GEOPOLITICS: ON BEING “NOT THIS, AND NOT THAT” AS WELL AS BEING “BOTH THIS AND THAT”

The realism of international power politics and the dynamics of great-power competition have all but returned the international sphere to a new Cold War dynamic. Worryingly, amidst a struggle for political, military, and economic might that is conceptualized in binary, winner-take-all terms, ideas have become pawns in ideological battles, with various forms of extremist rhetoric becoming mainstream.

Various forms of extreme, self-righteous discourse have emerged, which have parasitically attached themselves to political and pan-political platforms. While superficially polyphonic, in fact such discursive forms are self-centered at their core, taking what is a one-sided, self-righteous

opinion and promoting it as a kind of universal value, making a claim to absolute truth. This creates a condition of intense fragmentation in which different positions descend into mutual incommunicability, with differences between modes of thought degenerating into an ideological struggle that is defined in terms of good and evil. We are constantly faced with a binary mode of operation in world politics in which a so-called democratic alliance must resist an “axis of evil.” The political rhetoric of “cognitive warfare” and “counter-cognitive warfare” abounds. Under the guise of various political slogans, the struggle between different governance systems and the contest to claim interpretive domination over the concept of democracy have ensured that both sides can only see the righteousness of their individual positions, as well as the needs which those positions meet. Both sides are unable to see the validity of the other’s position, as well as the needs which are being served by those positions. In the realm of political struggle as well as the various forms of media propaganda related to it, both sides are truly exhibiting what Zhuangzi (369–286 BC) long ago described as “each affirming what the other denies and denying what the other affirms.” It can be said that the ideological struggles of the Cold War era have not dissipated. It is simply that the soul of such struggle has been resurrected in a novel body, often parasitically biding itself to various new modes of rhetoric. The space for free thought has been reduced greatly, and the communicative power of language is gradually waning.

Humans claim to be beings imbued with spirituality, endowed with language, and capable of thought. Originally language was meant to bridge differences, and thought was employed in order to produce a sense of imaginative passage across divides. Language and thought should be gifts exchanged between peoples. However, amidst the current geopolitical crisis, the benevolent ideal embodied in the notion of language and thought as reciprocal gifts has been replaced by a form of linguistic violence and ideological struggle. What has emerged is the brutal reality of Hot War defined by an ever greater arms race, leading to out-and-out armed conflict. Furthermore, the prevalence of manipulated, fake news as well as malicious slander on social media platforms is fueling the shift from linguistic violence to actual violence, leading to a dizzying duplication, but also radical simplification, of existing discursive structures, hindering the potential for ideas and language to be exchanged as gifts. Faced with the current geopolitical crisis, replete as it is with both linguistic violence and kinetic conflict, and cognizant of the many voices that have been

drowned out by the militarist cacophony, we uphold a principle of co-becoming grounded in the notion of *minimizing harm* and *maximizing room for creative transformation*. Upon this basis, we advocate a cessation of hostilities and a commitment to peace grounded in the spirit of *transforming mutual harm into mutual growth*. We advocate a spirit of co-becoming grounded in the capacity to “walk two roads” (i.e., a term from *Zhuangzi*, meaning engaging in non-binary thinking), in which *win-win transforms uni-directional hegemony*. We hope to transform the hostility between self and enemy which currently defines geopolitics, grounded as it is in polarized conflict, working to find the power of the *middle way*, in which we allow positions to be “neither this nor that” as well as “both this and that.” In this way, polarized struggles between various interests, as well as battles between ideological forms, can be restored to a space of co-becoming grounded in embedded existence and collective transformation. In this way, language can once again become a bridge of friendship, while thought can once again emerge as a form of reciprocal gifting. The dazzling variety of voices embodied in the myriad of things can come together to sing in a polyphonous heteroglossia.

This is a form of political advocacy grounded in an epistemological transformation. We must thoroughly acknowledge the limitations of our own selves, of our own modes of apprehending the world, of our own positions. We must deeply recognize that humans are finite beings, and as such all activities of thought and language must by necessity be shaped by various subjective and objective conditions. No one can claim to have command over an absolute Dao or to monopolize claims to truth. All opinions and propositions are mediated by finite feedback loops, embodied by the Buddhist notions that “to see is also not to see; whatever something is affirmed to be, it also is not.” Only after thoroughly recognizing that no one can escape this partiality of perspective can we engage in the epistemological transformation promised by the notion of a mode of being that is “neither this nor that” *and* “both this and that.” In doing so, we can re-learn the Dao of “walking-two-roads”—that is, learn how to engage in creative, non-coercive dual-directional transformation, which is the space of co-becoming. Although this epistemological revolution does not seek to produce absolute, final solutions to humanity’s various conflicts of right and wrong, it does not shy away from engaging in value critique in specific contexts. It takes the dead-end road of vicious struggle grounded in a winner-take-all mentality, in which the self and enemy are understood

in a position of unbreachable hostility, and transforms it, moving toward the path of co-becoming, which is grounded in *multi-directional winning and mutual enrichment*.

We must acknowledge the pervasiveness of differing perspectives and bravely confront the ontological fact that these differences can never be eliminated. The world is an intricate kaleidoscope composed of countless finite beings in different circumstances. Any attempt to provide a single, all-encompassing resolution to disagreements in the realm of values, as well as various conflicts which impinge upon different sets of interests, will result in the hollowing out of pluralism itself—a heavy price to pay for this attempt at absolute resolution. Therefore, we advocate resisting the temptation to resolve conflicts through totalizing metaphysical intervention, which indulges in the fantasy of an external, transcendent final solution to such conflicts. Such a panacea is inherently toxic. It presumes that there is indeed a means of conflict resolution that is itself without some kind of embedded positionality, transcending all, sufficient to resolve all disputes. But it is precisely this ultimate remedy that reduces the range of possibilities for concrete resolution within specific historical contexts, for it attempts to flatten out the overwhelming diversity of the world with a transcendental singularity. The idea of co-becoming that we are proposing, grounded in the notion that things can be at once “neither this nor that” as well as “both this and that,” does not take as its end-point the elimination of disagreements forever, the eternal pacification of all opposition. It does not imagine that there is a sudden and miraculous cure, one that sublates oppositions from the outside, in an action designed to pacify the realm forever. All of this has been tried in the past, and we do not seek to resurrect it. What we suggest is a much milder form of medicine, one that seeks to transform the opposition of extreme positions into the practice of “walking two roads,” in which a greater range of possible remedies can be discovered. In this way, the reality of different positions does not necessarily have to lead to the zero-sum, dead-end path in which there are only friends or enemies, nothing in between. A dual-directional path in which we can mutually transform and enrich one another is possible. How are we to bring this revolution in thought into being, one which advocates “dual negation and dual affirmation”? This involves developing a sense of human cultivation, as well as a public ethos, based on the attenuation of the desire to dominate, the emptying of the self, softness, and the ability to listen.

3.5 HOW SOFTNESS TRANSFORMS HARDNESS: CULTIVATION AS THE ATTENUATION OF HUMAN DESIRE

Since the emergence of the human species, the earth's ecological community and biodiversity have suffered unprecedented damage, reaching a point of irreparable ecological catastrophe. Since the advent of humanity, religious and cultural conflicts have continued, genocidal events continue to break out unabated, wars large and small have never ceased, and the current threat of complete mutual destruction through the utilization of nuclear weapons continues to be felt. Humanity not only does not have the capacity to refrain from going too far—a fact that is felt in its continual plunder of other species, its aggression against other humans, and its continued exploitation of earth's resources—but its techniques of exploitation have also evolved to become increasingly sophisticated and efficient. To this, we can only remark with a certain acidic irony: humanity is a rapaciously covetous and self-centered animal, hell-bent on pursuing development, progress, control, and expansion with unmitigated cupidity.

This desiring animal, with its inability to attenuate itself and its constant self-expansion, reminds us of the concern that is expressed in *Laozi* regarding the mode of desire embedded in the “Dao of the Human”: “those who are self-righteous lack illumination, those who are self-satisfied are unable to grow, those who are self-aggrandizing have no achievements, while those who are self-glorifying cannot mature.” Being rigidly attached to a single perspective prevents us from seeing possibilities beyond our own. Being replete with self-righteousness easily leads to a blinding, isolated mode of being in which we can only praise ourselves and defame others. Exaggerating one's own achievements and inflating one's pride makes it difficult to share gifts with others. An excessive reliance on one's own abilities and the exertion of dominance against the outside world easily lead to a lack of space for mutual growth and nourishment. The original “Dao of heaven (*tian*),” in which the myriad of things across heavens and earth co-became, embedded productively together, naturally possessed a sustainable mechanism which allowed for the return to a state of equilibrium. However, the intervention of the “Dao of the Human” dramatically reversed the “Dao of heaven,” developing in ever more extreme ways. Indeed, the “Dao of the Human” represented a radical departure from the “Dao of heaven.” Here, the concepts of a finite and infinite game can be used to metaphorically describe this situation. The “Dao of the Human” is a mode of being which, pace *Laozi*, “takes from the needy

to support the abundant.” The “Dao of heaven,” conversely, “takes from the abundant to support the needy.” A finite game is the excessive expansion and dominance of a particular species, which disrupts the relations of common existence and mutual co-becoming embedded in the manifold webs of life. For example, when the human species dominates and plunders in oligarchic fashion, it inevitably impacts the interdependent ecosystem, ultimately harming the system of co-becoming upon which humanity depends.

Why, then, has humanity embarked on a self-destructive path, replacing infinite games with finite ones? This involves a further diagnosis of humanity. At its core, *Laozi* argues that the “Dao of the Human” has formed a mode of desire and cognition that is profoundly self-centered. In doing so, it has destroyed the path of co-becoming which sees “heaven and earth born together, the myriad things as one.” In short, due to a cognitive mode grounded in self-righteousness and self-satisfaction as well as a mode of desire grounded in self-aggrandizement and self-glorification, the species that we call human beings have continually engaged in a finite game which sees “those who are abundant get even more abundant (the rich get richer)” and “those who lack come to lack even more (the poor get poorer).”

The oligarchic economy that envelops the entire world today is the most obvious manifestation of “taking from the deficient to support the abundant.” The expansionist dominance of humanity has destroyed the most basic conditions of fair competition in society. Therefore, in order to return to the sustainable game of co-becoming and win-win, we must cultivate a renewed mode or quality of desire within the players. That is, we must transform the self-centeredness of aggressive conquest, expansion, and plunder into a mode of subjectivity grounded in refusal: a refusal to be self-righteous (and thus able to reach illumination); a refusal of self-satisfaction (and thus able to grow); a refusal of self-aggrandizement (and thus capable of genuine achievements); and a refusal of self-glorification (and thus capable of genuine maturation). Only in this way can we truly reckon with the meaning of a space that enables our own development while leaving room for the creative existence of others. In this way, we restore the dual-directional game, a practice of “walking two roads,” in which we mutually illuminate, grow, mature, and accomplish. Only in this way can we have a chance to repair the network of co-becoming, with its infinite game grounded in the reciprocity of the gift.

3.6 THE CO-BECOMING OF GODS: TRANSFORMING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONFLICTS

The loneliness and alienation of interpersonal relationships, the ecological damage caused by technological domination, geopolitical polarization, and the ferocious, unattenuated expansion of desire—all such challenges propel themselves forward one after another. When people are unsure of whether to move forward or retreat, lacking any solid foundation, and unable to save themselves, they have often placed their hopes for salvation or redemption in transcendent beings like God, or gods. Modern Enlightenment rationality once declared God dead, but looking at human society in the twenty-first century, it is easy to see that religious belief has not only not disappeared, but continues to permeate many aspects of life in various ways. While recognizing the absolute necessity of a form of cultivation that is not mired in egocentrism, that rejects self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification, how can we provide some sense of peace to our individual minds, mired as we are in deep anxiety here in this world? How can humanity achieve *embedded existence and collective transformation*, working together to provide a space of co-becoming for the billions of people on earth, one which minimizes harm and maximizes creative transformation?

The power of religion, its ability to penetrate and elevate the human heart, is unquestionable. However, to truly unleash the divine power of religious peace and the co-becoming of gods, we must undergo a process by which religion undergoes a self-softening and transformation. Perhaps we can call this a reformation of religious epistemology. This requires the de-absolutizing, de-singularizing, and de-centralizing of the sacred, so that the sacred can be realized throughout diverse cultural life worlds, universalized across the diversity of the myriad of things, liberating and expanding any given “singular center” into the multiplicity of “omnicenterism.” In other words, the co-becoming of gods entails returning them to the ontological base of co-becoming itself, a state of *embedded existence and collective transformation*.

In reality, every “path” is forged through practice, and each path possesses its own suitability within its own temporal and spatial context. However, no path is singular, and it stands to reason that different paths can exist side by side without conflicting with one another. It is only when one discrete path becomes the only path, imbued with singular truth, and

thus made absolute, does it in fact become closed off, reduced to being a one-way street that all must be forced to go down. In this way, the encounter between different one-way streets inevitably leads to fierce conflict that is framed in irreconcilable terms, in which there cannot be two positions. Clashes between religious paths, political paths, and economic paths involve different positions, perspectives, claims of right and wrong, choices and forms of competition between different roads. These do not have to be elevated to a war of gods characterized by an “irreconcilable opposition of force” or “a refusal to share the world with one’s enemy.” In fact, realizing co-becoming among the gods represents a source of great liberation, and great happiness, for humanity. The failure of co-becoming between the gods represents a great challenge for humanity, bringing with it great suffering. As such, rather than abolishing religion’s pious yearning for salvation, it is our hope that godly co-becoming can give full play to a plural gospel, one grounded in *care for the vulnerable, nurturing the marginal, embedded existence, and collective transformation*. Because religions have served so often in the annals of human history as a gentle power for cultivating moral sentiment, we sincerely hope this Dao of gentleness, springing forth from the depths of human nature and nourishing humanity toward maturation, will not be abused by the rigid and aggressive allegiances that adhere within political structures and underlay ethnic mobilizations. Instead, we hope that religion as a social force will, through the past, present, and future of our human history, continue to cultivate the love of the other as oneself and enhance our abilities to empathetically put ourselves in the shoes of others. Whether as individuals or as collectivities, humanity will always endure suffering of various kinds, which presents a great test to us. The question is this: how can we transform our own experience of pain into a pathway toward the other, to the experience of shared pain and shared trauma—a communion of our wounds that blossoms into genuinely shared affect? How can we deepen and widen a sense of heart-felt connectedness among one another, transforming even our suffering into a fount of co-becoming? We sincerely hope that religion will continue to serve as a humane force that transforms hardness with softness.

Here, we must understand the many forms of suffering that define social reality as shared wounds and shared pain, leading toward empathy. We call on everyone to elevate them into a wellspring of strength by which we can walk the path of co-becoming.

3.7 NEITHER MORAL APPEAL, NOR POLITICAL SLOGANEERING: THE HOPE FOR AN OPEN GLOBAL ETHICS GROUNDED IN THE *CO-BECOMING OF NON-COMMONALITY*

Humanity has never lacked moral appeals, nor has it lacked the promise of religious paradises or the promotion of political utopias. However, without a realistic diagnosis of the difficulties facing co-becoming, religious and moral appeals will ultimately run aground against the difficult question: just how exactly do we co-become? Being unable to answer this question, the door of co-becoming will be almost impossible to open. Even further caution is warranted when one considers the way in which the notion of co-becoming can be and has been abused and sullied. Modern East Asian history shows us how, under the guise of “mutual co-prosperity,” imagined communities were brought into being fueled by hatred, in which the boundary between self and enemy was insisted upon, and on that basis massive political, military, and economic mobilization engaged in. In this way, co-becoming degenerated into a slogan that glorified self-sacrifice and legitimized a form of co-destruction.

The co-becoming we advocate must be grounded in sustained reflection upon, and critique of, this tragic history. We must remember that co-becoming cannot be achieved by consolidating a singular center, dispelling all differences from within it. As such, co-becoming does not possess any single, inflexible center, nor does it possess impenetrable walls. Co-becoming will not expand itself by eliminating enemies. Naturally, co-becoming must accommodate difference. It must accommodate opposite positions, enabling them to develop alongside one another without conflict, leading to their mutual inter-penetration and transformation. Co-becoming does not stop at a kind of relativism of value which refuses to place different positions into dialogue with one another. Co-becoming begins by confronting the dissensus of different, even opposing, positions. It attempts to diagnose the knot of this dissensus, hoping to open the gap through which “walking two roads” becomes possible, repairing and nurturing a space by which a consensus of dissensus is realized, one in which we are *mutually embedded and collectively transformed*. As such, while co-becoming advocates a commonality of non-commonality, this is by no means a simplistic call for unification or integration, nor is it an embrace of an enclosed singularity.

Existence itself takes place between different peoples and different species, a state in which we encounter the difficulty of commonality, and even the negation of commonality, in which contradictions and conflicts abound. This is an existential fact that can never be completely dispelled. However, equally important, indeed even more important, the *mutually embedded, collectively transformed* relationship that exists among the myriad of things is also an existential fact that cannot be dispelled. Therefore, we need a new global ethics of co-becoming, which when facing the challenges posed by various instances of the negation of commonality call upon us to relentlessly nurture and repair the space of co-becoming, a space grounded in the reality of *mutual embeddedness and collective transformation*. In short, a new global ethics must be established on the basis of correlative ontology, a revolutionary shift in epistemology, and a soft, flexible form of cultivation that is capable of transforming the nature and quality of human desire. Only in this way can a new global ethics of co-becoming gradually manifest itself, becoming ever more clear through continuous practice.

Can human thought and cultivation once again lead us through the current crisis and toward a path of co-becoming? This is a strenuous challenge that presses imminently against us, one that is forever incomplete. We are certain of only this: we need a form of sharing that transcends the self, a form of softness that transcends rigidity, and a form of mutuality that transcends the individual. The gift that is embodied in the question how we co-become stands on the road before us, waiting for us to meet it, waiting for us to pass it on to others. It never completely arrives, and yet it is always silently arriving!

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDED READINGS

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The *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* as a Philosophy of Co-becoming: Acknowledging Non-knowing for Co-existence, Shouldering Softness for Co-living

Hsi-san Lai

The philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi were situated in an age of chaos and warfare: the system of rituals and music of the Zhou dynasty was rapidly decaying, and the voice of the court was shadowed by the ever-proliferating “hundred schools of thought.” It was a time when the political stability of a unified dynasty began to rapidly collapse, as well as a transitional period during which culture had to be reconstructed from the bottom up. As the official unificationist discourse of the Zhou dynasty became increasingly challenged, the overall political, military, and cultural condition of the dynasty tended to what may be called a highly decentralized, deterritorialized “great turmoil” (大亂). Speaking in the language of the time, “a world faring on the dao” turned into “a world not faring on the dao.” The *Laozi*

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once described the sufferings and tragedies of the incessant warfare of its time as follows: “When the world is faring on the dao, the galloping steeds are sent back to draw carts of manure. When the world is not faring on the dao, war-horses are bred in the borderlands” (Ch. 46); “If the people had no fear of death, it would be useless to threaten them with death” (Chap. 74); “The hunger of the people is indeed due to a ravenous greed. For it is due to those above them gobbling up their taxes” (Chap. 75). The historical context of the *Laozi* can be understood even just through these fragmented descriptions: an extremely cruel, autocratic rule and harsh taxation, omnipresent starvation, battles so fierce and intense that even pregnant horses could not come off the battlefield—in short, dying was preferred to living. In a time so far from “faring on the dao,” the average man had virtually no means of subsistence and no way to avoid the fate of conscription or mass mobilization, to the extent that even a text so focused on the ideas of “non-contending,” “compassion,” and “tenderness” like the *Laozi* strangely talks about the use of weapons “as a last resort” (Chap. 31). In a sense, the *Laozi* discusses military strategies only to the extent that it is utterly indispensable to making the world “fare on the dao” again and providing the masses with some basic means of living. The *Laozi* never eulogizes “war heroes” and instead focuses its attention on mourning the deceased after a military victory. As a text born out of the “Warring States” period, the *Laozi* could not completely avoid military discourses but is explicit in its total indifference to military strategies. Above all, it is concerned with returning the world to its dao of co-living. Furthermore, the *Laozi* argues, “There is no disaster greater than not knowing when to stop. There is no error more massive than desire for gain” (Chap. 46). While individual disasters and errors can be attributed to a multitude of causes, in all cases, the seeds of disaster and incessant strife are already planted in the depth of human nature when human beings struggle for strength and power, desire without ever being satisfied, and expand their desires without “knowing when to stop.” This paper attempts to select and comment on several passages of the *Laozi* in order to elucidate its philosophy of “dissolving firmness by tenderness,” tranquility and contentment, and non-knowing and non-doing. It provides a philosophical ground for reflecting on a way of “co-existence, co-living, and co-becoming” (共生) in the face of humanity’s incessant oppositions and confrontations.¹

¹The concept “共生” (*gongsheng*) can currently be translated into English in three ways: *co-existence*, *co-living*, and *co-becoming*. Following the recommendation of Nakajima Takahiro

4.1 ON THE “DAO” (道, WAY, COURSE): “NO ETERNAL, UNCHANGING DAO” AS THE DISENTANGLEMENT OF IDEOLOGICAL CONFRONTATIONS, PROVIDING A MULTIVALUED PATH TOWARD INTELLECTUAL CO-BECOMING

Any course can be taken as the right course to take, but no course like that can be the course taken always. Any name can be named to determine what is or should be, but no name like that can be what determines them always. (*Laozi*, Chap. 1)

Courses have never had any sealed boundaries between them, and words have never had any constant range. It is by establishing definitions of what is “this,” what is “right,” that boundaries are made. (*Zhuangzi*, “Equalizing Assessments of Things”)²

As the opening sentence of the first chapter of the *Laozi* explains, while the dao, as an ever-changing and unfixed process of activity, may be temporarily actualized in a particular manner (for instance, creating a certain path by traversing it), these specific instances of application and manifestation (*ke dao* 可道) should not be permanently fixed (*fei chang dao* 非常道). Similarly, while the name, as an ever-changing and unfixed network (脈絡) of reference, can be temporarily employed to describe things, such acts of description and classification (*ke ming* 可名) should not be dogmatically reified (*fei chang ming* 非常名). The dao in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* is akin to neither the metaphysical substance of Greek ontology that remains free from change nor some ineffable realm of mystical silence. Rather, the

of the University of Tokyo, a pioneer of the “philosophy of co-becoming,” I adopt *co-living* in contexts emphasizing “living together” and *co-becoming* when highlighting the dynamic nature of life. Moreover, in accordance with the Daoist philosophical spirit of *transformation* (化), I especially emphasize *co-becoming* to capture the processual nature of change, the organic interconnectedness of all things, the non-anthropocentric perspective, and even the creative potential of mutual transformation. For further discussion regarding the English translation of *co-becoming* and the potential of the concept of *gongsheng* in Chinese philosophy, see the interview with Professor Nakajima Takahiro by Hsi-san Lai and Mark McConaghy, “On the Importance of a Philosophy of Co-Becoming for Our Strait and Our World: A Conversation with Professor Nakajima Takahiro”, *Reflexion*, No. 45, May 2022, 249—286.

² Unless otherwise stated, the English translations of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* in this chapter are cited from *Daodejing*, translated by Brook Ziporyn, Liveright, 2023 and *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*, translated by Brook Ziporyn, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2020.

dao in the *Laozi* is best understood as one that does not depart from the processes of transformation of things (物化)—it operates multiple threads of transformation simultaneously without contradiction. Zhu Qianzhi (朱谦之, 1899–1972) provides a precise articulation of this idea:

“Dao” is the name for the totality of transformations. It shifts with time and changes in response to things. [...] Since ancient times, commentators of the *Laozi* have understood the dao to be ineffable. [...] In reality, the *Laozi* states that non-being can be utilized as function, and being can be utilized as benefit—the dao is not unspeakable. The text mentions “beautiful words,” “a guiding source for words,” “straightforward words always seem reversed,” and states that “our words are very easy to understand, very easy to put into practice”—all of them are acts of speech and refer to concretized courses and names. Some interpreters of the *Laozi* have unilaterally considered “constant” (常) to denote the unchanging and the immutable. They believe that what can be spoken of and named is subject to change, while what cannot be spoken of or named is unchanging (as per Lin Xiyi 林希逸, 1193–1271).³ They do not realize that what the *Laozi* refers to as “dao” is inherently ever-changing and non-dwelling, flowing through the six voids. There is neither an eternally unchanging dao nor an eternally unchanging name. Therefore, in dealing with the world, one should have no fixed mind or intention but “take all the people’s intentions as his own” (*Laozi*, Ch. 49). In response to things, one should “found their way on the constancy of Nonbeing” (*Zhuangzi*, “The Whole World”). In other words, being constant means that one can constantly “be” and constantly “not be” without adhering to or exceedingly preferring either side. Since “constant” refers to not adhering to fixed constants, it is thus called “non-constant.” [...] What is constant is non-constant. [...] As the *Zhuangzi* states, “Life and death are fated, and that they come with the constancy of day and night is of Heaven.” The dao of heaven and earth is enduring and unceasing—the four seasons change, yet it ever more completed. If there were no change and no alteration, how could there be what is called “constant”? Therefore, it is said, “Any dao can be taken as the right course to take, but no course like that can be the dao taken always. Any name can be named to determine what is or should be, but no name like that can be what determines them always.”

As Zhu Qianzhi’s remark reveals, what the dao describes is the process of the activity of shifting with time and adapting to the transformation of

³ 可道可名: The character “dao” has the double meaning of “the dao” as well as “to speak of” (note from the translator).

things. This process naturally unfolds into a multiplicity of phenomena across different situational contexts. Since the dao—as concrete transformations—constitutes a pluralistic movement of “non-identity,” naturally, it should also manifest the diversity and plenitude of how “lushly” things “flourish and grow” (夫物芸芸). What we call “dao” is not a transcendent, singular, “capital-D Dao” external to all things; rather, it is expressed in the infinitely many, mutually differentiated courses of transformation of things simultaneously operating without contradiction. Using the metaphor of pathways, the chapter “Equalizing Assessments of Things” in the *Zhuangzi* states that “[pathways] are formed by walking them.” One the one hand, the dao is continually actualized only in the activity of walking; on the other hand, it entails multiple possibilities of actualization and the vein-like quality of these possible pathways constantly branching from one another. For example, as people traverse the earth, they explore and establish different pathways in response to their circumstances. However, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* remind us that these pathways (*ke dao*) and signposts (*ke ming*) temporarily emerging through practice, though functionally and contextually valid in their specific applications, should not be fixated beyond their immediate context or, even worse, enclosed and reified into a “constant Dao” (*chang dao*) or “constant name” (*chang ming*). In reality, both dao and names possess an inherent capacity for transformation and infinite applicability. This is why the opening sentence of the *Laozi* reminds us that, in provisional uses of “*ke dao*” and “*ke ming*,” we must employ the function of negation (*fei* 非) to counteract the tendency to fall into the non-transforming dogmatism of “constant Dao” and “constant names.” Only by doing so can we preserve the maximal flexibility of “being free of any constancy.”⁴

From the perspective of the *Laozi*, if there is such a thing as a “Daoist school,” it would be precisely the school that is the least attached to its own path (*fei chang dao*) and the least fixated on its own words (*fei chang ming*). The very absence of a fixed, linear, and unchanging eternal pathway is what constitutes the Daoist understanding of “*fei chang dao*” as “the dao that is not a dao” (不道之道). For the Daoist, courses are formed by walking them, and the traveler, in the act of walking, is always treading a path of experimentation that is never fully completed. As the *Laozi*

⁴ “The same as it? But then you are free of any preference! Transforming? But then you are free of any constancy!” (同則無好也，化則無常也。) Zhuangzi, “The Great Source as Teacher.”

reminds us, “[G]ood is the travel that follows no ruts and leaves no tracks” (Chap. 27). The skilled traveler avoids having the temporary traces of his past footsteps permanently fixed as an unchanging *dao* for himself or for the future generations. Similarly, as a story from the chapter “In the Human World” in the *Zhuangzi* goes, “you have learned how to fly with wings, but not yet how to fly without wings.” Those who fly with wings tend to leave behind a fixed pattern to be imitated, whereas those who fly without wings, through their use of the *wu* (无) that functions to dispel fixed attachments, are able to not dwell in past traces and instead open up new pathways.

The opening quote of this section from Chap. 1 of the *Laozi* is also interpretable in terms of the chapter “Equalizing Assessments of Things” of the *Zhuangzi*: “For courses have never had any sealed boundaries between them, and words have never had any constant range. It is by establishing definitions of what is ‘this,’ what is ‘right,’ that boundaries are made.” Whereas the *Laozi* parallels “*dao*” with “name,” the *Zhuangzi* parallels “*dao*” with “word” (*yan* 言, or “speech,” “language”). Both are concerned with the tendency for *dao* and name (word) to, in the processes of “*ke dao*” and “*ke ming*,” degenerate into rigid frameworks of self-enclosure, thus forgetting the infinite possibilities of their “unsealed,” “nonconstant” origin. According to these “made boundaries,” what had been an unsealed, open *Dao* becomes constant (*chang dao*), and what had been diversified words become constant names (*chang ming*). In the attempt to construct (a specific “right”) a particular path or point of view (a specific “is”), one focuses on only the particular system of symbols at hand, thereby forgetting the infinite possibilities of our overflowing, unconflicted co-existence—as the *Zhuangzi* says, “[N]o thing is not right, no thing is not acceptable” (無物不然，無物不可).

In fact, the “*dao*” was a concept widely adopted by the “hundred schools” in early China. In particular, in the sociopolitical context of the great turmoil and a time of cultural crisis, all schools shared the mission and ethical obligation of “saving the world,” and each had its own vision of how to make the world “fare on its course” again. For instance, Confucius made it his goal: “he frequents the company of men of principle that he may be rectified” (就有道而正焉) and often exclaimed: “My doctrines make no way. I will get upon a raft, and float about on the sea” (道不行，乘桴浮于海). The *Mencius* also expresses an urgent desire for rejecting “evil speech” (邪說) and establishing an “orthodox *dao*” (道

統),⁵ while the Mohists hoped to square all differences in order to singularize heaven and earth into one same dao (一同天下).⁶ Almost all schools shared the intention to guide heaven and earth with a “constant Dao” (*chang dao*), returning heaven and earth to the same one dao (*yi dao* 一道), and establish “right name” with the “right Dao” (*zheng dao* 正道). Among them, the ones that exerted the greatest influence in pre-Qin dynasty China were the Confucians and the Mohists. In short, the Confucians believed that their courses of “humankindness and righteousness,” “ritual and music,” and “right names” were the reigning “constant Dao” that could save the world, whereas the Mohists believed that this reigning “constant Dao” consisted of the courses of “universal care,” “against aggression,” “against music,” and “moderation in burial” for which they advocate. The Confucians considered their course as the most axiologically superior among the hundred schools; so did the Mohists.

The *Zhuangzi* was critical of this debate over what it describes as the “rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists.” The problem lies not so much in normative differences in views of what is right or wrong in themselves but rather the tendency for two different points of view involving provisional courses and names to each elevate itself to a claim for being the “Dao of Truth” or even the “Ultimate Dao.” When two provisional courses (*ke dao*) and names (*ke ming*) proclaim themselves as constant (*chang ming* and *chang dao*), the normative differences between them turn into a battle for singularity. This intellectual warfare between the Confucians and the Mohists operates in the same way as an armed warfare, which explains why the *Mencius* tries to clear away “evil speech” and establish its “orthodox dao” so desperately. Only in the presence of an orthodox dao can oppositional views be eliminated; only by eliminating

⁵While the *Mencius* does not present a unified philosophy or political outlook, its antagonism toward so-called evil speech is particularly intense: “I also wish to rectify men’s hearts, and to put an end to those perverse doctrines, to oppose their one-sided actions and banish away their licentious expressions—and thus to carry on the work of the three sages. Do I do so because I am fond of disputing? I am compelled to do it. Whoever is able to oppose Yang and Mo is a disciple of the sages” (我亦欲正人心，息邪說，距詖行，放淫辭，以承三聖者；豈好辯哉？予不得已也。能言距楊墨者，聖人之徒也)。

⁶The *Mozi* believes that the intellectual differences of “there would be one purpose when there was one man, ten purposes when there were ten men, a hundred purposes when there were a hundred men” (一人一義，十人十義，百人百義) will lead to standardlessness and a turbulent social order and thus advocated for “a unification of the standards of the world” (一同天下之義). For more on the *Mozi*’s view of squaring differences and singularizing heaven and earth, see the “尚同” chapter.

heretical views can the idea of a “unified dao” be implemented—they form a “solemn yet self-anxious” dyadic unity. In the language of the philosophy of co-becoming, the Mohist idea of “identification with the superior” (尚同) and the Confucian efforts to establish an “orthodox dao” are two self-enclosing, self-rigidizing constancies in “deep disagreement” (深度歧見) that can hardly co-exist or co-live with each other.⁷ Both sides believe that it uniquely possesses the “capital-D Dao” superior to all other dao. Unless all other schools become identical to the “one same dao” (for the Mohists) or become subordinated to the capital-D Orthodox Dao (for the Confucians), the “constant Dao” and “right names” cannot be implemented, and there would be no possibility of running the dao in heaven and earth. Hence, Mohism painstakingly developed its system of logic and sophistry, while the *Mencius* also forced itself into sophistry against “evil speech.” Theoretical and intellectual warfare became inevitable: each side wanted to affirm itself and reject the other in order to establish the unity of a dao operating all of heaven and earth.

In this context, the critique of “dao” and “name” (“words”) in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* provides an ironic picture: they label themselves as the “Daoist school” precisely because they no longer self-proclaim to possess a “constant” dao or a “constant name.” Out of humility and tenderness, they understand that they have never even come close to a unique, singular “dao of truth” or any absolute, transcendental “words of truth.” For the early Daoists, even the so-called dao qua dao (道之為道) or name qua name (名之為名) have the qualities of network-like

⁷“Deep disagreement” is a core term coined by Deng Yu-ren in his diagnosis of the dilemma of conflicts of value in present-day democratic politics. I apply it to the present explication of the intellectual conflicts among the “hundred schools” in early China, especially the conflict between Confucianism and Mohism mentioned in the *Zhuangzi*. For example, in the chapter “The Whole World,” the *Zhuangzi* remarks that every school of its time remained stuck in a state of “congratulating themselves complacently for their insight into some single aspect.” Although they each offer certain valuable views of how to regulate society, they each perceive their minds to be “complete” (成心) and make no effort to self-reflect, accept different views, or sustain an open dialogue with each other. From the perspective of the *Zhuangzi*, these schools have fallen into either the narrow-mindedness of “affirming what they deny and deny what they affirm” or theoretical conflicts (which easily turn into ideological conflicts) like that between the Confucians and the Mohists. In other words, these “scholars of partiality” (一曲之士) are so self-centered and eager to apply their perspective to everything in the world that they take their own “is” as “everything is” and their own Dao as the “constant Dao,” reducing differentiated positions and perspectives to a state of “deep disagreement,” affirming themselves and rejecting all others.

interconnectedness and provisionality in their essence. Hence, neither is it possible to possess any unique, eternal dao nor is it possible to occupy any unique, eternal name. The Daoists are called “Daoists” precisely because they remind us of the infinitely expansive openness of the “non-constant dao” (*fei chang dao*) that have “no sealed boundaries between them” and the “non-constant names” (*fei chang ming*) that have “never had any constant range.” By discussing the non-constant, the Daoists provide a realm of open-heartedness and imaginative creativity that allows for the experimentation with all kinds of courses and accepts the provisional proposal of all kinds of opinions. In other words, the “courses” and “words” in Daoism always keep a space open for divergent paths and disagreements. It is this self-emptying (自我虛位化) attitude, in which any provisional “dao” or “name” always leaves room for alternative dao and names, that enables Daoist philosophy to maximally expand the possibilities for co-becoming.

4.2 ON THE “DEITY” (帝): “AN IMAGE OF WHAT PRECEDES EVEN THE HIGHEST DEITY” AS THE DAO OF DE-SUBSTANTIALIZATION, PROVIDING A WAY OF CO-LIVING TOWARD RELIGIOUS RECONCILIATION

The dao: a gushing through, a jumbling together, an emptying out—yet harnessed for use by every random unfilled space. So deep an abyss it seems, the very source of all the ten thousand things—blunting their edges, untangling their knots, blending with their shines, merging with their dusts. So translucent, a mere semblance of a presence, something without known parentage: an image of what precedes even the highest deity. (*Laozi* Ch. 4)

In this description of the dao from Chap. 4 of the *Laozi*, the images of “gushing through” (沖), “deep abyss” (淵), and “translucence” (湛) all point to the flowing, malleable quality of water, implying that the dao can never be substantialized as an object. Interestingly, the ending description of the dao as “an image of what precedes even the highest deity” also implies the impossibility of finding an external, hypostatic entity as the originary cause of the dao. All in all, it may be said that the images of “gushing through,” “deep abyss,” and “translucence” are chosen for their fluctuating ambiguity, which helps illustrate the “pre-objectified” (前對象化) quality of the dao—it has no source, no beginning or end, and appears indeterminable between existent and non-existent. Moreover, these

images echo the *Laozi*'s general rhetorical strategy of metaphorizing the dao with water: in other parts of the text, the dao has been variously compared to lakes, oceans, and, by extension, the valley through which hundreds of rivers flow. In all cases, the key lies in the quality of water as non-substantial, changing, nourishing, apt for fusion, and simultaneously tranquil and active. These metaphors form a group on which the text repeatedly draws in its description of "dao" and "virtuosity" (德).

Why is "gushing through" ("void, emptiness, non-being") used to describe the essential characteristics of the dao?⁸ The point is that the indeterminacy of the dao should be expressed negatively. Once the "dao" is posited as some substantialized existence, it also becomes objectified as a being or specified into a particular substance, similar to the metaphysical substance in Western philosophy or the absolutely existent God in Christianity. The tradition of Western metaphysics posits that, behind all phenomena, there must exist a more fundamental "ontological existence" as an absolute entity and the first cause of these phenomena—only thus do we have a sufficient explanation for the myriad phenomena we see. However, from the perspective of the *Laozi*, both the eternal, *causa sui* Creator God in Christianity and the first-cause entity in Western metaphysics belong to a substantialized existence, which is utterly different from the "de-substantializing" character of the dao that "gushes through." The "gushing through" of the dao implies that it takes no form or shape, denies objectification, and cannot be referenced (made definite) by some fixed or true name such as "Yahweh." In the terms of the first chapter of the *Laozi*, "Yahweh" is precisely the "constant name" given to the God that operates within a "constant Dao." By contrast, in the apophatic language of the *Laozi*, the fact that the dao "gushes through the void" reveals its non-existence (無) dimension and the impossibility to objectify it into any entity. Given the "gushing," "non-existent," and "empty" characteristics of the dao, whenever people attempt to understand it by understanding individual entities, especially when they employ objectifying language to reference it with self-enclosed, constant names, the result will inevitably

⁸ Zhu Qianzhi: "The character for 'gushing through' (*chong* 冲) appears in Fuyi (傅奕, 555–639)'s version of the text as 'poison' (*gu* 蠱)—where *gu* is the ancient equivalent of *chong*. According to the *Shuowen Jiezi*, '*gu* stands for the emptiness of the equipment' (氣虛). According to the *Laozi*, 'the Dao is *gu* harnessed for use.' Hence, the emptiness in the equipment is called *gu*, and as such, it is capable of containing myriad things. Hence, the *Zhuangzi* talks about the 'vast *gu* in which no one thing wins out' in the chapter 'Sovereign Responses for Ruling Powers' (應帝王)."

be the objectification, fixation of the dao, which loses its indeterminacy and characteristics as “gushing through,” non-existent, and empty. Furthermore, since the dao is described as a “deep abyss,” it is mysterious, unfathomable, and inexhaustible, its ceaseless power of generativity overflowing the world like a deep spring and infinitely nourishing myriad living and non-living beings. Accordingly, the *Laozi* describes the dao as “the very source of all the ten thousand things.” However, the idea of the dao as the “source” (宗) should not be understood in the way of Western metaphysics as a preexistent, substantialized “origin” behind all phenomenal existence. The metaphor of an “abyss” and a “source,” like water “gushing through,” only makes sense in the context of the function (用) of the dao. Whereas the latter tends to describe the non-overflowing of its function, the former tends to emphasize its inexhaustibility. In either case, neither the “dao that gushes through” nor the “abysmal dao” can be understood as some original metaphysical entity outside of its all-pervasive functioning in the world. Otherwise, such an idea would be incoherent with the end of Chap. 4, which describes the dao as “something without known parentage: an image of what precedes even the highest deity.”

In this line, the “unknowable parentage” of the dao implies, on the one hand, the human acknowledgment of their own “non-knowing” and, on the other hand, the futility of forcibly locating its source. Beyond the all-pervasive function of the dao that is gushing through, abysmal, and translucent, it is impossible to identify a parental source of which the all-pervasive function of the dao is only the produced, created effect. Furthermore, not only do humans not know the “parentage” of the dao; it is also “an image of what precedes even the highest deity.” The latter reminds us that the changing, fluctuating activity of the dao exceeds any model of explanation based on religious constructions such as the hypostatic God or a polytheistic world. The latter are often imaged as divine entities external to and preceding the world, who then serve the role of the foundational source of all transformations of the universe. For example, various religious or mythological traditions have attempted to explain the origin of the world through creation stories in their earliest stages of development. By contrast, when the *Laozi* describes the “gushing through” of the “abysmal” dao as “without parentage” and “an image of what precedes even the highest deity,” it is, in a quite ironic manner, making a turn of “de-substantialization” and “anti-foundationalism” to people’s tendency of objectifying, hypostasizing, or substantializing the dao. Religious systems are often skilled at substantializing, personifying, specifying, and

focalizing some intangible force into some object of worship, which capitalizes on human beings' desires and imaginative capacities. However, the "healing" power of religious deification is often copresent with the power of intoxication, which is the risk of degenerating the unsealed, non-constant function of dao and name into some sealed, constant, hypostasized deity or substantial being. In the language of the *Laozi*, rendering constant the Dao and name of "the image of what precedes the highest deity" leads to dogmatism and closed-mindedness, where different "images of what precedes the highest deity" come into conflict with one another.

Conflict and warfare have never ceased since the dawn of human civilization. Human history is cursed with everlasting violence, in which brutality and civilization have remained inseparable to the extent that this so-called civilization is, in fact, not so civilized by any standard. Meanwhile, humanity has acquired the "safeguard" of gods and religions since its dawn—religion offers consolation for the agonizing sufferers, while the gods are believed to be their merciful protectors. Yet, needless to say, neither religion nor the gods have relinquished human conflicts. In fact, strangely, they are often precisely the cause of these conflicts—from ancient tribal conflicts to the present-day war between Christianity and Islam, we are repeatedly reminded that God, or the gods, is more often a propelling rather than terminating factor of war. In a sense, every god dedicates all of its power and resources to winning the "votes" of its community as it competes with and denounces all other gods and religions—such is the violent history of human religions. This "sacred violence" in the name of love or divinity has been and, perhaps, will continue to be a universal phenomenon of religions.⁹

From the perspectives of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, all conflicts of human civilization—between religions, ideologies, -isms, and between the religious and the secular—can be described and deconstructed by the "dao." In short, these conflicts can be described as that between different "constant Dao" (*chang dao*): between the courses of Christianity and

⁹ It is thus unsurprising that, in his insightful yet highly controversial analysis of post-Cold War global conflicts in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington turns his focus from ideology to conflicts between major religions and regional powers, such as those between Christianity of the West, Islam of the Middle East, and Confucianism of China. Huntington's views have sparked significant controversies since their publication, but looking back at his analysis from the point of view of the international political circumstances today, it must be acknowledged that the clash and competition between religions have been playing an increasingly essential role.

Islam, between the courses of Confucianism and Mohism, between the courses of the Republicans and the Democrats. When these different, identifying courses are “upgraded” into constant, unique, “capital-D Dao,” the differentiated views of various provisional courses and names will escalate into a deep disagreement between courses and names each proclaiming itself as universal. As such, we have a “clash of civilizations” that may at any time escalate into a holy war between the “good” and the “evil,” the “orthodox” and the “heretical,” the “right” and the “wrong,” or the “holy” and the “demonic.” To be precise, there is no “in-between” in a war in which both sides cling to a singular and exclusive dao: only when that singularity has been established conclusively will the war come to an end, grounded as it is in a logic of the non-co-existence of differing viewpoints. Wars are launched in the name of a “battle for righteousness.” Many of the great tragedies in the history of human civilization began as conflicts over secular, material interests but ended up as wars over the cause of “truth” or “morality,” each side emphasizing its own sacredness and denouncing the evilness of its opponents.

Any human conflict or violence must directly or indirectly involve a conflict between “capital-D Dao.” The capitalized “Dao” implies uniqueness, and a conflict between such Dao is essentially a battle for complete authority over what the “right Dao” is.¹⁰ When a capital-D Dao is set against another capital-D Dao—a constant Dao against a constant Dao, a right Dao against a right Dao, a truth against a truth, an image of the deity against an image of the deity, the “good” against the “good” (insofar as each side has its own provisional values and merits)—a devastating holy war becomes nearly inevitable. A conflict between the “good” and the “good” is turned into one between the “good” and the “bad,” and finally one between the “bad” and the “bad.” In other words, when the co-existence, co-living, and co-becoming of two civilizations become impossible, the necessary (and only) path forward is the extermination of one side through war in order to achieve an ultimate solution.

Thus, rather than the idea of a substantialized “image of the highest deity” found in various religious traditions, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*

¹⁰ Adopting the language of Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics,” the idea of a capital-B “Being” is plagued by the “violence of the light” and “violence of otherness” of its metaphysical reductionism. For Derrida, the overall structure of Western metaphysics has been determined by three key conceptual frameworks: the dominance of sameness, metaphysical reductionism, and the reduction of ethics to a secondary status. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1978).

prefer the idea of a de-substantialized “image of what *precedes* the highest deity.” It is often difficult for theological frameworks to avoid the metaphysical substance of a capitalized “Being” or “Dao,” that is, the positing of a realm of divine transcendence, which vertically elevates itself to a height of absoluteness (e.g., Heaven, God, the “other shore” that lies in an other-worldly dimension) that becomes the essential object of identification and attachment among the individuals of a given community. Such a “height of absoluteness,” in turn, offers these individuals a higher perspective from which all other religions, creeds, and societies are looked down upon. The capitalized ontological “Dao” or “Image of Deity” will remain permanently transcendental with respect to all lowercase phenomena or sentient beings. This is a typical metaphysical structure in which the one commands the many—unless the lowercase beings humbly follow and obtain the mercy of the capital-D Dao, their courses will never be protected or satisfied. This is precisely why almost all religions establish a boundary line between the “orthodox” and the “heretic” and between the “internal” and the “external.” What lies within the boundary are the “constant” Dao, the “right” Dao, and the protected citizens of my blessed community, whereas what lie without are “external” dao, “demonic” dao, and non-believers doomed for the severest retribution.

This extreme antagonism between the “right dao” and the “wrong dao” is certainly not limited to the sphere of religions. In fact, the escalation of normative differences between the views of lowercase “dao” into holy wars between the right and the wrong or truth and falsehood among “constant Dao” and “constant Names” is entrenched in every historical situation of the so-called human civilization and even our daily lives. Even in the small dao of the everyday life, we often observe circumstances in which people fight over the most trivial issues and end up with horrendous consequences. Chap. 4 of the *Laozi* reminds us that most common people are trapped by the habit of objectifying and substantializing everything they encounter; they lack the “softness” to de-objectify and de-substantialize things at hand. They treat the dao as an image of some specific deity rather than that which precedes the deity. If human beings maintain an openness of “not-yet-knowing” (未知) and even “non-knowing” (無知) with respect to the indeterminacy of the “gushing through” of the dao, they will likely not treat the “mind” of their own tribe or religion as “complete” and take its unilateral perspective as the universally constant Dao or Name that must be fiercely and uncompromisingly defended even at the cost of a holy war. The tenderness lying beneath

the “image of what precedes the highest deity” opens up the room for mutual agreement and neutralizes the unyielding, segregating character of the “image of deity” itself, thus alleviating the clash among civilizations and religions and establishing a platform that sustains and mediates their tender co-living.

4.3 ON THE “ONE” (一): CO-LIVING AND CO-BECOMING WITHIN A CORRELATIVE COSMOLOGY

“Those who achieved unity long ago: heaven achieved unity and is thereby clear, earth achieved unity and is thereby tranquil, the spirits achieved unity and are thereby numinous”—just as the valley achieves unity and is thereby filled. Indeed, it is through achieving such unity that all things are born and live.

But when lords and kings achieve unification, they take it as a demand for the whole world’s unwavering fealty.

If such were brought to bear in every case, heaven, robbed of what brings its clarity, would ever be in danger of splitting; earth, robbed of what brings its tranquility, would ever be in danger of collapsing; the spirits, robbed of what makes them numinous, would ever be in danger of destruction; the valley, robbed of what allows it to fill, would ever be in danger of running dry; all the ten thousand things, robbed of what gives them life, would ever be in danger of extinction; and the lords and kings themselves, robbed of what alone makes them exalted, would ever be in danger of downfall. (*Laozi* Chap. 39)

Unity, or more literally the “One” or “oneness” (一), which in fact is a term which expresses a unity of differences, differences which create an intricate web of relation with one another, is another term central to the philosophy of the Laozi that shares a similar status and conceptual similarity with the “dao” and often provides supplementary explanations for it. For example, Chap. 42 says, “The dao generates continuities. Continuities generate polarities. Polarities generate triplicities. Triplicities generate the ten thousand things.”¹¹ All the ten thousand things bear the darkness of

¹¹ The line from can be more literally translated as follows: “the Dao generates the One, the One generates the Two, the Two generates the Three, and the Three generates the ten thousand things” (道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物). However, it should be immedi-

shadow on their backs as they hug the brightness of sunlight to their breasts—and in the intermingling of these two energies all their harmonies are formed.” The intimate continuity between “unity” and “dao” is revealed in the dynamically fluid great functioning of the dao, during which it “intermingles the two energies” and forms “all harmonies” from the poles of darkness and brightness. Similarly, in the chapter “The Whole World,” the *Zhuangzi* describes the core of Laozian thought as follows: “[Laozi and Guan Yin] founded their way on the constancy of Nonbeing, and centered it in the supreme Oneness. Externally, they had the appearance of pliant weakness and self-deprecating humility. Internally, it was the empty void that leaves all things unharmed that was their firmest reality.” In other words, the chapter considers “supreme Oneness” the “center” of Laozi’s thought. The question is, how should this “Oneness”—unity—be understood? What is its connection to the philosophy of co-becoming? I will attempt to answer them through a commentary on the idea of “achieving unity” (得一) in Chap. 39 of the *Laozi*.

By “achieving unity,” it may be said that we have thereby “achieved the dao” (得道), that is, participated in the sharing of the dao. As emphasized earlier, the “dao” of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* does not depart from things—the imbrication with things and the transformation of things—such that each and every transformation of Heaven, earth, human beings, deities, and material things are all immersed in the all-pervasive functioning of the dao. As such, the so-called achievement of unity or the dao can be more properly understood as the opening of oneself to this omnipresent functioning of the dao. As Chap. 34 of the *Laozi* says, “The vast dao, how it overflows all banks, drifting in all directions, to the left, to the right! All things depend on it for birth, none declining it and none declined. [...] It clothes and feeds the ten thousand things, yet never plays their lord and master.”

In particular, “oneness” symbolized holistic unity and continuity: the separate (individual) cannot depart from the non-separate (holistic) interconnected network of relations. As the chapter “Equalizing Assessment of Things” of the *Zhuangzi* says, “Any single indication is of all heaven and earth. Any single horse is all the ten thousand things” (天地一指也萬物一馬也); “Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one” (天地與我並生而萬物與我為一). The “I,” the

ately obvious from this section that Ziporyn’s decision to translate “one” as “continuity” is quite in line with the meaning of this passage (note from the translator).

“single indication” (一指), and the “single horse” (一馬) that each appears as individual and uniquely differentiated are, in fact, completely intermingled with the ten thousand things of Heaven and earth. “I” am not external to the ten thousand things; it is only by living “in between” the ten thousand things of Heaven and earth and “being born together” with them as one—that is, co-becoming and co-living with them in the infinite web of relations in which everything is intertwined with, caused by, and born out of every other thing—that “I” am able to possess the specific experiences, characteristics, and states of being that testify to and vivify my existence in this world. Conversely, this interconnected network of relations among the ten thousand things shows itself subtly, concretely, yet universally in every “single indication” and every “single horse.” On the one hand, “unity” symbolizes the system of interconnectedness and interchangeability among the ten thousand things; on the other hand, it is an expression of the plethoric blossom of the ten thousand things, each qualitatively unique from and non-identical to all other things. In other words, unity—oneness—also portrays an image of diversity, co-existence, and co-living of the ten thousand things.

Meanwhile, the first line of Chap. 39 tells us that there is no “heaven” singled out, isolated from “earth,” no “spirits” isolated from “valleys,” and no “lords and kings” separated from “the whole world” (and vice versa for each case). For each and every existential state or configuration—heaven, earth, spirits, valleys, a human being, the ten thousand things—it is only when they co-exist and co-live within this infinitely expansive and all-inclusive web of “oneness” and participate in the intimate, mutual sharing of their *dao* (the so-called achievement of unity/the *dao*) that their existence is fulfilled by an energetic dynamism and a plethora of meanings. Conversely, when things become self-enclosed and isolated from their circumstances, such an alienation from the interconnected network of relations (the “loss of unity/oneness”) will make them wither and become exhausted like water cut off from its source. In this case, the “clarity of heaven” falls into the “danger of splitting,” the “tranquility of earth” falls into the “danger of collapsing,” the “numinosity of the spirit” falls into the “danger of destruction,” the “fulfillment of the valley” falls into the “danger of running dry,” the ten thousand things fall into the danger of “extinction,” and the lords and kings fall into the danger of “downfall.” The continued livelihood of any being—heaven, earth, humans, spirits—is thwarted when they become alienated from the unity of the interconnected network of co-living and co-becoming of the ten thousand things.

Metaphorically speaking, it is as if the myriad differentiated beings of the universe are dispersed among myriad islands in the ocean. These islands are able to sustain a plenitude of life precisely because they are all connected as one to the bottom of the ocean. Once an island becomes rootless, isolated from the ocean, the vibrant ecology of life it supports will soon meet the fate of collapse, destruction, and extinction. As Chap. 36 says, “[T]he fishes must not leave their depths”; the “unity” (“oneness”) in Chap. 39 is closely connected to such terms as “depth” (淵) in Chap. 36, “mother” in Chap. 20, and “water” in Chap. 8, which form a conceptual group with the similar metaphorical content of the interconnected transformations and cyclical quality of the relationally defined universe. No single existence may depart from the unity of this interconnected network, because it is only the interchangeability and incessant transformation between the ten thousand things that allows for their co-living. Roger Ames has provided an excellent account of this picture of what he calls a “correlative cosmology,” as well as the rich potential for co-living and co-becoming it implies:

Instead of invoking the language of initial beginnings and some independent efficient cause, this document and the Daodejing broadly, with their pervasive mothering and birthing metaphors, describe fetal beginnings in an ongoing cycle of autogenerative reproduction.

The Daoist correlative cosmology begins from the assumption that the endless stream of always novel yet still continuous situations we encounter are real, and hence, that there is ontological parity among the things and events that constitute our lives. A second assumption of Daoist “cosmology” (now using this term “cosmology” under advisement) that follows from this acknowledgment of the reality of both change and the uniqueness that follows from it is that particular “things” are in fact processual events, and are thus intrinsically related to the other “things” that provide them context. A third assumption in the Daoist “cosmology” is that life broadly construed is entertained through and only through these same phenomena that constitute our experience. The field of experience is always construed from one perspective or another. There is no view from nowhere, no external perspective, no decontextualized vantage point. We are all in the soup. The intrinsic, constitutive relations that obtain among things make them reflexive and mutually implicating, residing together within the flux and flow. A fourth presupposition of Daoist cosmology is that we are not passive participants in

our experience. The energy of transformation lies within the world itself as an integral characteristic of the events that constitute it.¹²

In this sense, the idea of “achieving unity” also echoes “embracing unity” (抱一) from Chap. 22: “This is how a sage embraces unity, a micro-cosmic model for all the world.” In other words, the sage is responsive to the world and the ten thousand things because he tenderly embraces the all-encompassing correlative cosmos as it undergoes incessant transformations. This is the most profound embodiment of “being born together with heaven and earth” and “being one with the ten thousand things,” which maximally opens oneself to everything and makes one capable of responding to the reciprocal effect between all things and their organic interconnectedness. Every existence is an organic existence within the all-encompassing interconnected network of relations; in the long run, nothing can remain self-centered and self-isolated. Any attempt to self-aggrandize, self-expand, and self-strengthen will always meet the consequence of collapse, destruction, and extinction. By “achieving” and “embracing” unity, the sage reminds us not to attempt to command and control all relations; instead, we must soften ourselves and enrich those we encounter in our relations as we participate in the reciprocal transformation of things. This self-softening mode of response is not merely passivity; it is an “active responsiveness” toward co-becoming.

4.4 ON “THE DAO OF HEAVEN” (天之道): AN “INFINITE GAME” IS ONLY POSSIBLE WHEN THE “TWO ROADS” OF LACK AND EXCESS ARE HARMONIOUSLY BALANCED AND WALKED TOGETHER

The dao of heaven, is it not like the stretching of a bow? The high is brought low, the low is raised up. Reducing what is too much, increasing what is too little.

¹²The “one” in this context is not the metaphysical source of all things but rather a description of the process of correlative transformation of the ten thousand things “born together as one.” Ames’ reading of the “Dao” and the “one” in the *Laozi* involves a strong critique of the Western metaphysical tradition. See Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, “Philosophical Introduction: Correlative Cosmology—An Interpretive Context,” in *Daodejing—“Making This Life Significant”: A Philosophical Translation* (The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003). The quotation is revised according to the Chinese translation of this text.

The dao of heaven is to take away where there is excess and add where there is lack. The dao of man is just the contrary, taking from those who have too little and giving it to those who have too much.

But who has the ability to take what is more than enough and give it as an offering to all the world? Only those faring the dao. (*Laozi* Chap. 77)

The “dao of heaven” sustains itself by the principle of continually tending toward a state of equilibrium. By an analogy of the balance of power in the stretching of a bow, the text illustrates that the operation of the “dao of heaven” consists of maintaining a balance between “adding and taking away” and between “lack and excess.” The bow should neither be stretched too tight (in which case it veers into the end of having “too much”) nor be kept too relaxed (in which case it veers into the end of having “too little”); at its best, the act of stretching involves adjusting its power around some “constantly adjusting, dynamically mediating center” that “takes away where there is excess and adds where there is lack.” The “constantly adjusting, dynamically mediating center” (中和) is a “between-ness” that empowers subtle transformations and dynamic adjustments between myriad heterogeneous forces. It is a center of “appropriateness” (適中) between the high and the low, the tense and the loose, the lack and the excess—that is, an approximate average of these polar ends that maintains a state of relative harmony. The activity of “adjusting” things according to their “appropriate” adjusting harmony keeps them from dramatically oscillating between the polar opposites of “too much” and “too little,” which often causes the loss of harmony and balance. Furthermore, it facilitates the reciprocal adjustment and harmonious mutual transformation between a vast array of non-identical forces, where each force maintains a delicately balanced position that enables it to—as the *Zhuangzi* calls it—“walk two roads” (兩行) of tension and looseness, highness and lowness simultaneously. Again, in the *Laozi*’s bow analogy, it is the reciprocal complementarity between the “two roads” that the “dao of heaven” traverses at the same time that sustains its uninterrupted operation.

However, in contrast to the “dao of heaven” that always so smoothly and naturally operates around its adjusting, appropriating harmony, “taking away where there is excess and adding where there is lack,” the *Laozi* reminds us that the “dao of man is just the contrary, taking from those who have too little and giving it to those who have too much.” In other words, because of their habits of self-righteousness, self-satisfaction,

self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification, the “dao of heaven” that is appropriately balanced and centered around the adjusting, appropriating harmony is, in the case of man, extremized into a situation in which those in excess tend to further excess and those in lack tend to further lack. According to the principle of “stretching the bow,” the deviation of the dao of man from the dao of heaven will necessarily sabotage what had originally been a properly functioning system of forces in the world, causing it to shut down and become practically dysfunctional. The “dao of man” that “takes from those who have too little and gives to those who have too much” cannot sustain itself in the long run. Like stretching a bow, the excessive addition of forces to one extreme will only accelerate the wreckage of the entire bow.

To further explain the difference between “taking away where there is excess and adding where there is lack” and “taking away where there is lack and adding where there is excess,” we may compare the concepts of the finite game (or monopolistic competition) and the infinite game (or perfect competition).¹³ A “finite game” can refer to a phenomenon where a particular species or entity overextends itself and becomes excessively dominant, ultimately disrupting the interactive balance of the biological chain and its symbiotic relationships. For example, the temporary sole victory of a single species (a *monopolistic winner*, akin to a lone oligarchic tycoon) can quickly lead to the collapse of the ecosystem’s chain, resulting in a vicious cycle that, in turn, harms the very symbiotic network upon which its own survival depends. The point the *Laozi* tries to make is that the dao of heaven, on the other hand, belongs to the network of infinite games—a vast web of symbiotic relationships. The reason the ten thousand things can sustain a flourishing, diverse ecosystem in which multiple beings co-exist freely as *multiple winners* of the game is that the system itself naturally “takes away where there is excess and adds where there is lack.” When some single species attempts to self-expand and monopolize the system by doing the opposite, if it exceeds a certain threshold, the infinite game in which multiple winners harmoniously co-live under the same ecosystem will degenerate into a finite game. It is the infinite game that the *Laozi* tries to describe with the “dao of heaven”—an infinitely sustainable and encompassing network of the ten thousand things.

¹³James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (New York: The Free Press, 2011).

In light of the previous discussion of the concept of “unity,” what the “dao of heaven” presents to us is, in fact, the unity of the interconnected network of relations in which “heaven and earth are born together” and “all things and ‘I’ are one.” The ten thousand things and “I” co-exist and co-live within the same vast, intricate network that is called “heaven and earth.” The “unity,” in turn, means the unity of all lives, where the liveliness of every being is intricately connected to that of every other being. As the *Zhuangzi* says, “[J]ust open yourself into the single energy that is the world” (通天下一氣耳). In other words, the relationship between “men” and “objects” is not only external; the internality of men is a priori already interconnected with these so-called objects. The Daoist philosophers have no intention of singling out human beings from the ten thousand things or, even worse, carving out some “dao of man” distinct and alienated from the “dao of heaven,” in which case the former necessarily becomes a source of harm to the ten thousand things. This is why, in “Equalizing Assessments of Things,” the *Zhuangzi* painstakingly reminds us that we must avoid forcing what we consider as “right” to all other ten thousand things on the basis of the unilateral perspective of our own “dao of man” in order to avoid the harm of being “hopelessly tangled and confused” in the trails of right and wrong:

Gnawgap asked Baby Sovereign “Do you know what all things agree in considering right?”

Baby Sovereign said, “How could I know that?”

Gnawgap said, “Do you know that you don’t know?”

Baby Sovereign said, “How could I know that?”

Gnawgap said, “Then are all things devoid of knowledge?”

Baby Sovereign said, “How could I know that? Still, let me try to say something about this. How could I know that what I call ‘knowing’ is not really ‘not-knowing’? How could I know that what I call ‘not-knowing’ is not really ‘knowing’? Now let me try asking you something. When humans sleep in a damp place, they wake up deathly ill and sore about the waist—but what about eels? If humans live in trees, they tremble with fear and worry—but how about monkeys? Of these three, which ‘knows’ what is the right place to live? Humans eat the flesh of their livestock, deer eat grass, snakes eat centipedes, hawks and eagles eat mice. Of these four, which ‘knows’ the right thing to eat? Monkeys take she—monkeys for mates, elks mount deer, male fish frolic with female fish, while humans regard Mao Qiang and Lady Li as great beauties—but when fish see them they dart into the depths, when birds see them they soar into the skies, when deer see them they bolt away

without looking back. Which of these four ‘knows’ what is rightly alluring? From where I see it, all the sproutings of humankindness and responsible conduct and all the trails of right and wrong are hopelessly tangled and confused. How could I know how to distinguish and demonstrate any conclusions about them?”

“Humans, eels, and monkeys”; “humans, deers, snakes, hawks, and eagles”; “humans, monkeys, elks, fish”—the ten thousand beings are born into heaven and earth together, so what right do humans have for privileging their own perspective as the standard for measuring all things and forcing this self-centered, supposedly unique “right standard” on the diversity of the ten thousand beings in heaven and earth? What the *Zhuangzi* criticizes is precisely this self-centrism and arbitrariness in the dao of man, which becomes the source of suffering for all things. When the human race becomes unaware of everything except its own desire for power and self-expansion and forgets its fundamentally equal, reciprocal relationship with all other things and species—that they are all born as one—it will eventually become like the “wildcats and weasels” in the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: “They crouch low to await any stragglings prey, then pounce east or west in an elegantly arcing leap, high or low without hesitation. But this is exactly what lands them in a trap, and they end up dying in the net.” When human beings reduce the purpose of all other lives and species to “potential resources” at hand for their exploitation and prey on all the ten thousand things in the world without satisfaction, this means human beings have themselves fallen into the trap of alienation of the dao of man. From the view of the *Zhuangzi*, the “dao of man” must embody the “dao of heaven” in which all things (including humans) co-exist, co-live, and are treated as equals. We must avoid becoming the source of harm to the world in which we participate.

4.5 ON “THE DAO OF MAN” (人之道): SELF-TOUGHENING AND INSATIABILITY AS THE “DESTROYER” OF CO-LIVING

Before further elaborating the meaning of the “dao of man,” it may be helpful to provide a brief summary of the Daoist position on the heaven-man relationship. An essential pair of concepts in the philosophies of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, “heaven” and “man” are often put in contrast with each other. The distinction between the “dao of heaven” and the

“dao of man” is frequently discussed in these texts, a prime example of which is the Chap. 77 excerpt from the previous section. Likewise, the *Zhuangzi* makes the contradistinction between the “minuteness” of man and the “vastness” of heaven: “Minute and insignificant, he is just another man among the others. Vast and unmatched, he is alone in perfecting the Heavenly that is his” (*Zhuangzi* Chap. 5); “he who is a petty man to Heaven is to humans a noble man, while he who is a noble man to Heaven is to humans a petty man” (*Zhuangzi* Chap. 6). Despite such distinctions between the dao of heaven and man that appear to strongly prefer the former, the ultimate goal of these Daoist texts is not the complete cancellation of human agency (or humanistic creativity) but rather having the dao of man embody, emulate, participate in, and unite itself with the dao of heaven. As Chap. 25 of the *Laozi* says, “Just so is the dao so vast, the sky so vast, the earth so vast—and the sovereignty of a ruler so vast as well. In all the realm there are these four kinds of vastness. The sovereignty of a ruler is but one of them. For humans conform to the earth, the earth conforms to the sky, and the sky conforms to the dao; but the dao conforms to how everything is when left to itself—conforming to nothing at all” (人法地地法天天法道道法自然). The “vastness of humans (the ruler)” comes not from their distinguished status from the rest of the world but rather from their participation, care, and emulation of the dao of heaven and earth. Only by reorienting themselves in the vastness of heaven and earth can human beings simultaneously “know heaven” and “know themselves” during their destined participation in heaven-man interactions. As the *Zhuangzi* chapter “The Great Source as Teacher” begins, “To understand what is done by Heaven, and also to understand what is to be done by the human, that is to reach the utmost.”

The question is, why has the dao of human deviated from the dao of heaven in the first place—to the extent that it significantly sabotages the latter’s system of co-existence? Most importantly, the question involves the *Laozi*’s diagnosis of human nature. According to the text, the dao of man cannot embody the dao of heaven because it is in the nature of men to think of and make sense of things exclusively in relation to themselves. This anthropocentrism and self-centrism of self-display, self-justification, self-congratulation, and self-aggrandization cloud the heavenly dao of co-living and turn men into machines for the self-propagation of desires and a source of great harm to the world. Consider Chaps. 22 and 24 of the text:

This is how a sage embraces unity, a microcosmic model for all the world: By not displaying himself he shines. By not justifying himself he emerges preeminent. By not congratulating himself he achieves glory. By not aggrandizing himself he grows greatly. (Chap. 22)

“Up on tiptoes one cannot stand. Overstepping one cannot walk.”

Those who are self-righteous have no luminosity; those who are self-satisfied cannot burst forth radiantly; those who self-aggrandize gain no accomplishments; those who self-glorify cannot grow.

Voyagers on the dao call such things as these spoiled leftovers or tumorous growths—things that inspire disgust. That is why those with the dao before them never stay where they are. (Chap. 24)

In other words, in the *Laozi*, human self-centrism is most essentially summarized by four behaviors: self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification. Furthermore, these behaviors often reinforce themselves in a way similar to the unidirectional habits of self-toughening and self-expansion discussed in Chap. 36.¹⁴ The two excerpts above from Chaps. 22 and 24 offer similar messages expressed in opposite ways. In particular, Chap. 24 satirizes human self-centrism through metaphors such as a man who struggles to “stand up on his tiptoes” or struggles to “walk by overstepping.” The actions are comical in both cases because they are excessive, unnatural, and disconnected from how things work in reality. A similar case can be made for human self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification—they are clumsily excessive and ineffectual (and thus “inspire disgust”), just like “spoiled leftover” food or “tumors” on the body.¹⁵ As the text continues to say, “those with the dao before them” establish

¹⁴ *Laozi*, Chap. 36: “To be shrunk something must first be fully expanded. To be weakened it must first be fully strengthened. To be cast down it must first be fully raised up. To be taken it must first be fully given. This is called the illumination of the barely visible: the soft and yielding overcome the firm and strong. Just as the fishes must not leave their depths, the sharp weapons of a nation must never be displayed.”

¹⁵ Lin Xiyi (林希逸): “What the *Laozi* calls ‘spoiled leftovers or tumorous growths’ are extraneous things (長物). Those who possess the Dao do not leave traces; those who leave traces are extraneous. What the *Laozi* calls ‘spoiled’ and ‘tumorous’ are the same as what is referred by ‘webbed toes’ (駢拇) in the *Zhuangzi*. To eat what has been leftover or develop a tumor—anyone would be disgusted by them. This is why the *Laozi* says that ‘those with

themselves and engage with the world without such excessive behaviors of self-exaggeration and self-aggrandization.

Whereas Chap. 24 adopts a critical angle and admonishes that these four behaviors result in—against their intentions—the incapacity to be luminous, radiant, accomplished, and dynamic, Chap. 22 focuses on the cultivation of the inversion of these four behaviors into “non-self-righteousness, non-self-satisfaction, non-self-aggrandizement, and non-self-glorification.” Doing so opens up the possibility for the reciprocal achievement of the luminosity, pre-eminence, accomplishment, and growth of every human being. In other words, Chap. 22 highlights the positive openness that results when the four behaviors from Chap. 24 that lead to negative closure are inverted. Meanwhile, through a self-reflective lens, Chap. 24 admonishes us that self-centered views, evaluations of others, cognitions, and actions lead us to a unilateral self-expansion that makes us no longer capable of responding to the multitude of diversity and differences among other beings. In this situation, the reciprocal illumination, revealing, facilitation, and nourishment from Chap. 22 become impossible.

The *Zhuangzi* chapter “The Whole World” once quite accurately summarized the personality and self-image of Hui Shi as “thinking of himself as the most valuable in the world.”¹⁶ Hui Shi’s desire of “earning fame by defeating others” is satirized in the chapter “Autumn Waters,” which portrays the character of a “River God” who became excessively self-confident after a sudden high tide: “The time of autumn waters had come, and all the streams were pouring into the Yellow River. The expanse of its unobstructed flow was so great that a horse on the other bank could not be distinguished from a cow. The River God was overjoyed, delighting in his own powers, believing all the world’s beauty now to be encompassed

the Dao before them never stays where they are’—they do not collect or accumulate their own traces” 《道德真經口義》(《道藏》Vol. 12, No. 2).

¹⁶ *Zhuangzi*, “The Whole World”: “Covering over what is in men’s hearts with their embellishments, altering their ideas, able to defeat their mouths but not to convince their hearts—this is the trap in which all such debaters get stuck. Hui Shi day after day used his cleverness²⁴ to debate with others, accomplishing nothing more than the creation of a spectacle along with the other debaters. This is all it amounted to. But Hui Shi thought his eloquence was the most valuable thing in the world. [...] Since it was really all about opposing the views of others in order to earn fame for defeating them, he was unable to get along with the mass of men. [...] A pity! Hui Shi’s talents were fruitlessly dissipated running after things and never returning to himself. He was like a man trying to silence an echo with shouts, a man trying to outrun his own shadow. How sad!”

within himself.” This self-elevating image of Hui Shi and the “River God” (who stand in as images of human beings in general) is like a mudflow that wildly crushes over the valleys and river banks, ignoring the co-existence of lives and beings on its sides and bringing destructive damage to wherever it lands. The “River God” who thinks he has “all the beauty encompassed within himself” and ignores the network of co-existence in which he stands would end up destroying everything to the extent that “a horse could not be distinguished from a cow.” In a similar fashion, anthropocentrism easily causes humans to extend their power and desire without end, turning them into nothing but harm for all other ten thousand things.

4.6 ON “SUBTRACTION” (損): SUBTRACTING KNOWLEDGE AND THE “SELF” FROM OURSELVES OPENS UP THE ROOM FOR CO-LIVING AND CO-BECOMING WITH OTHERS

All discussions of the “dao” in the *Laozi* use a nominalized language in order to illustrate the naturally “self-so” (自然而然) and self-generative quality of the dao amidst its non-doing (無為) and yielding to the ten thousand things. Furthermore, besides the empty, subtractive, yielding quality of the dao itself, the character of the “genuine human” (真人) that possesses the dao is also described by a nominalized language. As discussed earlier, the *Laozi*’s critical reflection on the four behaviors of self-display, self-justification, self-congratulation, and self-aggrandization, as well as its inverse foil in Chap. 22, provides a foundation for the agentic cultivation of co-living and co-becoming, during which self-toughening becomes self-softening in the way the text describes it in Chap. 43: “The softest things in the world run roughshod over the firmest things in the world.” The inversion of the “four self-centered behaviors” in Chap. 22 may remind us of the earlier quoted story from “Equalizing Assessments of Things,” where Baby Sovereign keeps answering Gnawgap in the same way, “How could I know that!” (吾惡乎知之!). Baby Sovereign’s repeated acknowledgment of his own non-knowing is an indirect echo to the four actions of “non self-righteousness, non self-satisfaction, non self-aggrandizement, and non self-glorification,” reminding us the importance of honestly acknowledging our ignorance and letting go of our anthropocentrism and self-centrism. Only through the tender disentanglement of our one-sided perspective of what is right and wrong can we liberate

ourselves from value-driven conflicts and deep disagreements, accept the diversity of views and opinions, and appreciate the infinitely many ways by which different things exist. The *Laozi* discusses this cultivation of self-subtraction, acknowledgment of non-knowing, and attitude of tolerance by describing the dao that “subtracts daily” and melds the firm by the soft. The following passage is an example of the former:

“The work of learning is daily addition.” But the work of the dao is daily subtraction, subtracting and further subtracting until nondoing is reached—a nondoing that leaves nothing undone.

It is the constancy of having no task to do that allows one to gain the world. Wherever there is anything to do, no amount of doing is ever sufficient to gain the world. (*Laozi* Chap. 48)

The “work of learning,” as “daily addition,” is essentially the self-centered accumulation of positive doings. The *Laozi*’s critique of “works of learning” concerns not so much the expansion of knowledge and experience but rather its self-centering tendency toward self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification. The self-toughening agent, who considers himself to be in possession of knowledge, is especially prone to the habit of affirming himself and denying all others, turning normative differences in points of view into a dangerous, malicious competition. It is for this reason that the *Laozi* is especially aggressive in its critique of self-aggrandization. What the *Laozi* rejects is not simply knowledge but rather the habit of “daily addition” behind learning. Furthermore, similar to the rhetoric in Chap. 24, the cultivation of the “work of the dao” asks us to subtract and eliminate the extraneous “leftover” of such self-centrism. The work of the dao does not involve the direct rejection of knowledge; rather, the emphasis is on the “daily subtraction” of our self-conceit—we must “subtract and further subtract” until there is no excessive attention to the self.

As such, the key to turning from the “work of learning” to the “work of the dao” lies in transitioning from the habit of “daily addition” to “daily subtraction.” As discussed earlier, the *Laozi* describes the dao as “the birthing and rearing of things that never possesses what it produces, never expecting anything from its deeds” (Ch. 10). In the words of Wang Bi (王弼, 226–249), the dao simply yields itself to the vast space of generation and growth of the ten thousand things “without inhibiting their nature or

obstructing their source.” The dao of “non-doing” (無為) that neither dominates nor commands provides the maximal opportunity of livelihood for the ten thousand things by allowing them to “happen of their own accord” (Chap. 51). Such is the wondrous mystery of how, according to Chap. 48, the “non-doing” dao “leaves nothing undone” (無不為). The dao yields to the world by non-doing rather than commands the world and tries to do everything. As a final word of clarification, when the chapter says “it is the constancy of having no task to do that allows one to gain the world” (取天下常以無事), the character for “to gain,” *qu* (取), is an ironic reversal specifically connected to the idea of non-hiding and non-gaining in the *Zhuangzian* trope of “hiding the world in the world” (藏天下於天下). When “non-doing” and “having no task” degenerate into the positive doing of tasks, the natural, unassuming “gaining of the world”—as non-gaining—becomes a deliberate, calculated play of power and strategy. The *Laozi* finds it necessary to painstakingly reemphasize this point: “[W]herever there is anything to do, no amount of doing is ever sufficient to gain the world.”

4.7 ON “SOFTNESS” (柔): SHOULDERING SOFTNESS FOR EACH OTHER’S CO-LIVING

For the *Laozi*, the philosophy of softness, as partly expressed in the reverse trope of daily “self-subtraction” discussed above, contributes to the state of harmonious co-living it describes as “[p]artial then whole—bent then straight, hollow then filled, worn then renewed. Having little then gaining. Having much then muddled” (曲則全枉則直窪則盈弊則新少則得多則惑). If you allow yourself to yield and become partial at times (*qu* 曲), you are more likely to keep yourself intact (*quan* 全) and participate in the mutual completion of yourself and others (*cheng* 成). If you are willing to bend yourself at times (*wang* 枉), you will instead bring about further possibilities of cooperation and create greater room for the self and others to co-live (*zhi* 直). If you can stay low and humble (*wa* 洼), you will instead bring about further fulfillment (*ying* 盈). When things grow worn and depleted (*bi* 弊), that is precisely when the opportunity for renewal (*xin* 新) manifests itself. The less you grasp for (*shao* 少), the less you fear about losing—which is a gain of contentment (*de* 得). The more you try to hold on (*duo* 多), the more tangled (*huo* 惑) you become in the anxiety of losing it. A common rhetoric in the *Laozi*, this series of opposite reversals

deconstructs the habits of self-toughening and unidirectional perspectives and inverts them into the opposite cultivation of softness.

The *Laozi* develops many reversal concepts such as “softness,” “subtraction,” and “yielding” not in order to establish a “means–end” applicative framework but rather out of its profound understanding of the existential principle that things accomplish each other precisely by being opposites, always changing together as an inseparable unit. When Chap. 22 continues with the saying that “a sage embraces unity, a microcosmic model for all the world” (聖人抱一為天下式), the phrase “embracing unity” (抱一) indicates that there is no such thing as “lone existence” in any life: any existence must ipso facto embrace and be embraced by the ten thousand things, be part of the infinite circle of co-becoming, and contribute to the “great unity” in which all things and “I” are born as one. When the *Laozi* discusses “subtraction” or “yielding,” it is, in fact, establishing a dao of balance between subtraction and addition, yielding and asserting, lack and excess within the unity of a correlative cosmos, in which each of these elements moves with the rest together. It is this step of holistic consideration that makes this dao of activity “soft” rather than firm. Furthermore, “softness” doesn’t mean weakness or feebleness—it is a commitment for the sake of our co-living. Only by treating others tenderly does one leave room for others—and thus for themselves. This philosophy of softness reverses unilateral self-centrism into a dao of “walking two roads” and transforms individualistic self-strengthening into a path of tolerance and mutual acceptance. The softness that “does not contend” (不爭), in fact, naturally achieves a state in which “none in the world can contend with it.” Instead of firmness or toughness, it is softness that makes one let go of their self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification and leave room for the co-living of all other ten thousand things.

The softest things in the world run roughshod over the firmest things in the world.

What has no presence enters where there is no gap.

This is how I know that nondoing has its benefits.

The teaching of noninstruction, the benefits of nondoing—few things in the world extend as far as these. (*Laozi* Chap. 43)

In the first line, the “softest things” are contrasted from the “firmest things” with respect to the characteristics of the human “self.” The “firmest” self continuously asserts its will for victory and dominance through self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification. The “softest thing,” on the other hand, cultivates the emptiness of the mind and a gentle tolerance toward the world, transforming competition into co-living and dominance into yielding. In other words, the “softest thing” subtracts and empties its domineering will, focusing instead on following along with the interconnected network of relations and mutual co-existence of the ten thousand things.

When the *Laozi* stresses that “the softest things run roughshod over the firmest things,” the point is not the strategic use of softness to defeat the firm ones—a state of mind that remains trapped by the logic of win and loss, under which the soft and the firm remain in competition with each other. After all, what the text diagnoses is that the subject of any “firmness” or “toughness” originates from a domineering will or desire, which cannot sustain itself without leading to its own demise. No single will can control everything, just as no state of being is free from change. Nature continuously manifests a variety of “non-constant dao” based on the changing contexts of things, meaning that any desire for control or maintaining some “constant Dao,” which is often manifested in the behaviors of self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification, necessarily leads to its own ironic self-deconstruction, at which point it becomes open to the infinite possibilities of non-constancy and non-self-enclosure again. Any “firmness” or “self-toughening” that attempts to enforce an ultimate solution to the world will only end up as a manifestation of the subject’s own flaws and vulnerability. Only by following along with changes and acquiring a “softness” that is open to all possibilities can one be maximally prepared for their own inevitable transformations and appreciate the dynamic co-living of all things.

Moreover, the next sentences, “What has no presence enters where there is no gap. This is how I know that nondoing has its benefits,” are possibly an echo of the famous story of “Cook Ding cutting up an ox” (庖丁解牛) in the *Zhuangzi*: “When what has no thickness enters into an empty space, it is vast an open, with more than enough room for the play of the blade.” The “thickness” and “thinness” of Cook Ding’s knife is precisely the metaphor the *Zhuangzi* uses to describe what the *Laozi* calls the “firmness” (substantiality) and “softness” (emptiness) of the self. It is because Cook Ding can freely transform himself from thickness to

thinness and from firmness to softness that he is able to so softly and gracefully follow “the unwrought perforations” (依乎天理) of the ox and discover the “room” for co-existence between the human and the ox, between the self and the other. Once again, Cook Ding’s non-doing transforms the “lose-win” scheme of a finite game into a “win-win” situation for all the ten thousand co-existent beings. This infinite game, in which the “dao of man” converges with the “dao of heaven” and creates a win-win situation between man and heaven, is precisely the “teaching of non-instruction” (not being biased toward one’s own words) and “benefits of non-doing” (not being biased toward one’s own actions) mentioned at the end of Chap. 43. They are truly the most precious assets of our world: “few things in the world extend as far as these.”

4.8 ON “REVERSAL/OPPOSITION” (反): LEARNING FROM ONE’S OPPONENT AND CO-LIVING WITH ONE’S ENEMY

Reversal, opposition: the activity of the dao. Weakness, fragility: the functioning of the dao. (*Laozi* Chap. 40)

The character *fan* (反) in this context has the double meaning of “reversal” (相返) and “opposition” (相反).¹⁷ Accordingly, reversal and opposition are not two radically different modes of motion but belong to the same motion, organized under a relationship that is strangely “both same and different.” For the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, the reason why the cosmos perpetually produces change and unceasingly accomplishes the movement of the dao is precisely this mysterious, wondrous operation of “reversal-and-opposition,” as exemplified by languages such as the “obscure merging of existence and non-existence” (有無玄同) and the “intermingling of the *yin* and *yang* energies” (陰陽沖氣). In other words,

¹⁷ As Chen Guying (陳鼓應, 1935–) points out, “[T]he character *fan* usually has two meanings: (1) opposite (相反), standing against; (2) reversal (返). As Lin Xiyi says, ‘*fan* stands for recovery (復) and tranquilization (靜).’ As Gao Heng (高亨, 1900–1986) says, ‘*fan* means spinning and circularity.’” Whereas Chen Guying prefers the second meaning, the present text prefers to maintain the dialectical complexity between the two meanings of “opposite” and “reversal.” Furthermore, Wang Huai (王淮, 1934–2009) also considers *fan* to have two meanings: (1) reverse motion, implying the opposition in things acting on each other (*Laozi* Chaps. 7, 13, 22, 41, 81); (2) repeated motion, implying the circularity in things acting on each other (*Laozi* Chaps. 9, 16, 25, 52).

the saying “reversal, opposition: the activity of the dao” means, on the one hand, the simultaneous opposition and reciprocal accomplishment of the *yin* and *yang* forces in their transformation and, on the other hand, the subtle interpenetration and reversibility between existence and non-existence. As discussed earlier, the “reversal and opposition” mode of operation not only occurs macroscopically on the cosmic level but also manifests itself in the microscopic self-operation of the “dao of man.” The basic principle shared by both is that opposite forces of power should not be left unattended as they become more extremized toward their respective poles; rather, we should “intermingle” the various different forces around ourselves (which often tend to different and even opposite directions) into a harmonious balance, which would create a strangely appropriate state of diverse co-living rooted in internal differences among all things. This is also what the *Zhuangzi* refers to as the “central adjustment” of “walking two roads.”

The *Laozi* is adept in its observation of subtle changes in the balance between the dao of heaven and man. As the saying goes, whenever things are swung too extremely into one direction, it will necessarily reach a limit and turn to the opposite direction (“物極必反”). Any extreme motion always involves a simultaneous “potential energy” pulling in the opposite direction that aims at reestablishing its balance. However, most people tend to follow their habits of self-toughening, blindly engaging in zero-sum competitions based on what is “trending” at the moment. As Chap. 36 fittingly summarizes,¹⁸ they become stubbornly preoccupied with and addicted to nothing except their own expansion (必固張之), strengthening (必固強之), rise (必固興之), and obtainment (必固與之). Such dogmatic, one-sided, and extremized self-development, unaware of the subtle “internal tendencies” in all forces of change, cannot escape the principle of reversal and opposition and the return to balance. The tendency of expansion implies the anti-force of shrinkage (歛之); the tendency of strength implies the anti-force of weakening (弱之); the tendency of rising up implies the anti-force of disintegration (廢之); the tendency of

¹⁸ *Laozi* Chap. 36: “To be shrunk something must first be fully expanded. To be weakened it must first be fully strengthened. To be cast down it must first be fully raised up. To be taken it must first be fully given. /This is called the illumination of the barely visible: the soft and yielding overcome the firm and strong. /Just as the fishes must not leave their depths, the sharp weapons of a nation must never be displayed.” 將欲歛之必固張之。將欲弱之必固強之。將欲廢之必固興之。將欲奪之必固與之。是謂微明。柔弱勝剛強。魚不可脫於淵國之利器不可以示人。(Note from the translator.)

enforcement implies the anti-force of being taken back (奪之). The prevalence of such phenomena serves as a constant reminder of the strange movement of reversal-and-opposition and its principle of balance. From the perspective of man, wisdom—subtle “illumination” (微明)—consists in maintaining a sensitivity toward such movements of reversal and opposition even in situations from the everyday life.

There is nothing mysterious about “reversal-and-opposition.” Things decay and wither not because some “dao of heaven” deliberately wants to punish them; it is simply the phenomenon of the dao of heaven naturally tending toward its balance amidst myriad changes. Whenever a force becomes too extremized to the extent of losing balance, the anti-force hidden within it will surface in a dramatic manner to pull it back toward the equilibrium. The infinite game of the myriad transformations of things in the dao of heaven involves a dialectical balance between *yin* and *yang* and between the opposition and mutual accomplishment of things. Hence, for the *Laozi*, the philosophical potential of co-becoming released from the principle of reversal and opposition consists in keeping a room for the reciprocal transformation among different beings. We must not indulge in unrestrained self-strengthening, which will lead to the extreme opposition of different forces of power. Instead, by leaving a room for others—as well as ourselves—we resolve the conflict between “opposite” forces by turning them into co-becoming forces “reversible” from each other. This is the point the *Laozi* repeatedly stresses in Chap. 9:

Better to stop short than to fill up all the way. A blade polished keen cannot be long preserved.

When gold and jade fill the hall no one can defend them.

Wealth and rank hoarded with arrogance call forth their own reproach.

Adopting the metaphors of the “finite game” and the “infinite game” again, the activities and attitudes of “filling up all the way,” “polishing the blade keen,” “gold and jade filling the hall,” and “wealth and rank hoarded with arrogance” belong to a competitive finite game in which the winner exalts with pride and thinks to himself that he has conquered the world. A finite game is a zero-sum game in which the winner takes all. On the contrary, the *Laozi* tells us that the dao of heaven, nature, and man have all originally belonged to cyclical law and process of co-becoming. An

ecosystem that sustains the continued prosperity and co-evolution of a diversity of beings cannot allow a single species to expand and monopolize its resources without limit, for it will disrupt the reciprocal relationship and balanced co-becoming of the greater network of things. By the principle of reversal and opposition, such behaviors inevitably foster malicious competitions that change from “winner takes all” to “all loses all.” On the other hand, an “infinite game” transforms “opposition” into a kind of “reciprocal reversibility” that benefits both parties and even all parties in the game. It is precisely this infinite game of multiple winners that allows the dao of heaven, earth, and nature to infinitely renew themselves without end. The *Laozi* is often ironic about how often the “finite game” of the dao of man sabotages the “infinite game” of the dao of heaven. As such, human beings are caught in the vicious cycle of dramatically swinging between the extremes of high and low, lack and excess. Only when we forsake this finite game of polar opposition and competition, turning instead to following the adjusting, appropriating harmony of “walking two roads,” will there be the slightest hope of avoiding—as determined by the principle of reversal and opposition—our self-destruction and self-demise.

What is the meaning of the second half of our opening quote—“weakness, fragility: the functioning of the dao” (弱者道之用)? We may start by discussing the opposite notion of “strength.” Often, “strength” implies the self-aggrandization of a presupposed subject and center of agency, which is a state of deliberate doing just like self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, and self-glorification. “Weakness,” or “fragility” (弱), is not the other pole of some dyadically opposite pair “weakness–strength” but rather the cultivation of the subtraction of the self and the emptiness of desire through non-self-righteousness, non-self-satisfaction, non-self-aggrandizement, and non-self-glorification. In the context of the text, weakness (fragility) is interchangeable with “softness” (柔) and “parental love” (慈): in all cases, human self-centrism is transformed into an all-embracing tolerance and willingness to listen, which provides the maximal room for the co-living of the ten thousand things and the unobstructed self-regeneration of each of these things. This room is made possible precisely because fragility manifests itself as soft, lowly, humble, and non-domineering—what the *Zhuangzi* calls the “great use of uselessness” (無用之用). The wisdom that “the soft runs roughshod over the firm” is based on the understanding that the strong will and domineering habit of the self-centered subject—for whom the force and the anti-force are

opposite to each other—can be transformed into a game of co-living and co-becoming in which these forces co-exist in a wondrously balanced state of “both opposite to and returning to each other.” Whereas firmness enhances the unidirectional command of a single selfsame force, the softness the *Laozi* advocates is neither cowardice nor physical frailty but rather a heightened sensitivity to the balance of various non-selfsame forces. In other words, the mode of softness and fragility takes both sides of force and anti-force, reversal and opposition into consideration and contemplates how these two sides can simultaneously oppose and accomplish each other.

Ordinary human beings are accustomed to self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification and almost instinctively feel a sense of repulsion when they encounter opposite things, ideas, or powers; they are so used to the “clockwise” activity of self-strengthening that they find it necessary to eliminate any “counterclockwise” factors that impede their forward motion. What Chap. 40 reminds us is precisely the great potential “softness” and “weakness” have in subtracting from the “daily additions” of the toughening self and responding to the subtle mechanisms of reversal and opposition. In this way, confronted with opposite people or things, our focus shifts from eliminating and destroying them to digesting and absorbing them, which will further turn into a process of self-transformation and self-evolution. The lesson from this chapter is that we should adopt the perspective of whatever is against ourselves, learn from our enemies, and embrace co-living with them, absorbing these forces of opposition as part of our own intrinsic forces. In other words, “co-living” represents not only the co-existence of multiple beneficiaries; the deeper lesson involves learning to co-exist with opposite forces and things that are impeding and harming us right in front of our eyes.

As a further comment, the *Laozi* is filled with the rhetoric of “saying the reverse of what it means” (正言若反). For example, the softness that supposedly belongs to the “straight words” from the dao of heaven is often taken by ordinary people, who indulge themselves in the unrestrained habit of self-strengthening in the dao of man, as unpleasant “reverse words.” By demanding people to reverse the direction of the dao of man so that it converges with the dao of heaven, the text is, in fact, setting it up for a “second-degree reversal”: it is the “reversal of reversal” (反反) that makes the dao of man “return to” (返) its straight path. Such is the strange idea behind “saying the reverse of what it means.” Another example of this rhetoric occurs at the beginning of Chap. 41: “When the highest type of gentleman hears

the dao, he diligently puts it into practice. When the middling type of gentleman hears the dao, he sometimes keeps it and sometimes loses it. When the lowest type of gentleman hears the dao, he simply bursts out laughing. Anything that causes no laughter cannot be considered the dao” (上士聞道勤而行之。中士聞道若存若亡。下士聞道大笑之。不笑不足以為道). The “lowest type of gentleman” are, again, those who indulge themselves in the self-centrism of the dao of man; the “highest type of gentleman,” by contrast, are those who model themselves after the dao of heaven to the extent of acquiring a total subtraction of the self. When the “lower gentlemen,” so accustomed to the way of their dao of man, first hear the words of the dao of heaven (such as “softness running roughshod over firmness”), their initial reaction will naturally be contempt and laughter. Yet, as the *Laozi* points out ironically, the more ordinary people find a speech or action ridiculous and funny, the more they are manifested as precious (“anything that causes no laughter cannot be considered the dao”). Such words and actions are precisely what the highest gentlemen prioritize and “diligently put into practice”—for no reason other than their understanding of how easy it is for the dao of man, which often runs against the dao of heaven, to become absorbed in its way of predation and self-toughening and take those actions as the “right dao.” When someone tells them that the “right dao” is, in fact, the dao of heaven and that their habitual dao need to be reversed, it is no surprise that they will react with resentment.

As the *Laozi* painstakingly emphasizes, it is precisely these seemingly “reverse” words that constitute the “straight” word. Their initial appearance as reversed is due to our own prior inversion of the straight word and the straight dao and how entrenched this inversion has become in our minds. If we begin to change our habits of self-centrism, we will be able to re-discover the “dao of opposite yet mutually returning movements” revealed by the text’s language of reverse speech and double reversal. In this context, “reverse” is understood by not only its literal meaning but also the dialectical character of “double reversals make a straight” it entails. We may say that the rhetoric of “straight words appearing as reverse” involves a connotation of “reversing the reversal in order to return to straight words, actions, and positions.”¹⁹ It should be noted that “straightness” in this

¹⁹ Overall, the character *fan* 反 may have the following meanings in the *Laozi*: (1) the opposite direction, implying opposite motion or forces of action; (2) the “mutual return to each other,” as exemplified in cases such as “bearing the darkness and hugging the brightness” (負陰抱陽) and “in the intermingling of these two energies all their harmonies are

context no longer means the kind of “rightness” based on a single direction or fixed standard. Rather, the generous acceptance of all kinds of strange words and actions—each “straight” of its own accord and all running simultaneously without contradiction—requires our opposition to such a fixed, unidirectional notion of “rightness.” As such, “reverse speech” is the one with the true character of “straight speech”: it satirizes any attempt to establish a constant Dao or a constant name in order to return to “the dao that is not a dao” or “the straightness that is not straight.”

4.9 ON THE “OBSCURE POWER OF VIRTUOSITY” (玄德): THE ETHICS OF CO-LIVING AS KNOWING THE LUCID WHILE MAINTAINING THE OPAQUE AND HARMONIZING WITH THE GLARE AND THE DUST

The *Laozi* often describes the ideas of a “dao” and “power of virtuosity” (德) with negative metaphors such as the softness, lowness, and humbleness of water and the emptiness and hollowness of valleys. The “negative cultivation” of “non self-righteousness, non self-satisfaction, non self-aggrandizement, and non self-glorification” gently disentangles us from our attachment to the domineering, judgmental self, thus opening up the vast space of the “obscure dao” (玄德) and “obscure power” that are tolerant enough to embrace all kinds of different things and views, including even polar opposite ones. This idea of the “obscure merging” (玄同) of opposites truly reaches the depth of the philosophy of co-becoming. Indeed, the opening chapter of the *Laozi* ends with a strong emphasis on this idea of obscurity:

Thus is desirelessness always maintained, enabling a view of the mystery in each of them and all; and thus is desire always maintained, enabling a view of just what it is that each of them strives and cries for. These two emerge together as one, but when named are determined as different. Their oneness is something truly obscure, more obscure than obscure, obscuring even obscurity—a gateway into the manifold mysteries of each of them and all.

In other words, “obscurity” merges the opposite poles of “desire” and “desirelessness” into a harmonious unity while maintaining their

formed” (衝氣為和), all of which involving the idea of “simultaneously opposing and accomplishing each other”; (3) apophatic creation, such as the emphasis on “non-” or “subtraction” in order to eliminate attachments to constancies and return to the wondrous function of the non-constant Dao and the non-constant name.

qualitative differences from each other. In Chap. 56, the *Laozi* describes the idea of obscure merging with the metaphor of “harmonizing with the glares, merging with the dusts” (和其光同其塵). In the obscure merging, even the farthest poles of glare (brightness, positive value) and dust (darkness, negative value) are resolved into a harmony. It is called “obscure” because it interweaves all the ten thousand things and states of tension (desire and desirelessness, light and dust) in such a way that one can walk any two roads from within this mixing together without contradiction. What the “dao” and “power of virtuosity” in the text try to negate are unidirectional, possessive, or exclusive dao and powers; instead, co-becoming is only possible through the “dao that is not a dao” and the “virtuosity that has no virtuosity”—in other words, the obscure merging of dao (Chap. 1) and the obscure merging of powers of virtuosity (Chap. 38). This point is further clarified by the following passage:

Whatever the dao generates is reared and raised by virtuosity, is shaped and formed by other things, is brought to completion by the propensities of every circumstance.

This is how all things without exception honor the dao and esteem virtuosity. The honor they give to the dao, the esteem they give to virtuosity, happen of their own accord without being imposed, obeying no command. [...]

Producing them but not possessing them, making them but not requiring anything of them, growing them but not controlling them. Such is their obscure power, the power of their obscurity. (*Laozi* Chap. 51)

Although the dao breeds and nourishes the ten thousand things, it never imposes any command and instead allows each thing to “happen of its own accord” in response to its specific circumstances. “Producing them but not possessing them, making them but not requiring anything of them, growing them but not controlling them”—the “obscure power of virtuosity” manifests itself through respecting, trusting, keeping an open attitude toward things. It is the practice of the “highest gentlemen” to forsake their biases, self-centrism, and desire for control. The “obscure virtuosity” of the dao is another expression for what the text describes in Chap. 25 as “the dao conforming to how everything is when left to itself—conforming to nothing at all” (道法自然), as well as what Heidegger calls *gelassenheit*—“letting” the ten thousand things “be” who they naturally

are and letting them express their diverse beauties. As Chap. 37 says, “The constancy of the dao lies in doing nothing yet leaving nothing undone. If lords and kings could hold fast to it, all things would transform of their own accord.” In other words, in their most ideal relationship, the dao practices non-doing and lets the ten thousand things develop and transform in their own accords. The obscure virtuosity of non-doing is precisely what allows the dao to accomplish the most deeds—that is, the self-so, unobstructed prosperity of all things. It is “virtuous” because it is not a singularizing dao that reduces all beings into sameness; it honors the spontaneity of every single being instead of displaying the dominion of the dao. Once this element of control is deconstructed, the ten thousand things are truly allowed to blossom each in its own colorful way. For human beings (especially the lords and kings), the “highest virtuosity” consists of emulating the obscure power of virtuosity and its “non-doing that accomplishes all doings” and applying this ethics of acceptance of diversity and differences to concrete interpersonal interactions in our daily lives.

The highest virtuosity is not grasped as virtuosity. That is why it has such virtuosity.

Lower virtuosity never loses its “virtuosity.” That is why it so lacks virtuosity.

Highest virtuosity does nothing, for it harbors no motives or purposes. Lower virtuosity is something done—always with some motive or purpose. [...]

Ritual propriety is the thinning out of loyalty and trust, the beginning of disorder. Foreknowledge is the ostentatious flowering of the dao, the beginning of foolishness.

Just so do the truly great stay with the thick and not with the thin, stay with the fruit and not with the flower—“Discarding that over there, they pick up instead this over here.” (*Laozi* Chap. 38)

While Chap. 1 claims that “no dao or name is constant as such,” Chap. 38 emphasizes that “no virtuosity is grasped as such.” The language of negation (“not”) is used once again to free us from the mistake in thinking that we already occupy an ethically superior position. By contrasting the

highest and the lower kinds of virtuosity and using a negative language, the *Laozi* dialectically affirms that the “highest virtuosity” is indeed virtuous. The generous inclusivity of the highest virtuosity is manifested in its ability to cure the problems of lower virtuosity. The ethical picture of the “highest virtuosity” is the result of careful dialectical considerations in the text rather than a simple, plain affirmation of virtuosity itself. In the latter case, the lower virtuosity that “never loses its ‘virtuosity’” acts in a way that appears to be promoting good and eliminating evil but is always getting “something done”—which entails its stubborn attachment to a specific, single-faceted version of “goodness.” The *Laozi* is critical of positive doing because it is not the most ideal way to engage in a primordial ethical relationship with others. The realization of the “highest virtuosity” in a primordial ethical relationship requires a cultivation of the habit of transforming the “foreknowledge” (前識) of subjective moral will and judgment (doing) into non-doing and non-purposivity.

When the chapter claims that “foreknowledge is the ostentatious flowering of the dao, the beginning of foolishness,” the “foreknowledge” in this case refers to the self-conceit among those with “lower virtuosity” in thinking that they already understand what should and should not be done. The sense of moral superiority implied in this “foreknowledge” stains the simplicity of the primordial ethicality, producing the “thinning out of loyalty and trust,” the “ostentatious flowering of the dao,” which is the “fount of disorder,” and “the beginning of foolishness.” This line may correspond to what the *Zhuangzi* describes in “Equalizing Assessments of Things” as the “complete mind” that takes itself as the teacher (成心自師): “dao qua dao get concealed behind the small formations that they themselves succeed in shaping, and speech qua speech gets concealed behind the garlands of honor it itself brings on.” Foreknowledge is the sword that cuts through the primordial obscurity that “knows the lucid while also maintaining the opaque” (知白守黑), creating sharply divided poles of good and evil, right and wrong. As the *Zhuangzi* chapter continues, “For courses have never had any sealed boundaries between them, and words have never had any constant range. It is by establishing definitions of what is ‘this,’ what is ‘right,’ that boundaries are made. Let me explain what I mean by boundaries: there are right and left, then there are roles and duties, then there are divisions and disputes, then there are competitions and struggles. (And this is the kind of thing they call the Eight Virtues!).” It is obvious that the “Eight Virtues” the *Zhuangzi* satirizes

are comparable to the “lower virtuosity” in the *Laozi*.²⁰ The *Zhuangzi* reminds us to pay attention to not only the “rights and lefts” or the “roles and duties” of any given ethical order but also the turbulent picture of “divisions and disputes” and “competitions and struggles” it brings. This is similar to the *Laozi*’s idea that “ritual propriety is [...] the beginning of disorder.”

From the perspective of the *Laozi*, the self-conceit and self-overestimation in foreknowledge are extraneous, “ostentatious flowerings” of the dao that, in the final analysis, amount to no more than spillovers and tumors. This is why the text places so much emphasis on the subtraction and elimination of the self. On a practical level, this also explains why Chap. 29 comments that “the sage avoids excess, avoids extravagance, avoids greatness,” practicing instead an unhewn (樸) life of simplicity and frugality.²¹

Both the “lower virtuosity” from Chap. 38 of the *Laozi* and the “Eight Virtues” mocked by the *Zhuangzi* are connected with the “violence of light” of ethics, especially in the sense of the bifurcation of language and concepts. As Chap. 2 of the *Laozi* says, “When all in the world know the

²⁰ The “Eight Virtues” in “Equalizing Assessments of Things” are likely an ironic inversion of Confucian virtues such as humankindness (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), ritual propriety, frugality, courage, loyalty, trustworthiness, and filial piety. From the perspective of the *Zhuangzi*, they are all products of fixed words and self-enclosed courses. In the primordial state in which the Dao and the power of virtuosity have not yet been lost, neither words nor courses have any sealed boundaries. Constant, self-enclosed Confucian virtues such as humankindness, righteousness, etc., with their unambiguous, itemized value judgments and standards of behavior, are what comes after the loss of Dao and virtuosity. The Confucian ethical framework is based on clear-cut definitions and distinctions between right and left, roles and duties, divisions and disputes, and competitions and struggles. Such a system of categorization and differentiation cannot escape the fate of value competition and mutual exclusion, which is the point the *Zhuangzi* makes when it critiques “virtuosity,” “understanding,” and “name” in the chapter “In the Human World”: “Do you know what it is that undermines real virtuosity, and what it is that produces conscious understanding in the first place? Virtuosity is undermined by getting a name for it. Conscious understanding emerges from conflict. A good name is most essentially a way for people to one-up each other, and conscious understanding is most essentially a weapon of war.”

²¹ Lin Xiyi: “Excess, extravagance, and greatness—each of them is a name for ‘beyond appropriateness’ (過當). which is the meaning of what the previous chapters refer to as ‘spoiled leftovers or tumorous growths.’ The sages who forsake them are free of the mind and its fatigue as well as from any doing and desire. The present chapter provides the final words on this topic: while the three characters all share the same meaning, the text presents them in this way in order to emphasize the utter importance of staying away from them.”

beautiful to be beautiful, there already is the ugly. When all know the good to be good, there already is the bad.” Since language, by nature, operates in terms of dyadic pairs of contrast, any standard of morality and ethics based on a system of names and conceptual categorization will create a dichotomy between certain “centers of acceptance” and the peripheries they exclude. The elevation of beauty and goodness comes with the debasement of ugliness and evilness. Every pair of contrasting concepts—long and short, high and low, existent and non-existent—involves the conflict and reciprocal accomplishment between affirmation and negation. In other words, the pursuit of positive values and rejection of negative values are two sides of the same inseparable coin of “both affirmation and negation.” As the *Zhuangzi* acutely observes, whenever we affirm anything, it is almost impossible to avoid sacrificing the other side: “their divisions are formations, their formations are destructions.” For the *Laozi*, the moral judge that affirms (forms) one side and negates (destroys) the other side belongs to the “lower virtuosity” in which the original obscurity has been lost. As the “Eight Virtues” affirm only a selected portion of beings and actions and excludes all others, they turn the acceptance and appreciation of the diversity of all beings—which are ultimately connected into a oneness (復通為一)—into a fierce competition that rejects everything on the other side.

In addition to criticizing the ethical maelstrom of dichotomous “divisions and disputes, competitions and struggles,” the *Laozi* also stresses that any biased or one-sided conception of a “moral superiority” is prone to producing the “violence of the light.” The ethics of “obscure merging” in the *Laozi* softens this violence and directs itself toward the openness of “harmonizing with the glares and merging with the dusts.” Furthermore,

In just this way are sages so constantly good, so good at rescuing people, so good at considering them good—finding not one to be worthless, abandoning none. For being so constantly good, so good at rescuing things, so good at considering them good, not one thing is found worthless, not one is abandoned.

This is called extending the illumination. So it is that the good are the teachers of the bad, and the bad are the raw material of the good. Failure either to value the teacher or to cherish the material is the vast confusion found even in “wisdom.”

For this is the wondrously unseen agreement binding the two together.
(*Laozi* Chap. 27)

From the *Laozi*'s perspective, "goodness" in the ordinary sense is distinguishable only insofar as it is contrasted to some notion of "non-goodness." For example, in the line from Chap. 2 above, the clear-cut dichotomy between good and evil creates a "one-sided goodness" that is prone to becoming stuck with its own self-assured sense of moral judgment, which it will use to condemn the behaviors of others. In other words, "goodness" in the ordinary sense might bring the opposite of softness and tolerance. Chapter 27 soft-pedals the sense of stubbornness and opposition commonly associated with "goodness" by focusing on the goodness in which "not one thing is found worthless, not one is abandoned."

The "good" that belongs to "lower virtuosity" is always a "one-sided good" in the dyadic confrontation between good and evil, one that occupies the endpoint of the seesaw. On the other hand, the "good" that is "good at rescuing people (and things)" according to Chap. 27 forsakes the habit of affirming one side and sacrificing the other side; in this case, "not one thing is found worthless, not one is abandoned." Such is the vast openness and generosity of the "highest virtuosity." Alternatively, Chap. 27 calls this "goodness of the highest virtuosity" that unites the two ends "extending the illumination" (襲名). What is "extending the illumination?" The character *xi* 襲 has the meanings of hiding, restraining, following, and adjusting. It is because this illumination hides and restrains its tendency of self-centrism well that it is able to follow along with, harmonize with, and "extend" itself to whatever thread that stands against it. Only through extending the illumination can we "know the lucid while maintaining the opaque" (知白守黑), facilitate dialogues between different dao and keep them in a harmonious balance, and avoid engaging in unilateral moral judgments. In short, "extending the illumination" transforms the "violence of the light" of a single, narrow perspective into a vast spectrum that encompasses brightness, darkness, and the infinite variety of perspectives that fall between them. This is what enables the dialogue between "brightness and darkness" and between "glare and dust."

Furthermore, since this attitude of "extending the illumination" does not abandon anything, it has the unique capacity of transforming the antagonistic conflict between the good and the bad into a harmonious

dialogue and perhaps even a mutually benefiting relationship in which each side treats the other as its teacher. Hence, Chap. 27 continues by describing a picture of collective prosperity in which the good and the bad lead and support each other: “the good are the teachers of the bad, and the bad are the raw material of the good.” If we temporarily loosen their fixed labels and try to empathize with their respective stories, then the “good” and the “bad” can be seen as foils of each other, each serving as a cautionary reminder to the other. The good and the bad learn from and transform into each other. It is precisely in this reciprocal relationship of being the teacher and raw material for each other that this “wondrously unseen agreement”—that is, the obscure merging of the two dao and their co-becoming—is manifested. If we merely affirm ourselves and reject all others, stubbornly sticking with our own one-sided views, then we miss out on this great opportunity to learn and receive support from all the ten thousand things. We may think that we have acquired some wisdom, but in that case, all we have is a “vast confusion.”

The sage, steadfast in having no intentions of his own, takes all the people’s intentions as his own:

“I regard the good as good, but I also regard the not-good as good. For virtuosity is to be good at finding them all good. I trust the trustworthy, but I also trust the untrustworthy. For virtuosity is to remain trustworthy in finding them all trustworthy.” (*Laozi* Chap. 49)

In an approximate sense, the difference between having and not having “intentions of one’s own” (常心/非常心) corresponds to what the *Zhuangzi* refers to as the “complete mind” and the “empty mind.” The sages in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* cultivate themselves by transforming their habits of self-centrism and intentionality into a kind of sincerity that takes all the people’s thoughts and needs as their own and truly listens to the diverse perspectives and views of the people.²² The sage that “has no intentions of his own” does not proclaim a single standard of beauty and goodness to be the ultimate truth and does not restrict or judge the people by some dichotomous value system of “good and bad.” Because he

²² Zhu Qianzhi put the matter in the following terms: “The character *chang* 常 is found underneath the character *wu* 無 in every copy of the *Laozi*—the Dunhuang copy and the Gu Huan copy. [...] The sage has no private heart for his own use but takes the heart of all people as his own.”

does not hastily label people as “good” or “bad,” the sage is more responsive to the variety of voices presented to him (“I regard the good as good, but I also regard the not-good as good”) and more appreciative of the diversity of individual stories and experiences (“I trust the trustworthy, but I also trust the untrustworthy”).

The opposition of goodness and badness that common people take to be the singular, selfsame value standard is now transformed into a multi-valued dialogue among many different co-existing views. In the language of Chap. 49, the non-binary, non-judgmental “good of the highest virtuosity” and “trustworthiness of the highest virtuosity” echoes the statement in Chapter 38 that “[t]he highest virtuosity is not grasped as virtuosity.” As another famous Laozian metaphor from Chap. 8 says, “The highest good is like water—water, so deft, so good at benefiting things by never competing with them, by putting itself where none want to go.” This is possible only because the highest good (virtuosity) is not attached to its own intentions or preconceptions of morality. By contrast, “lower virtuosity” (guided by personal intentions) is trapped within the moral framework the subject believes to be correct—he thinks he can decide the flow of values but ends up being caught up in endless competitions and perpetrating the violence of the light. The *Laozi*’s ideas of virtuosity as “finding all things good” (德善) and “finding all things trustworthy” (德信) cultivate the generous spirit of “knowing the lucid while maintaining the opaque” and “harmonizing with the glare and the dust,” allowing all people of different views and backgrounds to live and prosper in their own natural ways.²³

To know the masculine while also maintaining the feminine is to be a channel for all the world. Being a channel for all the world, the power of what is constant remains undivided—a reversion to the state of a newborn child.

To know the lucid while also maintaining the opaque is to be a microcosmic model of all the world. Being a model of all the world, the power of what is constant remains unwavering—a reversion to the boundlessness of utmost absence.

²³ While the characters *de shan* and *de xin* are written as 德善/德信 (“virtuosity in finding all things good/trustworthy”) in some copies of the text, other copies have instead “得善/得信” (obtainment of goodness/trustworthiness). We can infer that these two meanings are interchangeable.

To know the honorable while also maintaining the disgraceful is to be a valley for all the world. Being a valley for all the world, the power of what is constant remains ever sufficient—a reversion to the unhewn.

When the unhewn gets shattered, it is made into vessels and tools, each with its purpose. But as instead used by a sage, it is what has seniority over all such functionaries.

For the vastest of all structures is formed by the great cutting and carving that severs nothing. (*Laozi* Ch. 28)

Chapter 28 primarily consists of three lines with parallel structure and meaning. In each case, the line begins by describing a state that avoids the bifurcated schemes of masculine/feminine (concerning gender), lucid/opaque (concerning morality), and honorable/disgraceful (concerning fame), which transcends the polar opposition between value and anti-value and hence serves as a “channel,” “microcosmic model,” and “valley” for the whole world.²⁴ In particular, the metaphor of “valleys” (谷) returns to the negative, yielding, and all-encompassing image of the dao discussed earlier. For example, as Chap. 32 says, “[T]he dao is present throughout the world, just as the stream’s surge to the valley is there in the river’s surge to the sea.” As Chap. 41 says, “[T]he highest virtuosity is like a low-lying valley.” The low-lying valley is a frequent metaphor in the *Laozi*’s description of the “broadest (power of) virtuosity” (廣德), the “highest (power of) virtuosity” (上德), and, in this case, the “the power of what is constant” (常德).²⁵

²⁴ Regarding the “microcosmic model” (*shi* 式) for all the world, besides its usual meaning of a “model,” the character *shi* may also be connected to “cosmic board” (*shi pan* 式盤), an ancient Chinese divination device whose layout involves the double meaning of the “round heaven and square earth” and “the center and the two roads around it.” There is a hole at the center of the circle through which the device can be hung and kept rotating, which symbolizes the unceasing movement of constellations in the heaven. In the context of the ideas of “bearing darkness and hugging brightness” and the “gushing through of harmony” in this chapter, the image of the cosmic board also implies the meaning of a bearing and hugging between masculine and feminine, darkness and brightness in an inseparable unity.

²⁵ In the *Laozi*, “the broadest power of virtuosity,” “the highest power of virtuosity,” “the power of what is constant,” and “the obscure power of virtuosity” are used interchangeably as the alternative mode of morality and action that transcends and is contrasted with the “lower virtuosity” of binary oppositions. Since the Dao is neither constant nor fixed at a specific location, the virtuosity that accompanies it also shares the quality of an all-encompassing inclusion of vast differences.

It is only this humble, low-lying, and non-confronting “virtuosity of what is constant” that has the ability to maintain both sides of masculine/feminine, lucid/opaque, and honorable/disgraceful: on the one hand, it understands how value (usefulness) can be focalized and singled out; on the other hand, it remains a steady protector of the remaining infinitely vast and unfocalized realm hidden under a so-called absence of value (uselessness). The valley that occupies a low yet central position and the chaotic obscurity of the broadest and highest virtuosity are the site at which the initially divided extremes of masculine/feminine, lucid/opaque, and honorable/disgraceful meet and reintegrate, becoming each other’s teacher and protector in their simultaneous usefulness and uselessness. Both the low-lying valley in the *Laozi* and the “Primordial Miasma” (渾沌) of the “middle” (中央) in the *Zhuangzi* involve the idea of being “central yet empty” and “central yet lowly.” Likewise, the goodness of the Primordial Miasma echoes the goodness of “power of the constant” that “knows the masculine, lucid, and honorable while also maintaining the feminine, opaque, and disgraceful.” Furthermore, the three lines continue to describe a “reversion” to the state of “a new born child” (before masculine and feminine characteristics have taken place), “the boundlessness of utmost absence” (before the *yin-yang* opposition), and the “unhewn” (before being carved out, singled out, as valuable). Within the Laozian and Zhuangzian rhetoric, all three metaphors have the qualities of “both is and not” and an unbiased centrality through which the two sides are interweaved into a “chaotic unity.” Cheng Xuanying (成玄英) faithfully preserves this quality of an adjusting center that “both is and is not” and “neither is nor is not” in his commentary on the “Primordial Miasma” from the *Zhuangzi* chapter “Sovereign Responses for Ruling Powers”: “The South Sea is the manifest direction, hence it is deemed to possess existence. The North Sea is the realm of obscurity, hence it is deemed to lack existence. The Centre, being neither north nor south, is thus regarded as the state of non-being and non-non-being. The duality of existence and non-existence converges within this realm of neither being nor non-being; the two partial inclinations are harmonised into a single central resolve. Hence it is said that to await it is most excellent” (南海是显明之方，故以黛为有。北海是幽暗之域，故以忽为无。中央既非北非南，故以浑沌为非无非有者也。有无二心，会于非无非有之境，和二偏之心执为一中之志，故云待之甚善也。).

Thus, Chap. 28 reminds us that “when the unhewn gets shattered, it is made into vessels and tools” and concludes by saying that “the vastest of

all structures is formed by the great cutting and carving that severs nothing” (大製不割). The “shattering” of the unhewn means that the primordial state of chaotic obscurity, in which a multitude of beings interact with each other without leaving the unity of the whole, is now cut into two pieces that stand in opposition. The “power of what is constant” is lost when the unhewn is shattered. What has already been a self-sufficient virtuosity is replaced by the “vessels and tools” of a specified moral framework and its inelastic laws and regulations. The *Laozi* reminds us that only a sage who “cuts and carves nothing” and keeps to the unhewn can be a good public servant, for a good leader for any community must be sincerely welcoming and all-inclusive to his people. The leader must keep to the values while maintaining the anti-values in order to avoid dividing and categorizing people into “vessels” of fixed, narrow moral meanings between which there is no chance of communication.

Furthermore, with respect to the images of “carving out nothing” and “hugging the unhewn,” beside the valley that is “central yet lowly and empty,” the *Laozi* also uses the metaphors of a newborn child that “supplely unifies all his/her energies of life and breath” (the newborn child represents the primordial openness of possibilities before any features of masculinity or femininity are unilaterally determined), the “boundlessness of utmost absence” in which the two roads of *yin* and *yang* turn around simultaneously and without obstruction (the “utmost absence” is attached to neither *yin* nor *yang* and hence walks the two roads between them), and the open possibilities of the raw, unhewn material before its determination into some specific vessel (in which case the field of possibilities collapses into something ready-to-hand). Whereas the unhewn originally belongs to an obscure oneness in which all possibilities are ambiguously intermingled, when it is carved out and shattered into the definitive form of a vessel, it becomes impossible to avoid using constant, self-enclosed, and divided concepts such as lucid/opaque or honorable/disgraceful to describe it, giving rise to antagonistic conflicts. Therefore, a good leader must follow the dao of “carving out nothing” and actively protect the fragile constancy of the “power of what is constant” by “knowing the masculine (lucid, honorable) while also maintaining the feminine (opaque, disgraceful).” To clarify, the idea of “carving out nothing” does not mean a pure sameness or utter uselessness of all things; it simply asks us to not carve the originally unhewn world into discrete, absolutely disjoint forces of opposition. As the caretaker of human civilizations, it is impossible for leaders to not make use of vessels (which

inevitably leads to the “shattering of the unhewn” to a certain extent); the point is that they must keep in mind the importance of maintaining both sides of the various vessels they employ and encounter. It would be another kind of one-sided view to simply demand that we forsake all vessels and return to some state of absolute uselessness. The “dao of the unhewn” in the *Laozi* “knows the vessels while also maintaining the unhewn,” making adjustments here and there to maintain appropriating harmony between these two sides.

4.10 ON THE “LOW” (下): SOFTNESS AND HUMILITY AS THE PRINCIPLES OF CO-LIVING IN A CLIMATE OF GLOBAL POLITICS

The philosophy of the *Laozi* emerged in the late Spring and Autumn period, a time when interstate relations were dominated by the pursuit of military strength and the strategic maneuvering of political alliances. States vied for power through conquest, with large states seeking expansion and small states struggling for survival. Fueled by mutual distrust, relentless conflicts occurred among the states, leading to an increasingly extreme political landscape in which war became a near-constant reality, engulfing both great and small states alike. In fact, one could say that the late Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were the farthest away from a philosophy of co-becoming—which also makes them the times that most urgently needed it. For this reason, the *Laozi* took a path that is the “reverse” of its geopolitical context: politically and militarily, instead of the prevailing practice of developing strength and aggression, the *Laozi* embraced a softer, humbler dao of the “low”:

A large country is a downstream region, a low-down place where all the world goes for intercourse—the she-beast of the world. The she-beast always falls back on her stillness to defeat the male: she uses her stillness to get herself beneath him.

Just so does a large country come to possess a small country—by putting itself below it. By already being below it, the small country has gotten a hold on the large one. The one takes possession by putting itself low; the other gets a hold by being already low.

The large country most desires to take in and nurture the other; the small country most desires to render its services to the other. So for both to get what they desire, the great must put itself low. (*Laozi* Chap. 61)

A large country is the most prone to taking pride in its own strength, but only when it wields power without relying on the strength of this power can it relax the sense of threat and oppression that power often imposes. Instead of driving others away through fear, a large country can also transform its strength into a soft, nourishing force that naturally draws others in. The *Laozi* envisions the “largeness” of a country not in its ability to subdue others with power and strength but in its willingness to yield for a space of co-existence. All-encompassing in its lowness like the ocean and naturally drawing others in like a magnet, a truly “large” country creates an atmosphere that makes smaller countries feel welcome and secure. Only when a powerful state shifts from a competitive, domineering mindset to one of softness and peace can it truly realize the all-encompassing function of “the soft running roughshod over the firm.” The *Laozi* emphasizes that the latter is possible only because the large country models itself after the “feminine” (“she-”) qualities of softness (not relying on its strength), stillness (not acting recklessly), and lowness (not striving for victory). In short, it is because the large country keeps itself in the “downstream region” and “puts itself below” in its stillness that it embodies the lowly, non-contending, and non-dominant virtuosities of water. (Chap. 8: “Water, so deft, so good at benefiting things by never competing with them, by putting itself where none want to go.”)

For the *Laozi*, “lowness” is the principle of peaceful co-living shared by larger and smaller countries. The principle of lowness allows both large and small countries to leave room for each other: “A large country comes to possess a small country by putting itself below it. By already being below it, the small country has gotten a hold on the large one.” In the words of Zhang Mosheng (張默生, 1895–1979), “[B]y lowering itself, the larger country earns the faith of the small country; by lowering itself, the smaller country earns the trust of the larger country.” In other words, stability and mutual trust between nations cannot be achieved through sheer dominance or unilateral control determined by their scale of power. Instead, a large country earns the respect and trust of smaller ones by adopting a posture of humility and gentle accommodation (the “low of the large country”), while a small country secures the recognition and

tolerance of greater ones by embracing a stance of modesty and yielding (the “low of the small country”). When the *Laozi* continues to say that “the one takes possession by putting itself low; the other gets a hold by being already low,” the former refers to a large country winning the affinity of smaller ones, while the latter refers to a small country joining the inclusivity of larger ones. It is their reciprocal practice of “lowness” that produces the win-win situation of a dao of co-living.

Generally speaking, large countries wish to harmoniously extend their sphere of influence (“take in and nurture the other”), while smaller nations wish to peacefully get by without conflict. “For both to get what they desire,” the chapter concludes by emphasizing that “the great must put itself low.” While “putting oneself low” is the shared principle for both larger and smaller countries to co-live harmoniously, in practice, the large country should still take the first initiative. After all, its military and political strength naturally inspires fear, distrust, and a sense of distance. The burden falls on the large country to be the first to lower itself, dwell in softness, and lead the international community in the promotion of an atmosphere of inclusion and mutual prosperity.

4.11 ON “WEAPONS” (兵): WAR CAUSES THE MOST EXTREME DAMAGE TO THE DAO OF CO-LIVING

One who assists a ruler by means of the dao will not use military might to strong-arm the world—such deeds too easily turn back upon their doer.

Wherever an army is stationed, thorns and briars are sure to grow. In the year after a great battle, a bad harvest is sure to show.

The real skill is persistence that never resorts to force: Persistent but not proud. Persistent but not aggressive. Persistent but not arrogant. Persistent in what cannot be stopped. Persistent but never coercive.

When things get too strong they begin to grow old. This is called being set off dao. What is set off dao soon ends. (*Laozi* Ch. 30)

In the chaotic times of the Warring States period to which the *Laozi* belonged, when great powers pursued military might to expand their territories and small states were forced into militarization for survival, the dominant political logic was one of armed strength and conquest. Wealth

and military power became the primary objectives of almost all rulers, each of them focusing on strengthening a system of centralized authority backed by military force. Amidst this autocratic and militaristic atmosphere, the *Laozi* made a strikingly “politically incorrect” appeal that, as always, went in the reverse direction of its time: “One who assists a ruler by means of the dao will not use military might to strong-arm the world.” With urgent concern, the text calls upon rulers and sages to “hit the brake”—to guide people through the dao rather than through weapons. Whereas the dao is soft, non-doing, non-contending, and lowly, maximally preserving the space for co-living, “weapons” are rigid and domineering, seek conquest through destruction, and leave no room for shared existence in its plot of self-expansion.

As Chap. 30 solemnly reminds us, “[S]trong-arming” the world through military action almost always leads to two consequences: first, “such deeds too easily turn back upon their doer” (其事好還). Those who destroy homes and take lives through war inevitably sow the seeds of deep-seated hatred, fueling an endless cycle of vengeance and bloodshed. The logic of war breeds its own continuation—each act of violence begets another in return.²⁶ Wars do not simply end with peace treaties; they leave behind unresolved wounds that become the seeds of future conflict. The idea that “deeds too easily turn back upon their doer” reminds us that national and familial grudges do not dissipate when the fighting stops but instead lay the groundwork for the next outbreak of war. Second, “in the year after a great battle, a bad harvest is sure to show.” Among the destructive impacts of war, the death of countless men in the battlefield creates countless broken households, while the devastation wrought by armies turns fertile land into wasteland (“wherever an army is stationed, thorns and briars are sure to grow”). With men lost and fields barren, economic ruin and widespread suffering inevitably follow. Thus, for the *Laozi*, sages must “assist their ruler by means of the dao” and do everything in their power to prevent the two disastrous cycles of militarism.

Unfortunately, when countries are already entrenched in a climate of unceasing warfare, in order to maintain basic subsistence for the people

²⁶ Cheng Xuanying: “The character *huan* 還 means “return” and “retribution. In other words, any use of weapons creates enemies and irresolvable vengeance.” Zhu Qianzhi: “Weapons are ominous, and wars put people in a perilous position—they breed calamity to the combatants themselves.” Jiang Xichang (蔣錫昌, 1897–1974): “Those who kill others’ father will witness their own father killed; those who kill others’ brothers will witness their own brothers killed. Such is the meaning of ‘turning back upon the doer’.”

and preserve cultural continuity, sometimes they have no choice other than taking up weapons and defending themselves from invaders. In such dire circumstances, the *Laozi* does not deny the use of military force outright but instead issues a solemn warning: the use of war should “persist” only in order to deal with “what cannot be stopped” (果而不得已). Wang Bi interprets the meaning of the “persistent” (*guo* 果) as follows: “The purpose is to resolve difficulties. Those skilled in the art of warfare seek only to quell crises and quell calamities. They would never employ overwhelming military might as a deterrent, attempting to flex their strength before all under heaven or vie for supremacy over the realm” (果犹济也。言善用师者，趣以济难而已矣，不以兵力取强于天下也。). “Persistent in what cannot be stopped” means that countries should never initiate war for the sake of conquest. Military force should only be used to resolve a crisis that would otherwise become “unstoppable,” and once the crisis is over, the use of force must immediately cease. There can be no indulgence in continued warfare due to the temptation of “snatching the world.” In other words, the *Laozi* advocates for the minimization of the use of force—it should function only in response to crises rather than as a self-expanding initiative. Moreover, the acquisition of any “fruit” (*guo* 果) of war must be restrained, for the temptation for more fruits is another way to beget further conflicts. Such are ideas of “minimizing” the use of force and using force “only as a last resort.” For this reason, Chap. 30 painstakingly reminds us to be “persistent” with war (or, alternatively, to acquire fruits of war) but not be proud, not be aggressive, not be arrogant, and not be coercive. Otherwise, the state will detract from its initial goal of “ruling by means of the dao” and fall into the self-defeating attempt to “strong-arm the entire world,” leading to the vicious cycle of wars begetting wars and the endless growth of “thorns and briars.”

Finally, the chapter ends as follows: “when things get too strong they begin to grow old. This is called being set off dao. What is set off dao soon ends.” Anything that single-mindedly focuses on its own strengthening and expansion without leaving any room for shared existence with others has necessarily been “set off” from the true dao of multiplicity and co-living. From the *Laozi*’s perspective, departing from the dao of co-living only dramatically accelerates one’s premature demise and downfall.

Good weapons are ill-omened tools, always odious to someone concerned.
That is why a voyager on the dao never dwells where they are.

In the leisure of their homelife noble people prefer the left side. But in their usage of weapons they must value the right side as well.

A weapon is an ill-omened tool, not the proper tool for a person of nobility—to be used only as a last resort. Calm and bland times are best to him. When he must win a victory, he finds it an ugly thing. To find it a beautiful thing is to delight in killing others. One who delights in killing others can never realize his aspirations in the world.

In the ritual for auspicious occasions, the place of honor is on the left, while for inauspicious occasions, it is on the right. In the army, the second-in-command stays on the left, while the supreme commander stays on the right—the exact ritual positions of a funeral.

He who has killed multitudes of people should weep for them with grief, with sorrow—to live through a victory is indeed just like conducting a funeral. (*Laozi* Chap. 31)

The swords and weapons that appear nice and sharp are in fact “ill-omened,” filled with the smell of bloodshed and inviting nothing but fear and aversion. Hence, a “voyager on the dao” always keeps a reasonable distance from such weapons. Under normal circumstances, the sage should rely on the dao to open up the maximal possibility for the organic co-creation of all the ten thousand things; only in extraordinarily perilous cases would they begrudgingly resort to the use of force and weapons. Chapter 31 highlights this idea through the metaphor of “left and right” positions in a space of ancient ritual performance: “in the leisure of their homelife noble people prefer the left side. But in their usage of weapons they must value the right side as well.” As Cheng Xuanying’s commentary explains, the rhetoric of “preferring the left/right” is loosely based on spatial images from ancient rituals: “the left corresponds to the *yang* and primarily occupies the position of ‘living’ and what is ‘auspicious’; the right corresponds to the *yin* and primarily occupies the position of ‘killing’ and what is ‘ominous.’ In times of peace during which the sages are treated with dignity and fairness, culture flourishes, and the ‘left’ is preferred. In times of devastation and turmoil, militarism prevails, and the ‘right’ is preferred. When society operates according to concrete wisdom (喻行人實智), longevity is preferred. When strategy and the play of power comes to the forefront, killing follows.” As the metaphor reveals, the way a sage rules the country and engages in daily affairs must follow the principle of

minimal harm and interference, which creates a stable environment that maximizes the space for everyone's peaceful survival and growth. By contrasting the images of *yin*, the "living," and the "auspicious" of the left and *yang*, the "killing," and the "ominous" of the right, the text highlights the dramatic difference between "assisting a ruler by means of the dao" and "using military might to strong-arm the world": the sage should employ the way of the left whenever possible and only use the militaristic way of the right as a last resort and the inevitable means through which the way of the left can be restored.

As the chapter further stresses, even in situations where armed conflict comes as an inevitable last resort, it must be treated with an attitude of "calmness and blandness." How can one be "calm and bland" with weapons? As Wu Cheng (吴澄, 1249–1333) points out, "Those of tranquil mind indulge not in excessive joy; Those of quiet and unassuming nature seek not rich and intense sensory gratification" (恬者不欢愉, 淡者不浓厚。谓非其心之所喜好也。). Based on this interpretation, "calmness" means that the combatant is not attracted to the very act of killing, while "blandness" requires them not to perform a disgrace to the martial code of honor. The solemnity and self-restraint in this attitude toward the use of force sharply contrasts the belligerent habit of "killing for the sake of killing" that only leads to the destruction of all parties. Accordingly, the chapter reminds us to not praise the war or eulogize victories (finding one's own victory as "an ugly thing"). A society that begins to worship war heroes and spread militarism risks falling into the wicked pleasure of killing for the sake of killing. Regarding the victory that follows from the inevitable use of force, not only should we not beautify it, the chapter goes as far as claiming that we should "weep for [the lost souls] with grief, with sorrow—to live through a victory is indeed just like conducting a funeral." A "multitude of people" have been killed—it is only appropriate to honor them with a sorrowful heart and a funeral that is executed in exact accordance with the highest level of rituals: "the second-in-command stays on the left, while the supreme commander stays on the right."

The military strategists have a saying: "I dare not play the host but would rather play the guest. I dare not advance an inch but would rather retreat a foot."

This is called advancing the nonadvance, rolling up the sleeves to bare the nonarms, seizing the nonopposition, wielding the nonweaponry.

There is no disaster greater than to undervalue the enemy. Undervaluing the enemy puts us in danger of losing—our own treasure.

So when two combatants clash, the one whom it pains is the winner.
(*Laozi* Chap. 69)

In the first line of Chap. 69, the phrases “playing the host” and “advancing an inch” refer to the logic of aggression and active military expansion to which the *Laozi*’s logic of using force “only as a last resort” stands in reverse: the latter occupies a defensive or “retreating” position by default and only mobilizes itself in response to external threats. The fact that the *Laozi* “dares not” play the host or advance an inch demonstrates its highest respect toward sentient lives and its maximal caution toward weapons. One “plays the guest” and “retreats a foot” in order to preserve the possibility of non-confrontation to the best of his/her ability or, if not, at least minimize the extent to which the conflict will harm and leave long-term impacts on both sides. Even in situations where military action is necessary, the *Laozi* outlines the strange mode of “fighting and yet not fighting” (戰而不戰)—“advancing the nonadvance, rolling up the sleeves to bare the nonarms, seizing the nonopposition, and wielding the nonweaponry.” This is precisely Wang Bi’s idea in his commentary of this chapter: “The conduct of rulers or generals must be founded upon humility, yielding, compassion, and benevolence, never daring to vie for supremacy over all things. Though arrayed in battle formation, it appears as though no formation exists. Though arms are raised in combat, it seems as though no arms are present. Though weapons are grasped, it is as though no weapons are held. Though facing the enemy, it is as though no adversary exists. This supreme humility and non-contention renders them invincible to all under heaven” (言以謙退哀慈，不敢為物先。用戰猶行無行，無臂，執無兵，扔无敌也。言无有与之抗也。). In other words, the *Laozi* transforms the logic of opposition and self-strengthening by cultivating the “not” and practicing subtraction.

Most people instinctively think that when forces collide—especially in the context of war, where power is seized through violence—the only way to win is by meeting strength with even greater strength, crushing the opponent through sheer force. However, the *Laozi* takes a fundamentally different approach. Even in situations in which conflict becomes unavoidable, it refuses to follow the conventional logic of mutual destruction. Instead, it always seeks to preserve a space for avoiding battle altogether (

不戰) or, at the very least, for bringing it to an early end (止戰). As such, the *Laozi* transcends the rigid militaristic logic of “sword against sword” and creates a different kind of strategy that remains maximally fluid and difficult for opponents to predict while also ensuring that even in the midst of conflict, there is always a way to pull back before complete devastation becomes inevitable. Rather than engaging in war with the goal of absolute victory or annihilation, the *Laozi*’s approach forever preserves a lifeline, an opportunity to reassess the situation, and a hope of returning to peace.

Finally, the *Laozi* reminds us to never “undervalue the enemy,” which breeds hasty or arrogant decisions to attack. This would contravene the non-contending practices of “playing the guest” and “retreating a foot” discussed earlier and shatter the spirit of solemnity and sorrow. On a deeper level, undervaluing the enemy implies an apathetic carelessness and an underweighting of the worth of the country’s own soldiers. Both the undervaluing of the opponent and the underweighting of one’s own soldiers constitute a blasphemy and an encroachment on the most sacred, precious, and irreplaceable lives and souls heaven has endowed to this world. Therefore, the chapter concludes by saying that “when two combatants clash, the one whom it pains is the winner.” If all else are kept equal, it is the side that maintains a sincere attitude of pity and solemnity that has the better chance of winning—that is, providing the opportunity for the co-living of the two sides.

4.12 CONCLUSION: HUMOR AND NON-KNOWING PROVIDE A STURDY PLATFORM FOR THE CO-EXISTENCE, CO-LIVING, AND CO-BECOMING OF ALL BEINGS

The ancient Chinese version of the proverb “every cloud has a silver lining” (塞翁失馬焉知非福) comes from a story in the *Huainanzi*. The essential moral of the story is that “[t]he transformation of misfortune into fortune and fortune into misfortune is such that its changes are difficult to discern. Thus, fortune becoming misfortune and misfortune becoming fortune undergoes an unfathomable metamorphosis, profound and immeasurable” (禍福之轉而相生，其變難見也故福之為禍，禍之為福，化不可極，深不可測也。). It might be obvious that the philosophy behind this story is rather faithfully adapted from Chap. 58 of the *Laozi*: “A disaster, such a disaster!’ But on it depend the coming blessings. ‘A blessing, such a

blessing!’ But in it are hidden the coming disasters. Who knows where they all end up? There is no way to rectify them all with a single norm. The correct and normal becomes the unexpected and strange. And the good becomes the monstrous—confusion for everyone since time immemorial.”

When the protagonist of the story from the *Huainanzi*, Old Mr. Sai, “loses his horse at one moment and gains it back at another moment,” his emotions and way of processing these events are clearly very different from most people, for whom the apparent losing of the horse is an obvious disaster and the apparent gaining back of the horse is an obvious blessing. Moreover, according to the common understanding, whether a specific event is a blessing or a disaster is unambiguously categorizable and determinable. However, what the philosophy of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* reveals and satirizes is precisely this self-enclosing way of thinking only in terms of dyadic oppositions and absolute determinism, as if there is a recognizable, absolute standard that divides blessings from disasters. This irony is playfully developed in Old Mr. Sai’s subsequent experiences in the story: the event of “losing a horse” (a disaster) leads to the subsequent event of “acquiring a pair of top-quality horses” (the disaster turned into a blessing); the event of “acquiring a pair of top-quality horses” leads to the subsequent event of “losing one of his legs” (the blessing turns into a disaster again); in turn, the event of “losing one of his legs” leads to the next event of “getting his life back” (the disaster becomes a cause of a new blessing). In this way, disaster and blessing reciprocally give birth to and transform into each other. An event is inseparably linked to the next event, and more generally speaking, this ambiguous relationship of mutual causality and interconnectedness occurs among all events. An event present at hand is never an isolated unit or eternally fixed before the eye; it is always the undetermined process of “being open” to other events, “being caused by” other events, and “turning itself into” other events. Every event entails an interiority that depends on exterior others. As such, when events are viewed from the perspective of their unceasing transformation in an infinite spatiotemporal continuum, since our capacity of observing the world is extremely limited, any of our judgments of an event being a “disaster,” a “blessing,” an “auspice,” or an “omen” is necessarily hasty or “too early.” We try to unify the incongruities of an event or put an end to its incompleteness almost “too seriously.”²⁷

²⁷ Roger Ames has offered a valuable insight into the relationship between “humor” and the transformation of things in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*: “The transformation of all things

Conversely, it is precisely the sincere attitude in acknowledging the reality of the constant transformation of events between disaster and blessing that prompts “Laozi” (or, in the case of the *Huainanzi* story, Old Mr. Sai) to bravely acknowledge his own non-knowing—that he does not dare to make hasty conclusions about anything, much less create a “constant Dao” that enforces ultimate solutions to things. When the text asks, “[W]ho knows where blessings and disasters all end up,” it may be helpful to understand this attitude of non-knowing as a kind of *humor* rather than mere passivity. If we keep an open mind to the way things traverse and transform without end, we can maintain a relaxed and humorous style of “never speaking too soon” even with events and situations that appear to be clear and simple as they are. Otherwise, every time we make a hasty judgment about something, we will soon encounter the irony of it turning to the other side. To borrow a concept from the *Zhuangzi*, for one moment, we have just sealed a constant, self-enclosed Dao about something, but right at the next moment, we already find ourselves “slipping” on the so-called radiance of drift and doubt (滑疑之耀).²⁸

entails two important consequences: First, there are always myriad alternative postures that challenge the ultimacy of one’s present configuration. Secondly, the processional nature of experience guarantees that one will in fact actually proceed through an indefinite number of such configurations. The sagely recognition of this fact is the source of Daoist humor at its best.” David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, “The Focus-Field Self in Classical Daoism,” in *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, State University of New York Press, 1998, p. 71. Ames’ remarks echo the attitude of “acknowledging one’s non-knowing” emphasized in the present work.

²⁸The “Radiance of Drift and Doubt” is an idea that comes from the *Zhuangzi* chapter “Equalizing Assessments of Things.” It is one of the most crucial concepts in the chapter—along with “the axis of all courses” (環中) and “walking two roads” (兩行)—that reveals how the text resolves the dichotomy between Confucianism and Mohism. In fact, the phrase *huayi* 滑疑 is also closely connected to the sense of humor (*huaji* 滑稽)—in both cases, the character 滑 literally means “drifting” or “slipping.” Any position we hold, or any notion of “humankindness and virtuosity,” has the potential of “slipping away” and turning in the opposite direction at any moment, which makes us “slip on our own” and experience a comedic effect from ourselves. The point is further demonstrated in Brook Ziporyn’s full translation of this passage from the *Zhuangzi*: “Thus the Radiance of Drift and Doubt is the sage’s only map. He deploys no single definition of what is right, but instead entrusts it to the everyday function of each thing. This is what was meant by ‘using the Illumination of the Obvious.’” Moreover, Ziporyn provides the following interesting commentary on the “Radiance of Drift and Doubt”: “‘To drift’ implies instability, a state of constantly change that can fall in the other direction at any minute. ‘To doubt’ means to be always ready to not affirm, to not do anything positive, to not define any right and wrong or is and is not, and to not speculate about the motives of things.” Both drifting and doubting, both establishing

It is common for people to understand blessing as blessing per se and disaster as disaster per se; it is also common to, in the words of the *Zhuangzi*, have a preference between “three in the morning” and “four in the evening” (朝三暮四). For the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, it is precisely these kinds of understanding, almost second-nature to us, that reveal the profundity of our mistakes in relying on “foreknowledge” and thinking that our mind is somehow already “complete.” This does not mean foreknowledge is completely ignorant or that the “complete mind” is entirely lacking—the point is that each of them only represents a specific perspective. When people indulge in self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-glorification and apply their own point of view to the entire world, they mistakenly believe that they have acquired the supremely “constant Dao” or the “constant name”—an attitude that makes it difficult for them to accept and appreciate the reality of the co-existence of other dao and names. The strange observation of “a disaster on which depend the coming blessings” and “a blessing in which hide the coming disasters” in the *Laozi*, as well as its subsequent acknowledgment of its own non-knowing, do not imply a full-fledged relativism or nihilism—that because all things and events are relative and indeterminable, all actions are meaningless and therefore unnecessary. Such an understanding does not truly grasp the meaning of indeterminacy and unpredictability in the saying: “an unfathomable metamorphosis, profound and immeasurable.” One who truly grasps the depth of this language will, on the one hand, remain tolerant of any one-sided, unidirectional dao or claims of knowledge and, on the other hand, both respectfully accept and passionately investigate into the infinite possibilities of an event becoming something other than—or even opposite of—what it is. Strictly speaking, any views that appear to be “different from” or “contrary to” my own are—as independent, stand-alone views in their own respect—already

and dethroning, both is and is not—we call it “walking two roads,” and well call it the “Radiance of Drift and Doubt.” Brook Ziporyn, Ming-chao Lin, Hsi-san Lai, “The Contentions between Confucians and Mohists and the Principle of Dual Procession in *The Equality of Things*” (《齐物论》的儒墨是非与两行之道——吊诡、反讽、幽默的不道之道), *Journal of Shangqiu Normal University*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2022.

encompassed by my “intrinsic dependence on externality” (内在待外性) or “intrinsic otherness” (内在他者性). No position of my own can be singularly isolated in some pure “I am.” In the language of “Equalizing Assessments of Things,” the changes in my views over time, as well as the contrast between the views of mine and others at any given moment, ensure that all these positions are always intertwisting along an infinite chain of events in which every event “goes along with” every other event by simultaneously affirming and denying it (因是因非因非因是).²⁹ Because of this, no one is capable of transcendently determining what the “right” in “right and wrong” stands for and thus permanently end the debate. Everyone must eventually come to accept the irony of their own non-knowing—the *Laozi*’s question of “who knows where all things end up?” will remain forever in the air.

Alternatively, one might say that we have all found humor in ourselves. The humor in the so-called radiance of drift and doubt works in the same way as a talk show makes us laugh: we are all “set up” by the seriousness of our confidence in our own views and foreknowledge, which is met with the “punchline” of an unexpected change that shatters our preconception. Foreknowledge and the mind that takes itself to be complete are always serious and careful about the way they create dao and names, for they take them to be capitalized, eternally true “Dao” and “Names.” However, no one can ever know where things all end up: every event is subject to the principle of “fortune and misfortune turn into each other, and their transformations are difficult to perceive” (转而相生，其变难见). It is this epiphany of fully coming to terms with one’s own non-knowing (無知) that releases one from the seriousness of “constant Dao” and “constant Names” back to the humor of myriad provisional, self-transforming dao and names. It is also this kind of funniness and relaxation of the “sickness of tension” that alleviates the antagonism between the “enemy” and “myself.”

²⁹ *Zhuangzi*, “Equalizing Assessments of Things”: “‘Thatness’ emerges from ‘thisness,’ and ‘thisness’ follows from ‘thatness.’ This is its theory of the simultaneous generation of the ‘this’ and the ‘that.’ However, by the very same token, it can say that their simultaneous generation means also their simultaneous demise, and vice versa. When it affirms either one, it simultaneously finds it has denied it; when it denies either one, it simultaneously finds it has affirmed it. By going along with the affirmation it goes along with the denial; by going along with the denial it goes along with the affirmation.”

How is humor connected to the philosophy of co-becoming? First, the “Radiance of Drift and Doubt” teaches us that no event or position can stand in its own place for too long. Second, the “reciprocal turning and generation” (转而相生) between all things and events facilitates the mutual establishment—and breakdown—of all views. How does this add to our present picture? Using concepts from “Equalizing Assessments of Things,” in a tone of humor, it becomes impossible to be absolutely certain and confident that one is in possession of what is “absolutely right” (果是) or “ultimately so” (果然).³⁰ As we have seen, various traditions of philosophy (such as Western metaphysics) and religion (such as the Abrahamic monotheistic belief in God) promise the existence of a dao that is “absolutely right” or “ultimately so” with utter seriousness. They are like the Confucians and the Mohists the same *Zhuangzi* chapter has laughed at, who affirm themselves and condemn their opponents, each side thinking that only its version of the dao contains the “ultimate solution” to the great turmoil of the time. As such, they cannot help but advocate for their “constant Dao” with total seriousness, fueled by the pressing need to wipe out all heretical views and dao “external to” themselves. By sharp contrast, the “axis of all dao” (道樞) from the *Zhuangzi* operates the infinite realm of possibilities by being “central yet empty”—it empties the content of any supposedly “constant” Dao and responds to all things by contentless to begin with. It is precisely this emptiness that allows it to function as the “axis,” the meeting point of infinitely many dao and paths gushing through. The non-constant dao is “de-metaphysical” and “anti-serious,” promising the infinite continuity and possibilities of experimenting with ever-new “upayic” dao. Simply by walking is a new dao formed (行之而成). Human beings may try to keep walking on the same road, but it will never last forever. Every view or position disintegrates itself as it encounters a new context; what it has previously thought “so” about itself is met with the self-irony of the Radiance of Drift and Doubt, which, in turn, opens the gate to the beginning of the next upayic dao.

³⁰ *Zhuangzi*, “Equalizing Assessments of Things”: “If right were ultimately right, its differentiation from not-right would admit of no debate. If so were ultimately so, its differentiation from not-so would admit of no debate.”

When the *Laozi* speaks of “a disaster on which depend the coming blessings” and “a blessing in which hide the coming disasters,” neither disaster nor blessing describes the eternal essence of the event. Both of them slip and drift around as the story continuously evolves into a different context. Disaster and blessing depend on each other and never cease to fluctuate between the affirmative and the negative. In this context, non-knowing has the unique ability to transform our fixed understanding of events and soft-pedal the seriousness of our attachment to our own views, which will release an extraordinary burst of energy that sustains the platform of the co-living of all the ten thousand things. Furthermore, it should be noted that while “humor” may seem to carry the connotation of “forgivingness” (寬容), the latter is still a bit too serious and potentially remains entrenched by a subjective “I” that offers the gesture of “forgiving.” Humor, on the other hand, is first and foremost the recognition of one’s utter non-knowing, as well as the fact that—despite this recognition—one is not free from the ridiculous act of choosing between “three in the morning” and “four in the evening.” This prior understanding of our self-contradicting nature releases the self from the urge to morally judge or condemn things and events (including the self that cannot avoid judging and condemning), turning instead toward an attitude of humorous self-irony and playful curiosity with respect to the self and others that know nothing but think that they know everything.³¹ It is this equal acceptance and tolerance of the self and others that enables humanity to construct the smoothest, most sturdy platform of co-existence, co-living, and co-becoming.

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³¹ As Ames points out, “For the Daoist who mirrors the parity of things, there can be no final distinction between joker and ‘jokee.’ Humor must be based upon parity, and this means that the joke is always pretty much on everyone.” Hall and Ames, “The Focus-Field Self in Classical Daoism,” p. 69.

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“Zoetology”: A New Name for an Old Way of Thinking

Roger Ames

In the *Yijing* 易經 or *Book of Changes* we find a vocabulary that makes explicit cosmological assumptions that are a stark alternative to this substance ontology and provides the interpretive context for the Confucian canons by locating them within a holistic, organic, and ecological worldview. To provide a meaningful contrast with this fundamental assumption of *on* or “being” we might borrow the Greek notion of *zoe* or “life” and create the neologism “*zoe*-tology” as “the art of living.” This cosmology begins from “living” (*sheng* 生) itself as the motive force behind change and gives us a world of boundless “becomings”: not “things” that *are*, but “events” that are *happening*, a contrast between an ontological conception of the human “being” and a process conception of what I will call human “becomings.”

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5.1 TAKING ADVANTAGE OF OUR GADAMERIAN PREJUDICES

A familiar way of thinking about “methodologies” that we associate with rational, systematic philosophies are the formal principles or theoretical procedures of inquiry employed in a particular field or discipline. For example, in philosophy, we might speak of Socratic dialectics or Cartesian rational skepticism as methodologies, and of analytic, logical, and phenomenological methodologies among many others. The term “methodology” itself suggests the familiar theory and practice dichotomy by formalizing the method and making the principles of explanation prior to their application.

In looking for a starting point in formulating my own method (rather than methodology) for doing comparative philosophy, I appeal to John Dewey’s postulate of “immediate empiricism” (the notion that our immediate experience is our reality) and the primacy he gives to practice. As a philosophical method, Dewey’s radical empiricism requires that since all human problems arise within the “hadness” of immediate experience as it is had by specific persons in the world, the resolution to these problems must be sought through theorizing this same experience in our best efforts to make its outcomes more productive and intelligent. “Hadness” for Dewey is not some claim to “pure” or “primordial” experience, but simply what experience *is* as it is *had* by those persons experiencing it. In formulating this method, Dewey begins by asserting:

Immediate empiricism postulates that things—anything, everything, in the ordinary or non-technical use of the term “thing”—are what they are experienced as. [...] If you wish to find out what subjective, objective, physical, mental, cosmic, psychic, cause, substance, purpose, activity, evil, being, quality—any philosophic term, in short—means, go to experience and see what the thing is experienced as. (Dewey 1977, Vol. 3, pp. 158, 165)

As Dewey’s alternative to starting from abstract philosophical concepts and theories, he is arguing that all such terms of art must be understood as the “thats” of specifically experienced meanings. Dewey’s method provides us with a way of ascertaining what the language we use actually means and precludes the dualisms that usually follow in the wake of deploying abstract and thus decontextualizing terms such as reality, rationality, objectivity, justice, and, indeed, methodology itself.

Corollary to Dewey's immediate empiricism is recognition of the fact that experience itself is always a continuous, a collaborative, and an unbounded affair. Thus, his "hadness," far from precluding a robust subjective aspect, insists upon it. Before Dewey formulated his postulate of immediate empiricism, William James had earlier offered his own version of a similar idea that probably inspired Dewey, referring to it as a "radical empiricism":

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system.* (James 1976, p. 22, italics in original)

And more recently, yet another advocate of a pragmatic approach to philosophy, Hilary Putnam, brings additional clarity to this postulate of immediate empiricism by not only rejecting "view-from-nowhere" objectivism, but by further insisting that the subjective dimension of experience is always integral to what the world really is. Putnam insists that

[...] elements of what we call "language" or "mind" *penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being "mapper's" of something "language-independent" is fatally compromised from the start.* Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere. (Putnam 1990, p. 28, italics in original)

Putnam will not admit of any understanding of the real world that cleaves it off from its human participation and that does not accept our experience of it as what the world *really* is. He is making this same point regarding the holistic and inclusive nature of experience when he insists that

[...] the heart of pragmatism, it seems to me—of James's and Dewey's pragmatism if not of Peirce's—was the supremacy of the agent point of view. If we find that we must take a certain point of view, use a certain "conceptual system", when engaged in a practical activity, in the widest sense of practical activity, then we must not simultaneously advance the claim that it is not really "the way things are in themselves." (Putnam 1987, p. 83)

When we carry Dewey's postulate of immediate empiricism over to the task of interpreting another philosophical tradition, if we are to resist cultural reductionism and to allow the other culture to speak on its own terms, we do best to employ a comparative cultural hermeneutics as our method of inquiry. The starting point of hermeneutics, the branch of philosophy that has to do with the theory and practice of interpretation, is an acknowledgment of the interpretive interdependence of the structures of meaning within the experience from which understanding is to be gained. Hans-Georg Gadamer insists that

[...] understanding is not a method which the inquiring consciousness applies to an object it chooses and so turns it into objective knowledge; rather, being situated within an event of tradition, a process of handing down, is a prior condition of understanding. *Understanding proves to be an event.* (Gadamer 1997, p. 309, italics in original)

It is in this spirit of understanding as an event that Gadamer uses the term "prejudices" (*Vorurteil*) not as blind biases, but on the contrary, as acknowledging that a deliberate cognizance of our own prejudgments facilitates rather than obstructs our access and insight into something we do not know. These prejudgments are not only our presuppositions but also our projective interests and concerns. For Gadamer, the hermeneutical circle (i.e., locating a text within its interpretative context) within which understanding is always situated requires of us that we continually strive to be aware of what we carry over into our new experience, since critical attention to our own assumptions and purposes can serve to positively condition the depth and quality of our interpretation of what we encounter.¹ To be clear, the claim is that a comparative cultural hermeneutics has the potential to inspire a greater degree of insight than simply working within either tradition separately, because the analogical associations and contrasts that emerge in the process are productive of additional meaning. Even fundamental differences when used properly can be activated to serve the interests of clearer understanding. J. L. Austin remarks that

[...] the world must exhibit (we must observe) similarities and dissimilarities (there could not be one without the other): if everything were either

¹ See Malpas (2018).

absolutely indistinguishable from anything else or completely unlike anything else, there would be nothing to say. (Austin 1961, pp. 89–90)

Such analogical correlations that appeal to either similarities or differences between cultural traditions can be productive or otherwise to the extent that they are a source of increased meaning, that is, to the extent that they provide us with something to say.

5.2 COMPARATIVE CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS AS ANALOGICAL THINKING

It can be argued that all meaningful interpretation of experience, with “interpretation” itself literally meaning “a go-between negotiation,” emerges analogically through establishing and aggregating a pattern of truly productive correlations between what we already know and what we would know. Of course, since analogize we must, at the same time we might also want to allow that not all analogies are equally apposite. As has become apparent in the troubled history of having translated and thus “carried over” Chinese philosophy into the Western academy, poorly chosen comparisons can be a persisting source of distortion and of cultural condescension. A heavy-handed and impositional “Christian,” “Heideggerian,” and, yes, a “Pragmatic” or “Whiteheadian” reading of Chinese philosophy as well betrays the reader by distorting both the Chinese tradition and the Western analogue in the comparison. As inescapably correlative thinkers, we need to be analogically retail and piecemeal rather than working in whole cloth.

Again, analogies can be productive of both associations and contrasts, and we can learn much from both. To take one example, the *Focusing the Familiar* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) has been hugely influential as one of the Confucian *Four Books*. In this canonical text, it argues that the best of human beings have both the capacity and the responsibility to be co-creators with the heavens and the earth. In seeking to interpret this text, we might find an associative analogy with the process philosophy of A. N. Whitehead in his attempt to reinstate “creativity” within the evolving life process as an important human value. For Whitehead, claims about the “aseity”—that is, the self-sufficiency and perfection—of God in traditional theology precludes any interesting or coherent sense of human creativity. Following the sustained challenge Whitehead directs at conventional ways of thinking about creativity, the word “creativity” itself becomes an individual entry in a 1971

supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary* with two of the three references being made to Whitehead's own *Religion in the Making*. At the same time, however, we might be keenly aware that when the same Whitehead invokes the primordial nature of God and the Eternal Objects that are sustained in His thinking, the long shadow of Aristotelian metaphysics and the Unmoved Mover set a real limit on the relevance for classical Chinese process cosmology of these aspects of Whitehead's philosophy.

Aristotle's teleology (his doctrine of design and purpose), his substance ontology (his doctrine that all things are defined by an unchanging essence), and his reliance upon logic as *the* demonstrable method that will secure us truth might serve as contrastive analogies with a Chinese process cosmology that abjures fixed beginnings and ends, that precludes any strict formal identity, and that will not yield up the principle of non-contradiction as enabling of erstwhile apodictic or unconditional knowledge. On the other hand, Aristotle's resistance to Platonic abstraction in promoting an aggregating practical wisdom correlates rather productively with one of the central issues in classical Confucian moral philosophy. That is, Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical wisdom) with its commitment to the cultivation of excellent habits (*hexis*) in the practical affairs of everyday living has some immediate resonance with the ubiquitous Confucian assumption that knowing and doing are inseparable and mutually entailing (*zhixingheyi* 知行合一).

In our project of cultural interpretation, whether they be associative or contrastive analogies, we have no choice but to identify productive correlations that, with effort and imagination, can be qualified and refined in such a way as to introduce culturally novel ideas into our own world as a source of enrichment for our own ways of thinking and living. In this cultural translation, we certainly must be deliberate in the picking and choosing of our analogies—but at the end of the day, pick and choose we must.

5.3 CLASSICAL GREEK ONTOLOGY AND CHINESE ZOETOLOGY: "A SMALL STOCK OF IDEAS"²

As a self-confessed philosopher of culture, I take it as my task to identify, excavate, and articulate generalizations that distinguish different cultural narratives. It is only in being cognizant of these uncommon cultural

²Ontology too is "a new term for an old way of thinking" that can be traced back to the classical Greek sources and their philosophical problematics. The oldest extant record of the term "ontology" as Gk. *onto-* "being" or "that which is," and *-logia* "discourse," is

assumptions that, in some degree at least, we are able to respect fundamental differences and locate the philosophical discussion somewhere between the alternative worldviews. Just as with the watershed of the Western cultural narrative we would identify with Plato and Aristotle and Hellenistic culture, certain enduring commitments were made explicit in the formative period of Chinese philosophy that are more persistent than others, and that allow us to make useful generalizations about the evolution of this continuing tradition. In the language of the *Yijing* 易經 or *Book of Changes*, we must anticipate “continuities in change” (*biantong* 變通).

Again if we, as what Charles Taylor has called “language animals,” acknowledge the power that entrenched linguistic propensities might have in shaping the philosophy of grammar of a given population, it might occasion a reconsideration of our usual way of thinking about the originality of our own great philosophers. Without slighting their defining influence on their respective traditions, we might ask to what extent in the “history of thought” are a Plato and an Aristotle and indeed a Confucius constructing their philosophical oeuvres out of whole cloth, and to what extent are they—with penetrating insight, certainly—making explicit what is already implicated in the structure and function of the languages they have inherited from their predecessors? In what degree are they cultural archaeologists in the business of “recovering” and laying bare the legacy of “common sense” bequeathed to them by their progenitors?

While the meticulous scholar Nathan Sivin is adamant in exhorting us to resist “either-or” simplicity in our cultural comparisons, at the same time he has also observed that “man’s prodigious creativity seems to be based on the permutations and recastings of a rather small stock of ideas” (Sivin 1974, p. xi). If such is the case, how do we then get to this “rather small stock of ideas” that might allow for the mapping out of their subsequent permutations and recastings? What in our ways of thinking grounded in the classical Greek and Chinese worldviews are the underlying similarities and dissimilarities; what are their respective prejudices? Where in their deepest cultural strata are the uncommon assumptions, the pre-judgments that have their beginnings in the self-understanding of the always situated human experience as these cultural habits have been sedimented into their persistent yet ever evolving common sense?

in its Latin form *ontologia* and appears in the writings of two German philosophers, Jacob Lorhard’s *Ogdoas Scholastica* (1606) and Rudolf Gockel’s *Lexicon Philosophicum* (1613).

One prejudice of the first order that emerges early in the Western philosophical narrative is the commitment to substance ontology with all of its far-reaching implications. Ontology is the branch of metaphysics that seeks to classify and explain the things that exist, and its underlying assumption is that there are substances or essences internal to things that are available to us to classify them as this and not that. Ontology privileges “being *per se*” and a categorical language with its “essence” and “attribute” dualism, giving us substances as property-bearers and properties that are borne, respectively. Such ontological thinking animates Plato’s pursuit of formal, “real” definitions in his quest for certainty (i.e., definitions not of words but of what really *is*) and underlies Aristotle’s taxonomical science of knowing “what *is* what.” For these classical Greek philosophers, only what is real and thus true can be the proper object of knowledge, giving us a logic of the changeless. Indeed, such ontological assumptions produce a decidedly categorical way of thinking captured in the principle of non-contradiction that claims something cannot be “A” and “not-A” at the same time.

G. W. F. Hegel in his Introduction to the *Encyclopaedia Logic* reflects at great length upon the question: where does philosophy begin and the inquiry start? And in this reverie, he concludes that because philosophy “does not have a beginning in the sense of the other sciences,” it must be the case that “the beginning only has a relation to the subject who takes the decision to philosophise” (Hegel 1991, p. 41).³ I want to embrace Hegel’s concern about the importance of understanding the starting point of our philosophical inquiry, and I also want to heed his injunction to begin from the subjects who take the decision to philosophize. As my starting point, I will posit a contrast between a classical Greek ontological conception of human “beings” and a classical *Book of Changes* process conception of what I will call human “becomings,” a contrast between a discrete human being as a noun and interdependent human becomings as gerunds.

³For Hegel himself, it is the ultimate project of such philosophizing to bring this person—the finite spirit, the single intellect, the philosopher—into identity with God as the object of pure thinking. And for Hegel like Confucianism and unlike the Greeks, persons are not facts (like legs) but achievements (like walking) that could not do what they do and become what they are without the structures of the human community. For Hegel, the person as an abstract fact does not do justice to the process of becoming a person. Personhood is an irreducibly social achievement in the sense that identities emerge in and through difference, being at once affirmed by oneself and conferred on one by others.

The ontological intuition that “only Being is” is at the core of Parmenides’ treatise *The Way of Truth* and is the basis of the ontology that follows from it. The classical Greeks give us a substance ontology grounded in “being *qua* (or ‘as’) being” or “being *per se*” (i.e., the self-sufficiency of being in itself as it defines any particular thing) that guarantees a permanent and unchanging subject as the substratum for the human experience. With the combination of *eidos* (the essential characteristic that makes something this and not that) and *telos* (the design and purpose of a thing) as the formal and final causes of independent things such as persons, this “sub-stance” necessarily persists through change. In this ontology, “to exist” and “to be” are implicated in one term. The same copula verb “is” (or L. *esse*) answers the two-fold questions of first why something exists, that is, its origins and its goal, and then what it is, its substance. This substratum or essence includes its purpose for being, and is defining of the “what-it-means-to-be-a-thing-of-this-kind” of any particular thing in setting a closed, exclusive boundary and the strict identity necessary for it to be this, and not that.

The question of *why* something exists is answered by an appeal to determinative, originative, and indemonstrable first principles (Gk. *arche*, L. *principium*), and provides the metaphysical separation between creator and creature. The question of *what* something is is answered by its limitation and definition, and provides the ontological distinction between substance and incidental qualities, between real essence and its contingent attributes. In expressing the necessity, self-sufficiency, and independence of things, this substance or essence as the subject of predication is the object of knowledge. It tells us, as a matter of logical necessity, what is what, and is the source of truth in revealing to us with certainty what is real and what is not. As the contemporary philosopher Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽 avers, this kind of substance ontology defining the real things that constitute the content of an orderly and structured cosmos

[...] provides a “dictionary” kind of explanation of the world, seeking to set up an accurate understanding of the limits of all things. In simple terms, it determines “what is what” and all concepts are footnotes to “being” or “is.” (Zhao 2016, p. 147)⁴

⁴[...] 是对世界的“字典式”解释，试图建立界定万物的决定理解，简单地，就是断定“什么是”，一切观念皆为“在/是”(being/is)的注脚。I am using with minor changes the translation of this book by Edmund Ryden that is published by the State University of New York Press in 2024.

This kind of causal thinking is precisely what John Dewey is referencing in his concern about what he calls *the* philosophical fallacy. Dewey alerts us to our inveterate habit of decontextualizing and essentializing one element within the continuity of experience, and then in our best efforts to overcome this post hoc distinction, of then construing this same element as foundational and causal. As a concrete example of this habit, in achieving our personal identities in the process of our ongoing narratives, we abstract something called “being” or “human nature” out of the complexity of this continuing experience, and then make this abstraction antecedent to and causal of the process itself. For Dewey,

[...] the reality is the growth-process itself. [...] The real existence is the history in its entirety, the history just as what it is. The operations of splitting it up into two parts and then having to unite them again by appeal to causative power are equally arbitrary and gratuitous. (Dewey 1985, Vol. 1, p. 210)

In the *Book of Changes*, we find a vocabulary that makes explicit cosmological assumptions that stand in stark alternative to this substance ontology and provides the interpretive context for the Confucian canons by locating them within a holistic, organic, and ecological worldview. In this essay, I have taken it upon myself to create the neologism “zoetology” with Gk. *zoe*- “life” and *-logia* “discourse” as a new term for an old way of thinking that has deep roots in classical Chinese cosmology. It gives us a contrast between “*on*-tology” as “the science of being *per se*” and “*zoe*-tology” that we might translate as *shengsheng lun* 生生論: “the art of living.” This cosmology begins from “living” (*sheng* 生) itself as the motive force behind change and gives us a world of boundless “becomings”; it gives us not “things” that *are*, but “events” that are *happening*. And it is the nature of life itself that it seeks to optimize the available conditions for its continuing growth.

The starting point in this zoetological cosmology then is that nothing does anything by itself; association is a fact. Since the very nature of life is associative and transactional, the vocabulary appealed to in defining Confucian cosmology is irreducibly collateral: always multiple, never one. Everything is at once what it is for itself, for its specific context, and for the unsummed totality. Thus there are always correlative *yinyang* 陰陽 aspects within any process of change, describing the focal identity that makes something uniquely what it is, and by virtue of its vital relations, what it is

becoming. Important to an understanding of this vocabulary is the gestalt shift (i.e., a paradigm shift in one's perception of something) from the Greek noun-dominated thinking with its world of human “beings” and essential “things,” to the Confucian gerundive assumptions about the always eventful nature of human “becomings” living their lives within their unbounded natural, social, and cultural ecologies. It is the difference between a leg and walking, between a lung and breathing.

Turning to the human experience specifically, persons are not defined in terms of limitation, self-sufficiency, and independence, but ecologically by the growth they experience in their intercourse with other persons and their worlds. Given the primacy of vital relations that give persons their focal identities, any particular person is holographic in existing at the pleasure of everything else. Holography—literally, the whole as it is implicated in each thing—is that way of understanding things that begins from the notion that everything is constituted by its particular relations with everything else. The question of why such persons exist is explained by how they exist and what they mean for each other. And the necessity in ontology of defining what is what is replaced by the zoetological possibilities each thing affords everything else for growth, revision, and redefinition. Zhao Tingyang suggests that in contrast to the “dictionary” definition afforded by Greek ontology, the Confucian cosmology provides

[...] an explanation of the “grammar” of the world, striving for a coordinated understanding of the relationships—between heaven and humankind, humankind and things, and humans and humans—by which all doings are generated, with a special emphasis on the mutuality of relationships, and the compatibility of all things.⁵ (Zhao 2016, pp. 147–148)

“Things” as constituted by their relations are continually being redefined by the growth they experience in their intercourse with other things. Like words in a sentence, relational meaning begins from the conventional grammar that provides the basic ordering of these words necessary for them to be intelligible. And in the composition, it is the productive association the words come to have with each other that is the basic source of their meanings. The rhetorical effectiveness of a sentence is achieved as the relations among the words are cultivated and are thus grown to become

⁵[...] 是对世界的“语法式”解释，力求对万事所生成的关系(天与人，人与物，人与人)的协调理解，尤其重视关系的互相性或万事的合宜性。

increasingly eloquent in their expression. And the sentence rises to the level of poetry through the artistry of optimizing the contribution each inimitable word makes to its specific others as it draws upon its own history of associations.

5.4 ZOETOLOGY AND ITS FAR-REACHING IMPLICATIONS

In contrast with Greek “ontology,” there is an alternative, equally engrained prejudice in classical Chinese cosmology made explicit in the *Book of Changes* that we might call “zoetology” (*shengsheng lun* 生生論). The *Changes* is the first among the Chinese classics, and as a text is itself an object lesson in the ecological worldview it attempts to present. That is, when we reflect on the nature of “events” rather than “things” within this process worldview, the relationship of these particular foci to their fields lends itself to a holographic understanding of world systems. The totality or field is both implicated in and construed from the unique perspective of each particular focus: in this case, the *Book of Changes* itself. The “Great Commentary” (*Dazhuan* 大傳) on the *Changes* makes just such a claim in announcing the importance of this canonical text:

《易》之為書也，廣大悉備。有天道焉，有人道焉，有地道焉。

As a document, the *Changes* is vast and far ranging, and has everything complete within it. It contains the way of the heavens, the way of human beings, and the way of the earth.

Indeed, it is this open-ended *Book of Changes* with its centuries of accruing commentaries that has set the terms of art for a persistent yet evolving cosmology and for its cultural common sense. As such, it provides a shared interpretive context for the evolving Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, and most recently, for their engagement with the Western philosophical narrative.

The *Changes*, taking “change” (*yi* 易) as its title, defines the motive force within way-making or world-making (*dao* 道) itself specifically and denotatively as “ceaseless procreating”:

富有之謂大業，日新之謂盛德。生生之謂易 … 通變之謂事，陰陽不測之謂神。

It is because of its sheer abundance we call it “the grand workings”; it is because of its daily renewal we call it “copious virtuosity”; it is because of its ceaseless procreating we call it “the changes” (*yi*). [...] The continuity in flux we call events. And what cannot be fathomed by appeal to *yinyang* thinking is what we call the truly mysterious (*shen*).⁶

Each phrase in this passage isolates one specific way of looking at our continuing life experience, and then gives it a denotative name.⁷ In the language of the text, each name references one aspect of *dao* “way-making,” or perhaps less metaphorically, the unfolding of the cosmic order. The last phrase in this passage then takes us back to where we began, reminding us of the open-endedness of those processes of change expressed through *yinyang* 陰陽 correlations. Whatever “things” in this cosmos might be, their ever-changing identities must ultimately be understood as uniquely centered foci constituted by a manifold of vital relations within a boundless ecological field. It recalls a related description in this same text wherein the sages, like the heavens and the earth, 神无方而易无體 “in their mystery [...] remain undefined, and in their changes have no set structure.”

Sheng 生 as “life, growth, and the kind of birthing that occurs within this vital process” is real and will not be denied. This *Book of Changes* cosmology gives privilege to events as irreducibly relational “becomings” and provides the correlative *yinyang* categories needed to “speak” process and its eventful content. A popular mantra often invoked to capture the spirit of the *Changes* is 生生不已，創造不息 “procreative living is without end; creativity never ceases.” In this processual cosmology, the growth that attends such generative living is not only ceaseless and boundless, but is further elevated to be celebrated as the most vigorous potency and highest value of the cosmos itself:

天地之大德曰生，聖人之大寶曰位。何以守位曰仁，何以聚人曰財，理財正辭、禁民為非曰義。

⁶All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁷There is an important grammatical distinction we find throughout the text. Sometimes the text uses the denotative “is what is meant by” (*zhivei* 之謂) and sometimes the conative “is called or termed” (*weizhi* 謂之). The former expression defines its antecedent explicitly, while the latter connotes or references what is only one “aspect” of some greater whole.

The greatest capacity (*dade* 大德) of the cosmos is life itself. The greatest treasure of the sages is the attainment of standing (*wei* 位). The means of maintaining standing is aspiring to become consummate in one's conduct (*ren* 仁). The means of attracting and mobilizing others is the use of all available resources. Regulating these resources effectively, insuring that language is used properly, and preventing the common people from doing what is undesirable is what is optimally appropriate and most meaningful (*yi* 義).

Life as growth in relations is the magic of a fundamentally moral cosmos. A full complement of the Confucian values is expressed here as nothing more than assiduous cultivation of growth in the various dimensions of the human experience, from the achieved stature of the sages to best practices in the use of resources and in the effecting of social and political order. In this human world, such effective living is the substance of morality and education, and as the continuing source of meaning, is expressed through the boundless creativity and beauty that is its greatest treasure. Meaning is not available to us from putative metaphysical foundations—what David Keightley has described as “a Platonic metaphysics of certainties, ideal forms, and right answers” (Keightley 1988, p. 376). Instead, guidance for leading the most meaningful lives must be formulated and passed on within the historical narrative by the most sagacious of our progenitors as they have coordinated the human experience with the changing cosmic processes. Confucian morality itself is a cosmic phenomenon emerging out of the symbiotic and synergistic transactions that take place between the operations of nature and our concerted human efforts.

The *Book of Changes* has been compiled from a sagacious awareness of the nature of the world around us, and thus provides access to the mysteries and wonders of the human experience in all of its parts:

《易》與天地準，故能彌綸天地之道。仰以觀於天文，俯以察於地理，是故知幽明之故。原始反終，故知死生之說。精氣為物，遊魂為變，是故知鬼神之情狀。

It is because the *Changes* is modelled on the heavens and earth that it is able to cover the full complement of their operations (*dao*). Looking upward, we avail ourselves of the *Changes* to observe the constellations in the heavens, and looking downward, we avail of it to discern the topography of the earth. It is thus that we come to understand the source of both what is apparent and what is obscure. In tracing things back to their origins and then follow-

ing them to their end, we come to understand what can be said about living and dying. Things are formed through the condensing of *qi*, and change occurs in them through the wanderings of their life-force. It is thus that we come to understand the actual circumstances of the gods and spirits.

There is a cluster of key philosophical terms around which this "Great Commentary" on the *Changes* is constructed that reveals the world as it is immediately experienced, providing us with a proliferation of correlated dyadic or "paired" terms: the high and the low, the moving and the still, the hard and the soft, the full and the empty, the large and the small, the bright and the dark, the hot and the cold, and so on. Rather than appealing to an Unmoved Mover or some other external source of change, it is the correlative, bipolar, and dynamic tensions inherent in a *yinyang* life-world so defined that produce the energy of transformation. These same tensions between the determinate and the indeterminate are the source from which the novelty that always attends these processes continually emerges. Important here is a description of how things and events, from the most ordinary and everyday to the noncorporeal world of gods and spirits, are formed and eventually dissipate, animated by motive life-forces and taking shape through perturbations in the psycho-physical *qi*. The correlative relationship of the dyadic pairs such as "living and dying" (*sisheng* 死生) and "gods and spirits" (*guishen* 鬼神) in which each is implicated in the other reflects the porousness of such classifications and the absence of the categorical thinking that would set any final and exclusive limits on them.

The way in which this canonical text has been compiled by the sages and how it appeals to imagistic thinking in the production of meaning are described specifically in terms of change and transformation:

聖人設卦觀象，繫辭焉而明吉凶。剛柔相推而生變化。是故吉凶者、失得之象也，悔吝者、憂虞之象也，變化者、進退之象也，剛柔者、晝夜之象也。六爻之動、三極之道也。

The sages set out the hexagrams and observed the images. Attaching their commentaries to them, they made clear what is auspicious and inauspicious. The firm and the yielding lines displacing each other produces the changes and transformations. It is thus that auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are the image of gaining and losing, that regret and care are the image of anxiety and concern, that change and transformation are the image of advancing and withdrawing, that firm and yielding are the image of day and night. The

movement of the six lines is progress along the way-making (*dao*) of the three ultimates: the heavens, the earth, and humankind.

The sages have created a dynamic, imagistic discourse drawn from their understanding of the generative procreativity of the cosmos to communicate their insights into how we might guide the human experience deliberately, enabling it to unfold within the context of the heavens and the earth in the most auspicious way.

5.5 ZOETOLOGY, IMAGISTIC THINKING, AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Contemporary philosophers such as Mark Johnson and John Dewey before him are making an argument that resonates with the one we find here in the *Changes*. The imagistic discourse of the sages is not only descriptive of the physical operations of the cosmos, but through promoting benign growth it also provides a resource for the human being to create the higher-order values and concepts that make the human experience increasingly moral and intelligent. The subtitle of Johnson's *The Body in the Mind* is "The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason."⁸ In this work, Johnson has done much to argue for the bodily basis of human meaning-formation and also for what is ultimately the aesthetic ground of human flourishing. He maps the way in which the barest of physical images such as "balanced" or "centre and periphery" are extended through the metaphorical projections and elaborations of our imagination to generate complex cognitive and affective patterns of meaning:

Our world radiates out from our bodies as perceptual centers from which we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell our world. (Johnson 1987, p. 124)

For Johnson, the formal, logical structures of human understanding are a direct extension of the activities of our lived bodies with such higher-order intelligence emerging through the exercise of our seemingly boundless imagination. Such is the human capacity to produce complex culture. Johnson identifies his own basic image-schemata as "containment," "force," "balance," "cycles," "scales," "links," and "center-periphery." In

⁸ In many ways Johnson is following John Dewey's pioneering work *Experience and Nature*.

his reflection on what is "learning to become human," Johnson has urged the view

[...] that understanding is never merely a matter of holding beliefs, either consciously or unconsciously. More basically, one's understanding is one's way of being in, or having, a world. This is very much a matter of one's embodiment, that is, of perceptual mechanisms, patterns of discrimination, motor programs, and various bodily skills. And it is equally a matter of our embeddedness within culture, language, institutions, and historical traditions. (Johnson 1987, p. 137)

In appreciating this emergent process of the structures of human understanding, we have to be wary of simple epiphenomenal language that would separate root from tree as cause and effect, making the tree a secondary by-product of the root with itself having no causal effect. Rather, root and tree are a holistic, symbiotic process where they grow together or not at all. Similarly, lived bodies and our embodied living are two aspectual ways of looking at the same process of growth.

The image-schemata we find in the *Changes* are captured in the correlative images as the early sages have described them, and are reflective of the primacy given to vital relationality in the classical Chinese process cosmology. That is, these always situated images are understood in fundamentally and irreducibly relational terms with agency being a second-order consideration. Such images describe the transactional relationships that locate the activities of organisms within their human and natural ecologies. To give just one example of how higher-order thinking might be the extension of bodily actions, it is not difficult to conceive of how recurrent, habituated physical patterns such as giving and getting, rising and falling, agitation and equilibrium could be transformed and metaphorically extended to produce higher-order economic and political concepts defining of a mature culture such as "relational equity" and "social justice." Again, such higher-order but still zoetological "forms of life" in turn are internalized to become integral to our body consciousness.

Turning to the human experience specifically, zoetological persons are not defined in terms of limitation, self-sufficiency, and independence, but ecologically by the growth they experience in their intercourse with other persons and their worlds. Since any one thing exists at the pleasure of everything else, the question of why things exist is explained by how they exist and what they mean for each other. And the cognitive necessity that

emerges in defining what is superseded by the possibilities each thing affords everything else for growth, revision, and redefinition. Just as human flourishing arises from positive growth in the relations of family and community, the symbiotic, co-terminous, and mutually entailing cosmic flourishing is an extension of this same kind of transactional growth but on a more expansive scale. Indeed, human values and a moral cosmic order are both grounded in life and its productive growth, and are thus continuous with each other as interpenetrating complementarities. In canonical texts such as *Focusing the Familiar* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) and the *Classic of Family Reverence* (*Xiaojing* 孝經), human moral imperatives such as “sincerity, resolution” (*cheng* 誠) and “family reverence” (*xiao* 孝), respectively, are discerned in the natural order of things and thus elevated beyond the human experience as cosmic values, giving the best among human beings the stature of co-creators with the heavens and the earth. At the same time the terms that describe erstwhile cosmic forces such as “way-making” (*dao* 道), “imaging” (*xiang* 象), and “patterning” (*li* 理) are also used to express the human capacity to be meaning-makers.

Appealing to this concrete example of identity formation, a person's own potentialities, far from being front-loaded by locating their latent qualities or abilities as some inherent nature that is then available to them for actualization, are inclusive of and a collaboration with their evolving processual contexts. It is thus that such persons, rather than being self-standing human “beings,” can best be characterized in the language of human “becomings” who are constantly internalizing their environing conditions as their identities emerge in the world. Such human “becomings” are vital, interpenetrating, and irreducibly social “events” that create meaning through the continuing cultivation of their relations with others and transform ordinary experience into poetry through the elevation and refinement of the hours shared together as their lives become increasingly significant.

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The Invitation to Co-becoming

Xiangchen Sun

6.1 THE INVITATION

Despite the immense achievements of the modern world, and the unprecedented wealth and development of humanity, crises abound on every front: from ecology to technology, politics to culture, the economy to social welfare. The goals humanity pursues, such as lasting peace, cultural tolerance, equality among all beings, and pushing back against unchecked domination, still lie far beyond reach. This failure of aspirations reflects a particular unease and anxiety of our global age. What appear to be shared demands can, in specific circumstances, become deeply contested, and perhaps even backfire. “Diversity, equity, and inclusion” are also aims of co-becoming, yet how these key concepts are to be understood, and how such an ideal might actually be realized, is far from straightforward. When “diversity” is just window dressing within a more concealed unitary framework, when “equity” turns into a pretext for privilege, and when “inclusion” hardens into a posture of political correctness, our true goals can no longer be achieved.

An invitation begins from goodwill. It reaches out in a more humble, empathetic, and respectful posture, inviting people with different

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positions to take part together. This assumes the coexistence of many different ways of living, encourages co-becoming and mutual integration between humanity and all that exists, and allows for shared growth within an open setting. The term “invitation” carries a certain Eastern inflection: supple in tone, restrained in stance, and lingering in resonance. East Asian intellectual traditions have long emphasized, in the words of the early Chinese philosopher Xunzi, that “a thousand miles are reached one step at a time, and great rivers form from countless small streams.” Reflection on the modern world and efforts to transform contemporary crises are likewise not achieved in a single stroke by proclaiming new principles. They begin instead with the first invitation, proceeding gradually, bit by bit, until small accretions become something substantial.

An invitation expresses a particular stance toward others, one marked by genuine goodwill and by engaging in dialogue with a posture of deep courtesy and respect. From the outset, it differs from the bluntness of a declaration. Seen from an East Asian perspective, the invitation, if it were called “initiative” or something similar, would still carry too forceful a stance and can even create a sense of pressure. Co-becoming is not about imposing one’s own principles upon the world. East Asian traditions have long observed a cautious ethic articulated in the *Book of Rites*: “people are received as learners, not pursued as pupils” (禮聞來學，不聞往教). To invite is to welcome. Even when one believes something to be better, it is not imposed through forceful advocacy. What is emphasized instead is demonstration and voluntary participation, allowing confidence in what is genuinely good to show itself through sincere feeling and honest intent.

An invitation implies openness and tolerance, and requires the capacity to face those who hold radically different views. In Western theories of tolerance, there is often an implicit appeal to an absolute vantage point, whether God or the truth. Human beings are finite, and human existence is marked by imperfection; measured against such absolutes, tolerance appears necessary. Yet even among thinkers who champion tolerance—such as Locke, who in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* explicitly insisted that there can be no tolerance for “atheists and heretics”—this seemingly generous stance still rests on God or absolute truth as its foundation, and tolerance remains, in its own way, aggressively asserted. When thinkers like Isaiah Berlin abandon this kind of absolute grounding, value pluralism risks sliding into relativism. The modern world has developed its own principles of tolerance, but rather than being a form of co-becoming, they merely grant space for what is other. Daoist forms of inclusiveness differ

from this at a fundamental level. Zhuangzi's "walking-two-roads" idea captures this well: "The sagely man brings together a dispute in its affirmations and denials, and rests in the equal fashioning of heaven. This is what is called walking two roads." By drawing on the way of nature to mediate between right and wrong, one settles into the self-balancing movement of the Dao itself, allowing opposing sides to grow in their own directions. In the modern world, remaining genuinely open to a non-Western spiritual tradition, not as diversity accommodated within an existing framework but as something accepted on a foundational level, remains a major challenge.

If the invitation to co-becoming is truly to become a force for change, it cannot remain empty talk. It requires more people to put it into practice and involve themselves directly. It asks people to examine themselves and the world from a different perspective and to coordinate their actions and ways of living according to different principles. Co-becoming is not a matter of rational consensus, but an invitation that comes from the heart, grounded in mutual understanding and empathy. It is my hope that this voice emerging from East Asia can make a contribution to humanity as a whole and to the world at large.

6.2 EAST ASIA

The "Thinking Global Co-becoming: an Open Invitation" (the "Open Invitation") responds to the many crises of our time by issuing a call from East Asia. On the global cultural map, East Asian cultures stand apart from other regions through their strong "family resemblance," and when people from this region come together, a natural sense of warmth and familiarity tends to emerge. East Asia is by no means merely a geographical notion; it is a cultural region in its own right. East Asian scholars share a resonant understanding of the modern world. Of course, within this shared understanding there are also substantial differences. Cultural similarity and diversity always go hand in hand, and this aligns closely with the theme of co-becoming. Historically, East Asia has possessed many shared reference points, and there's been much common ground since the modern period as well. At one time, East Asia took Western-derived modernity as its benchmark, striving to realize a Westernized form of modernity. Although this effort achieved remarkable successes, it also produced distinct forms of unease. More importantly, as modernity has entered a moment of crisis on a global scale, humanity bears a responsibility to

propose responses of its own. Perspectives contributed by East Asian scholars in this volume are therefore rich with significance.

Opportunities for East Asian scholars to gather in this way and engage in philosophical discussion seem relatively rare; the general sense is that exchanges with Western counterparts occur more frequently. This brings to mind a series of Christian theology workshops that began more than a decade ago at Doshisha University, and which were later held in Seoul and Shanghai. The topic was Christian theology, and the working language was English—it was under these conditions that East Asian scholars were brought together. But philosophy is not only about engaging past spiritual legacies; it must also examine contemporary society and articulate hopes for the future. For this reason, this volume on co-becoming has been particularly exciting, offering East Asian scholars a chance to confront the present world together.

Though close in proximity, East Asian societies have also remained at a certain distance, bound up in many entanglements throughout modern history. As the historian Young-seo Baik noted, “East Asia is not a flat, homogeneous collection of states, but a layered, uneven region structured by multiple centers and peripheries.”¹ Historically, East Asia has been marked by complex relationships as well as persistent conflicts. For East Asian thought to generate influence on a global scale, there is still a long road ahead. The earliest philosophical self-awareness of Asian culture within East Asia can arguably be traced to the Kyoto School. Japanese philosophy was among the first to recognize East Asia’s significance in the wider world. If all of this remained at the level of concepts, it would be easy to paint an attractive picture. Reality, however, tells a different story.

To speak of “East Asia” today is even more challenging, but also more consequential. The meaning of “East Asia” itself is highly contested, which makes the gathering of East Asian scholars all the more significant. East Asian countries must work toward genuine reconciliation grounded in serious historical reflection. As Professor Tsuyoshi Ishii has repeatedly emphasized, future exchange and cooperation must be advanced on new foundations. If East Asia cannot properly address its own internal relationships, any invitation issued from East Asia will amount to little more than

¹Young-seo Baik, *Thinking East Asia Horizontally: Rethinking East Asian History in Core Sites* (橫觀東亞：從核心現場重思東亞歷史), Taipei: Linking Books, 2016, Chapter 1, Section 2.

empty words, and will lose its true value as a global appeal. Only if East Asia can set an example will an invitation from East Asia carry real force.

6.3 MODERNITY

We live in modern society, enjoying its conveniences while also bearing its burdens. It must be acknowledged that modernity was, at its core, constructed on the basis of Western cultural traditions. Western experience, refined and abstracted through rationalization, became the dominant discourse of the modern world. For a long time, modernization effectively meant “Westernization.” In Japan this was called “abandoning Asian values and embracing European ones,” in Korea “civilizational enlightenment,” and in China “total Westernization.” All of these terms presupposed that the West represented modern civilization. In this process, modernity and Western cultural tradition came to form a dual “surface-depth structure” within modern society. The “surface” consisted of a narrative of modernity, what Hegel called “forms of rationality,” while the “depth” was sustained by Western cultural tradition, what Hegel described as “content of rationality.” When surface and depth aligned, the Western world moved with ease; when they failed to align, the non-Western world found itself constrained at every step. Western philosophy has often presented Western intellectual traditions as universal, *a priori*, and disseminated them as such. It was modern Japanese philosophy, in particular, that first recognized that Western ontology and epistemology, and even Kantian philosophy, though appearing as universal reason, are in substance rooted in Western experience, thought, and language. This awareness met with serious setbacks, yet it remains deeply valuable.

Modernity, originating in the West, has made enormous contributions to humanity. It accelerated the course of human history, established many modern institutions, and articulated principles of freedom, dignity, and rights for modern individuals. At the same time, it is impossible to deny that the various crises enumerated in “The Open Invitation”—from technology to ecology, from ideology to geopolitics, from moral cultivation to religious belief—are all closely bound up with modernity’s own internal predicaments. Every era has its crises, but the crises of modernity are especially pronounced, and especially troubling.

Diagnoses of these crises often present themselves as questioning and critiquing modern principles. But upon closer inspection, one finds that Western cultural tradition plays a major role throughout, exerting

enormous influence. Hegel, for instance, famously praised Luther's doctrine of justification by faith for its profound significance in modern history, seeing in it a historical principle that human beings, by their very essence, are destined to be free. Yet the darker effects of modernity also carry the imprint of Western intellectual tradition. As Nietzsche showed, the Platonic split between a suprasensible world and this one is likewise a source of modern nihilism. When the modern world runs into deep problems, critique cannot limit itself to the present; it must move from rethinking modernity toward a deeper reckoning with the Western tradition. Western intellectual tradition therefore bears a substantial share of responsibility for the modern world's many predicaments.

People often rethink modernity by projecting imagined futures, by idealizing a classical past, or by appealing to rigorous systems of logic. But once one traces modernity back to the Western logic that underlies it, non-Western thought emerges as a separate vantage point from which modernity itself can be re-examined. The non-Western world bears a responsibility to offer such an external perspective, allowing the present to be seen anew. In this sense, returning to East Asian intellectual traditions and moving beyond the confines of modernity is what truly gives expression to human diversity, and it is also the point of departure for an ecosystem of co-becoming.

6.4 CO-BECOMING

Can intellectual traditions rooted in East Asia offer a different vantage point for critically rethinking modernity? The point is to draw on East Asia without confining the discussion to East Asia; to begin from East Asia, and, in terms the present can understand, to turn back toward humanity as a whole and face the challenges of modernity together. In this sense, discussion of co-becoming is not merely a matter of intellectual tradition. Rather, it opens the possibility of moving beyond the "first version" of modernity. Modernity is a world of ideas. Change in the world begins with changes in thought, and any response to crisis must likewise start by reworking the ideas that shape it.

Two of the authors of "The Open Invitation" possess a deep grounding in Daoist philosophy. Throughout the text one senses a Daoist resonance, steeped in subtlety and insight, drawing fully on the spirit of Laozi and Zhuangzi to offer a sustained reflection on, and forceful critique of, the modern world. In fact, East Asia encompasses a wide spectrum of

intellectual traditions, from which one can approach and respond to the arguments advanced by the invitation from multiple perspectives. The idea of co-becoming can also be illuminated through the *Book of Changes*, long regarded as the foremost of the classical Chinese texts. At the very origin of the Chinese-language world, there was no Parmenidean notion of Being. Nor did there emerge a corresponding tradition of ontology grounded in such an abstraction, itself derived from the structural features of Indo-European languages. The *Book of Changes* instead offers the Chinese world, and East Asia more broadly, a different metaphysical starting point: “The great attribute of heaven and earth is the giving and maintaining life.” *Qian* 乾 (the symbol of heaven) generates life in its fullness; *Kun* 坤 (the symbol of earth) nurtures life in its breadth, embracing difference and transforming all things, with ceaseless vitality unfolding before our eyes. The presence of traditional thought in the modern age is not merely a matter of philological study or interpretation. More importantly, it lies in whether such thought can engage the lived world and respond to the problems of modern society. This is what constitutes the genuine modern turn of classical thought, and it is here that the modern significance of East Asia’s classical humanistic traditions resides. As early as the seventeenth century, Leibniz compared Eastern and Western thought to two great peaks, each bearing universal significance for humanity. Yet for a long time, we have tended either to frame Eastern and Western thought in terms of a stark opposition between modernity and tradition, abandoning one world in order to embrace another, or to treat a rationalized version of Western thought as universal while casting the Eastern world as a special case, folding its specialness into modern universality. In all these approaches, the universal significance of East Asian thought has been subsumed and obscured. In fact, there’s no need for us to shy away from its Eastern origins. Once articulated through rational reflection, it too can be universal, and it too can belong to what humanity holds in common.

Co-becoming is a concept rooted in East Asia. What sets it apart from the concept of “co-existence” is its focus on life. Emmanuel Levinas once broke the word “interest” (in the sense of stake or self-interest) down into its Latin roots, *inter-esse*, indicating a relation of “being-between.” The logic of word formation often reveals the deeper meanings behind concepts, and a relation of “being-between” is precisely a question of “interests.” Hobbes’s vision of coexistence, also grounded in the question of “interests,” yields the familiar image of a war of all against all,

where each person's existence becomes a site of conflict with others. This is a form of being defined by antagonism. Co-becoming, however, follows a different logic. It is not a logic of being, but a logic of growth. Co-becoming means opening up within the process of change, accommodating difference, nourishing one another, and growing together. Such a plural landscape cannot be reduced to uniformity, nor can it be adequately contained within the bounds of what is called "negative liberty." Here there are no stark positions of black and white, no principles built on rigid binary opposition. Within complex and shifting processes, one moves from "co-being" toward co-becoming, and further still toward mutual integration. We might even borrow another formulation from Fei Xiaotong (费孝通, 1910–2005): "Let each appreciate the beauty of others, and let each cherish their own beauty, so that many beauties may flourish together."² Co-becoming is precisely this "many beauties flourishing together," and in this sense it poses a fundamental challenge to the principle of being itself.

It seems simple enough to accept that which is reasonable. Yet the modern world is built on Western intellectual traditions, and to this day Western philosophy has, at its core, not accepted non-Western thought as a philosophical framework in its own right. Non-Western forms of thought have largely appeared within Western disciplines only in anthropological guise. Husserl stated this position quite explicitly, arguing that only Western philosophy represents humanity's universal reason, while India and China possess value merely as civilizations of anthropological significance. It is precisely this mindset that constitutes a hidden source of the modern world's crises. From this perspective, the co-becoming project bears an important philosophical task: drawing on East Asian intellectual traditions to rethink modernity and to lay philosophical pathways toward new possibilities for humanity. Put differently, the task is to re-lay the metaphysical foundations of human existence, shifting from Being as an ontological ground to an account centered on co-becoming as continual generation. It's not simply a matter of putting forward another idea, but of establishing a different possibility at the most fundamental level. "The Open Invitation" is far from as straightforward as it might appear. Behind its seemingly direct gesture of invitation lies a philosophical task of the deepest order.

²Fei Xiaotong. "The study of man in China – personal experience" (人的研究在中国——个人的经历), *Readings*, May 1990.

6.5 GOOD AND EVIL

In discussing co-becoming, Professor McConaghy raised a pointed question: how are we to confront evil? How are we to respond to the all-too-familiar reality of the strong preying on the weak? How are we to face the concrete forms that evil takes in the world? I still remember the moral outrage he expressed when speaking of his experiences in Taipei, and I could clearly sense his deep-seated integrity and his instinctive hatred of injustice. His challenge was aimed at preventing co-becoming from turning into a posture of false virtue—deceiving heaven and humanity alike, accommodating itself to a corrupt world. As Confucius polemicized, “The village sophist is a thief of virtue.”

Owing to our human finitude, we may lack the capacity for absolute judgment when it comes to right and wrong in the world. Yet evil cannot be ignored, for countless forms of human suffering arise from it. At a moment when co-becoming was being advocated in generous terms, Professor McConaghy’s questions struck like a sharp wake-up call. Still, between good and evil, humanity has ultimately placed its faith in the power of the good. Plato located the Idea of the Good in the suprasensible realm, establishing its absolute status. Augustine, after early involvement with Manichean dualism and its strict opposition between good and evil, ultimately turned to Christianity, overcoming fear of evil through absolute faith in God. Similarly, in East Asia during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, intense debates arose over whether human nature is good or evil. In the end, Mencius’s doctrine of the goodness of human nature prevailed, becoming the dominant current in the Chinese intellectual world. Seen in this light, great thinkers across civilizations have shared a firm confidence in the power of the good, and mainstream traditions bear witness to humanity’s commitment to goodness and its disdain for evil.

Good and evil at the level of individual action are what people feel most directly in everyday life. As Professor McConaghy recounted in one story, a criminal gang forcibly bought out a car-wash business run by decent local residents, a case that naturally provokes indignation. On closer inspection, while the gang’s harassment is certainly reprehensible, what’s even more infuriating is the inaction of public authority and its collusion with elected officials. It is this failure that creates space for evil to operate and amplifies the harm of the strong preying on the weak. Even the novel *No Country for Old Men*, which Professor McConaghy mentioned,

presents Anton Chigurh—the lone, demon-like figure—as a form of individual evil. Such figures rightly inspire hatred, but without some enabling mechanism that abets them, they would ultimately be eliminated by ordinary decency. In that sense, an ecosystem of co-becoming would naturally restore balance, curbing certain forms of ugliness that arise in everyday life.

The gravest evils in human history have been systemic in nature, often carried out under the banner of good, and countless human tragedies have unfolded as a result. Individual wrongdoing is multiplied many times over through such systems, allowing the effects of evil to spread everywhere. What this has led to is not an ecosystem of co-becoming, but a deterioration of the ecological order, or even a collapse of the systems themselves. The reason evil has been able to unleash such overwhelming destruction in human history lies precisely in its reliance on certain systems that nourish and amplify it, and in the reckless misuse of those systems. Various unsavory aspects of human nature are magnified by systems. At the most basic level of human nature, the emergence of evil is often no more than letting one's impulses go unchecked, which rarely causes great upheaval on its own. It is precisely by means of flawed systems, however, within which petty human impulses find cover, that a fundamental inversion takes place: even minor evils can be expanded without limit, leading to repeated atrocities and the complete loss of moral restraint. Hannah Arendt perceptively exposed the terror of the “banality of evil,” showing how it grows quietly before erupting into extreme violence. This represents a thorough destruction of the human ecosystem and the loss of its capacity for self-repair. Faced with large-scale ecological devastation, systems must be changed, systemic decline must be halted, and resistance becomes necessary. This is similar to how Laozi did not oppose the use of force or even war, insisting instead that they be exercised with a spirit of compassion. Against such forms of evil, our task is to strengthen systems of co-becoming, to resist oppression caused by human-made systems, and to stop the spread of evil. This naturally requires that systems of co-becoming be carefully cultivated, so that fragile forms of life are given space to exist, something that demands human awareness and sustained care.

In Professor Young-seo Baik's account, the critique of capital is never abandoned. In traditional worlds, desire was often linked to the problem of evil; the modern world, by contrast, harnesses market forces to turn desire into a driving engine. Both the growth of modernity and its impasses are inseparable from power, technology, and capital. These are the Leviathans of modern society, the systems that magnify and accelerate it.

The ferocity of power, the expansion of capital, and the inflation of technology all demand an extraordinarily delicate guidance by the good. When power and capital combine without effective restraint, when desire sweeps capital into boundless expansion, when technology layered upon capital creates the illusion of omnipotence, humanity is in fact standing before a bottomless abyss. Humans are finite, as is the Earth. The concept of co-becoming continually recalls this fact of finitude and urges vigilance toward any form of unchecked expansion. Co-becoming calls for the empathetic capacity to put oneself in another's place. Starting from small-scale capacities, we must gather the force of the good, advance ethical consensus on a global scale, and, through co-becoming, form an effective system of maintaining balance.

6.6 MILIEU (FUDO)

There is no denying that the contemporary world has achieved many extraordinary accomplishments, and when it was first built, the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant stood as one such achievement. Yet the contemporary world is also profoundly precarious, and the nuclear disaster there has become a paradigmatic case of crisis. This dual character of the world captures the real condition humanity faces in modernity. The nuclear disaster site and the vast contaminated areas created fourteen years ago by the massive tsunami triggered by the Great East Japan Earthquake are a heartbreaking case in which modern technology brutally pierced the world of milieu. The “core site” is a place where contradictions of time and space are concentrated, and what we visited was precisely the core site of the Fukushima disaster, a scar that starkly exposes the sharp tensions between humanity and nature, technology and survival, and the short term and the long term.

In modern Japanese philosophy, the thought of Watsuji Tetsurō stands out for its distinctive character, and his concept of Milieu(Fudo) is especially worth examining in the context of co-becoming. Milieu captures the foundational relationship between human existence and its surrounding conditions. It is not a simple matter of how humans perceive their environment, but of how the surrounding world expresses itself in lived existence. It is a mode of human self-discovery, a concept in which humans and their environment form an inseparable whole. The nuclear disaster zone created by the Tōhoku earthquake reveals the destruction of Milieu in a double sense. At the Tomioka City Archive, one can sense the immense

damage inflicted by the earthquake and tsunami on local ways of life. The original harmony between humans and nature expressed by the concept of Milieu proves fragile in the face of massive natural catastrophe. Yet the deeper destruction does not lie in natural disaster itself. The Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum convey even more forcefully the terrifying harm that technological disaster inflicts on human existence. Such technological catastrophe shatters the warmth and integrity of Milieu far more thoroughly. Its damage is greater, its recovery more difficult, and this is what is truly frightening.

The village of Iitate is among the most beautiful rural areas in Japan, a place that most vividly embodies the local *satoyama* and *satoumi* landscapes. This is not wilderness scenery, but a site of harmonious co-becoming shaped through interaction between humans and their surroundings. Today, however, Iitate is also one of the area's most severely contaminated by the nuclear disaster. Forests have been polluted, large numbers of villagers have been forced to leave their homes, vast tracts of fertile farmland lie abandoned, and enormous volumes of contaminated soil await disposal. Although the Japanese government has invested substantial resources in restoring the conditions of life here, the damage is immense, recovery is slow, and the outlook remains uncertain. Yet even in the most difficult places, there are moving stories of resilience. Mr. Oda Yōichi, a university professor, continued to press forward in the aftermath of the disaster with unwavering determination: he founded the Resurrection of Fukushima nonprofit organization and entered deep into the disaster zone to carry out relief and restoration work. While articulating his own vision, he has also devoted himself to restoring polluted villages and land through natural means, seeking to rebuild the world of Milieu.

Within the world of Milieu, which resists absolute divisions between humans and objects, humanity has its own gentler ways of living and its own forms of wisdom for engaging with the natural world. This was evident when we visited a local Shinto shrine, where gods, humans, and the natural world already exist in a primordial balance, the natural condition of the world of Milieu. Under modern conditions, however, this balance has been deliberately disrupted, as technology forcefully impacts the world of milieu, whether in positive or negative ways. In the face of destruction, the question becomes how to restore the role of the earth as a nurturing

mother and how to return to a more primordial way of living with the land. While this may seem like a nonrational appeal, it is in fact a more fundamental destination of co-becoming, an expression of respect for humanity's foundational values and behavioral paradigms.

The indigenous movements that emerged globally in the 1970s were not concerned only with cultural identity and equal rights; they also responded to the growing deterioration of the ecological environment, recognizing the need to protect traditional knowledge that is integrated with the land. This aligns closely with the world of Milieu. Yet the movement soon departed from its original trajectory and focus, falling into the familiar trap of identity politics. What had once been a Milieu world oriented toward co-becoming turned, through self-assertion, into political claims marked by sharp oppositions between friend and enemy. The collapse of the Milieu world cannot be attributed solely to technological impact. Within a misguided framework, the excessive intensification of self-identity can itself become a form of self-undermining. How can tradition achieve co-becoming with modernity? How can indigenous peoples and minority groups achieve co-becoming with majority societies? How can local knowledge persist within forms of universal knowledge? These are questions that demand serious reflection. Co-becoming means protecting diverse forms of Milieu, and any deliberate hardening of self-identity risks damaging the ecosystem of co-becoming. What we need is a more integrated form of co-becoming, in which even the vulnerable possess a balancing force of their own.

Co-becoming arises from diversity, yet diversity alone does not automatically lead to a harmonious co-becoming under conditions of negative liberty. When diversity must assert itself through confrontation, when it becomes incommensurable, this is an attempt to pursue co-becoming within old frameworks, and it is bound to miss the mark. Milieu, grounded in nature, possesses an inherent multiplicity—rich, varied, and marked by co-becoming among all things. If co-becoming is to be realized, we must respect Milieu, and indeed work to rebuild countless worlds of Milieu.

6.7 CONCLUSION

“The Open Invitation” approaches the deficiencies of modernity with a posture of humility. Globalization in its first form was largely a product of Western homogenization; it made major contributions, but also incurred

serious costs. Humanity is now connected in unprecedented ways, yet what matters most is how we live together face to face. The Earth has long since become a small village, and co-becoming poses a simple but pressing question: what kind of global village does humanity truly need?

The world of the past featured brilliant civilizational landscapes, yet the gods were scattered across different realms, and religious absolutes were confined to limited domains. The modern world, meanwhile, has drawn diverse and striking forms of otherness rapidly into clear view. The Second Vatican Council soberly recognized the need for harmonious coexistence with non-Christian traditions, but even then it could not have imagined the speed at which face-to-face encounter would arrive. The call for co-becoming has thus become urgent. The realization of co-becoming has its conditions. We need to rebuild an outlook in which the world begins with gifting and is understood as relational, making co-becoming essential for humans to be able to live together. The logic of co-becoming is not a certain principle or stance, but a baseline, a form of wisdom. It places greater weight on pathways and methods, on multiplicity and possibility. Modernity foregrounded individual value; co-becoming provides an organic ecology among individuals. Although humans occupy a distinctive position between heaven and earth, only by committing to balance and mediation can we assist in the generative processes of the natural world, participate alongside them, and return to a warmer mode of dwelling within the world.

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Philosophies of the Parasite: From Coexistence to Para-existence

Futoshi Hoshino

7.1 PARASITOS: ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE PARASITE

The phrase “one who eats beside” offers the oldest definition of what we call the “parasite.” It refers to a person who eats the meal (*sitos*) served at another’s table, positioned beside it (*para*). The Greek term *parasitos*, from which the modern word “parasite” ultimately derives, thus emerged from this specific configuration of eating at another’s side.¹

Today, the word “parasite” is most widely associated with its biological sense, referring to organisms that live off a host. Its original meaning, however, designated someone who eats beside another person’s meal. Whether the subject is human or nonhuman, the prefix *para* in this

¹For example, Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* lists as its primary definition: “[O]ne who eats at the table of another, and repays him with flattery and buffoonery, parasite.” *Greek-English Lexicon* (1843), revised edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 1323.

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context should be understood not as “sharing,” but rather as “standing outside” or “being excluded.”

In concrete terms, the *parasitos* is clearly excluded from the categories of “family” or “friend,” those who are expected to share a household meal. Parasites may take in nutrients from within our bodies, but we do not “share” a meal with them. Likewise, a traveler who receives food and lodging as an act of hospitality is not a formal member of the household, but a guest who will eventually move on. Such *parasitoi* occupy an uncomfortable position within another’s home, taking their sustenance without ever fully belonging.

In ancient Greece, the *parasitos* appears as early as Middle and New Comedy in the fourth century BCE. His figure, however, differs little from the image still associated with the term “parasite” today. He is, in short, someone who eats and drinks at another’s expense, without spending a single drachma of his own. Typically portrayed as a cunning character, he seeks to win others’ favor in order to secure access to their table. In Greek comedy, the *parasitos* thus became a stock figure, one that persisted throughout later comedic traditions. For this reason, the figure reappears in Roman comedy and even in much later works—most famously in Denis Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* (1762–1773).

In *The Parasite*, written in the second century, Lucian has a character named Simon say that “the art of the parasite is the craft of drinking, eating, and of deploying whatever words are necessary to obtain them—its aim being pleasure.”

Lucian’s dialogue *The Parasite* proceeds as follows. The scene opens with Tychiades abruptly asking Simon, “So, what skill do you possess?” Simon replies that he knows nothing of music, medicine, or geometry, nor of rhetoric or philosophy. But then, as if suddenly remembering, he adds that there is in fact one particular skill he has mastered. He hesitates to name it at first, but when Tychiades presses him, he timidly confesses that this skill is “the art of the parasite.”

The Greek term *parasitēkē*, or “the art of the parasite,” which appears in this exchange, was not a common word even in antiquity. Suspicious of Simon’s claim that being a parasite could count as a *technē*, Tychiades in fact coins the term himself—modeled on *rhetorikē* (the art of rhetoric) and *grammatikē* (the art of writing). In response, Simon attempts to clarify in what sense parasitism may properly be called an art.

Simon’s argument is, in its own way, exemplary: he appeals directly to the criteria that define a *technē* as such. He begins by invoking a standard

definition of art or skill in antiquity: “[A] body of knowledge useful for living, harmoniously employed for a given purpose.”² Tychiades raises no objection to this definition. Building on its terms, Simon proceeds at length to explain why *parasitēkē* is, by this measure, a genuine and even respectable art. His explanation runs roughly as follows.

First, a parasite must be able to discern—not unlike a prophet, but with greater accuracy—whose table will be worth approaching and whose will not. In other words, the art of parasitism requires the capacity to judge character: to determine who is a worthy person and who is not. This ability to “read” people thus constitutes one component of the parasite’s *technē*.

Simon then continues: a parasite must possess intelligence and firm knowledge in order to inspire feelings of warmth and affection in his patron. Above all, he must be well versed in the qualities of foods and in various matters relating to cooking, for without such expertise he would be incapable of offering, at the dinner table, the kinds of remarks that earn the admiration of others. For this reason, Simon insists, only someone endowed with exceptional wisdom and understanding can hope to practice the art of parasitism successfully.

He concludes that *parasitēkē* is “the art of drinking, eating, and of deploying whatever words are necessary to obtain them,” and that its aim is “pleasure.”³ More than this, he maintains that parasitism is not merely one art among others but, viewed as a whole, the very best of them. Simon goes on to argue as follows:

Parasitēkē surpasses all other arts in every respect. Every other art inevitably begins with hardship, fear, and no small amount of flogging—burdens no one willingly wishes to endure. By contrast, this art alone, in my view, can be mastered without any toil. Have you ever seen anyone come home from a banquet in tears? Children returning from school, yes—but never a guest returning from dinner. And have you ever seen anyone go off to a banquet with the same dread with which children go off to school? The parasite willingly goes to the feast and desires nothing more than to exercise his art to the fullest. Practitioners of other arts, however, come to hate their craft; some even go so far as to run away from home on its account.⁴

² Lucian, *The Parasite*, 4, in *Luciani Opera*, ed. Matthew Donald Macleod, 4 vols. (Oxford Classical Texts, 1972–1987). My translation.

³ Ibid., 9. My translation.

⁴ Ibid., 13. My translation.

Although Lucian's work is a satire, Simon's explanation of his own parasitic craft—prompted by Tychiades' questioning—nevertheless highlights several features of this practice.

In any case, the original meaning of *parasitos* is “one who eats beside” the host's table. Yet the mode of existence we now associate with the parasite seems less tied to the act of eating than to a particular place. In Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite*, for instance, the basement dweller Geun-se appears—especially in contrast to the Kim family—to be the “true” parasite, largely through dramatic effects that span both the revelation of his presence and its aftermath. Even setting the film aside, the figure we ordinarily regard as a “parasite” is linked not only to food but also, and perhaps even more intimately, to a specific spatial locus.

Why is this the case? Although what follows remains only a hypothesis, it seems to me that the Greek *parasitos*—originally bound closely to the act of eating—gradually came to be associated instead with place as it was translated into the languages of the modern West. This shift, I suspect, owes something to a development that was largely accidental, yet historically established.

What do I mean by this? When we encounter the English word “parasite,” for example, we immediately recognize the prefix *para* and almost unconsciously separate the term into *para*-site. The same does not apply to every Romance language, but at least in French the situation is broadly similar to English: the Greek implication of *sitos* (“grain” or “food”) is not entirely absent, yet it has largely receded into the background. If we neglect, as we often do, to return to the Greek root, we may hastily—and mistakenly—take the word to refer to something that stands “beside” (*para*) a “site,” a place.

7.2 PARASITE AS FIGURE AND PROBLEM: BONG JOON-HO'S *PARASITE*

Let us now turn to Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019), a film that presents a particularly clear dramatization of parasitism as both social figure and conceptual problem.

The film revolves around three households: the Kim family (Ki-taek, Chung-sook, Ki-woo, Ki-jung), the Park family (Dong-ik, Yeon-kyo, Da-hye, Da-song), and the underground family—Geun-se and his wife Moon-gwang—whose existence is revealed midway through the story.

Broadly speaking, the first half of the film follows the poor Kim family, who live in a semi-basement apartment in Seoul, as they skillfully position themselves within the wealthy Park household. The second half centers on the grand party held in the Parks' absence, during which Geun-se's presence in the basement is discovered, ultimately leading to catastrophe.

The film is saturated with symbols and allegorical structures; every detail—beginning with the parallel composition of the two four-person families—is neatly integrated into a narrative circle. The title *Parasite* likewise belongs to this system of signs. The first half of the story traces, step by step, how Ki-woo becomes the English tutor of Da-hye, which in turn allows Ki-jung to enter the house as Da-song's art instructor, followed by Ki-taek as the driver and Chung-sook as the housekeeper. Here the structure is clear: the Kim family positions itself as the parasite of the Park household, both economically and symbolically.

Everything changes, however, when the former housekeeper Moon-gwang appears during the Kims' bold revelry in their employers' home. She reveals the presence of her husband Geun-se, who has been secretly living in the Parks' basement. With the emergence of what appears as the "true" parasite, the Kims' scheme begins to unravel and the comedy shifts—after a brief passage through suspense—into tragedy.

As we have just seen, the force of the title *Parasite* rests on the film's presentation of a double parasitism: that of the Kim family and that of the couple Geun-se and Moon-gwang. The Kim family positions itself within the Park household economically, while Geun-se and Moon-gwang do so spatially. In both cases the Parks serve as host, yet the two parasites are of different orders: the Kims, who receive unjustifiably high wages in the hope of escaping poverty, may be regarded as comparatively mild forms of parasitism, whereas Geun-se, hiding himself in another's basement to evade enormous debts, represents a more literal and deep-rooted kind of parasite.

It is therefore no surprise that the Japanese subtitle—"The Semi-basement Family"—was chosen to highlight the presence of the "true" parasite, Geun-se, who appears midway through the narrative. The phrase clearly refers to the Kims' semi-basement apartment, introduced at the beginning of the film; but once the existence of the man who lives in the *actual* basement is revealed, his appearance is rendered all the more striking by contrast. In a film where the spatial axis of "above" and "below" consistently figures social inequality, emphasizing the "semi-basement" as a topos is more than appropriate.

In any case, the film's plot—culminating in the tragedy after which Ki-taek takes Geun-se's place in the bunker—exhibits a structural precision that leaves little to criticize. Since the film received the Palme d'Or at Cannes and later four Academy Awards including Best Picture, it has been discussed so extensively that scarcely any aspect of it seems to have escaped comment. Yet amid this abundance of discourse, one issue appears to have gone largely unnoticed. This is not because something important has been overlooked in the film. Rather, it is because something so obvious has never quite been articulated.

Namely, the question of what a “parasite” is in the first place. This question, which may sound somewhat peculiar, arises from a basic doubt: why do viewers so readily accept the title *Parasite* as self-evident? If the word appears in the title, it is natural to assume both that a “parasite” (as a figure) must exist within the film and that “parasitism” (as a practice) constitutes the film's core concern. Indeed, such an assumption seems to operate almost tacitly among those familiar with the work. But on what kind of recognition does this assumption ultimately rest?

In the film, the Kim family in the semi-basement and the couple Geun-se and Moon-gwang in the basement are each represented as parasites who live off the Park household in entirely different senses. Connected with the earlier discussion of etymology, it is worth noting that both families, in their own ways, steal “food” from their host much like the ancient *parasitos*. As mentioned above, the scene in the middle of the film in which the Kims enjoy a large meal inside the Park house serves as a symbolic demonstration of this. And we should not forget that Geun-se, who appears immediately afterward, also survives only because Moon-gwang secretly provides him with food—a practice she can no longer continue, which is precisely what leads to her fateful encounter with the Kims.

To be sure, the film vividly depicts this “original” mode of parasitism—namely, secretly taking food that belongs to others. Yet our recognition of these characters as parasites does not, I think, depend on their literal theft of food. The Kims obtain unjustifiably high wages from the Park couple through various acts of deception and scheming, while Geun-se, having nearly perfected the art of hiding his own existence, has effectively taken root in the family's basement. In this film, as in contemporary discourse more generally, the phrase “to parasitize” something largely carries economic or spatial implications.

But if this is so, a certain problem arises. My earlier discussion of etymology was meant to remind us that the term originally bore a strong

connection to food. Yet, as we have just seen, this original sense has been largely lost, and the word now commonly refers to economic or spatial forms of exploitation. *What* is being taken is no longer the central issue; rather, what the different uses of the term share is the manner of taking—namely, that it is done improperly. In the end, both the Kim family and the couple Geun-se and Moon-gwang suffer the consequences of their respective transgressions. But this only means that *their* wrongdoing is made visible to us. There is no guarantee that Dong-ik, Yeon-kyo, or their two children have never exploited anyone. And if there is no such guarantee, nothing prevents us from considering them, too, as parasites.

There is a further problem. If parasitism consists merely in “taking” something from another, then whether this is done justly or unjustly is ultimately a secondary matter—after all, who is in a position to draw that line? To put the point starkly: no being can sustain its existence without drawing on something external to itself, and none can acquire everything it needs by wholly legitimate means. Thus, unless we limit the notion of parasitism to the literal taking of food, the condition of being a parasite risks becoming identical with the fundamental condition of existence itself.

In this sense, we are all parasites in one way or another. Yet in contemporary society the word “coexistence” has a far more agreeable resonance. Everywhere we turn, it is “coexistence” that is invoked, praised, and idealized. And indeed, the difficulty of coexistence in the real world—economic inequality, religious conflict, and the global rise of exclusionary politics—remains an urgent issue. But the word “parasite,” differing by only a single character from its more pleasant counterpart in Japanese, carries an unsettling resonance. What would it mean to think not in terms of “coexistence” (共生) but of “parasitism” (寄生)? Not of living *with* another (coexistence) but of living *beside* something (para-existence)?

In any event, within the limited space that remains, all I can offer is a sketch of a general theory of the parasite and a few conceptual markers—topoi—that may guide future inquiry. For a parasitology yet to come: for the still-unseen guests who travel between eating, moving, and touching.

7.3 THE CONDITIONS OF PARASITISM: LAW, TRANSGRESSION, NON-ASSIMILATION

Here, let us reconsider parasitism—understood so far as figure and representation—in relation to “law.”

A parasite—lacking a proper dwelling or a stable source of nourishment, at times putting down roots in a single household and at other times circulating among several—is, in this sense, essentially bound to movement. This movement, however, should not be understood simply as physical displacement. Rather, it refers to the repeated inhabitation of places to which the parasite has no rightful claim. A parasite is an entity that, despite having no legitimate reason to be in a given place, comes to inhabit it before one realizes it, and that may in turn depart and settle elsewhere. The first condition of parasitism, then, lies in this act of inhabiting a place where one is not meant to be, regardless of the type or duration of one's stay. This condition alone is insufficient to define parasitism, but it is nonetheless necessary.

In most cultural contexts, it would be considered illicit for someone to appear at another person's home and begin living and eating there. Such behavior appears illicit because, in whatever form it takes, occupying a dwelling and partaking of its food are generally regulated by what we may call "law." As a matter of course, the right to inhabit a house—whether through purchase or lease—is secured through legal arrangements in a broad sense, including economic transactions. Thus, the boundary determining whether one may enter another's home and share a meal there depends on whether the act rests upon some form of legal legitimacy.

One might object that many cultures include customs of unconditional hospitality, in which strangers are welcomed and offered food without prior negotiation or compensation. From this perspective, arguments concerning rights of occupancy would seem to apply only to certain cultural spheres. Yet even here, it is crucial to recognize that such hospitality presupposes an implicit normative order. To welcome the stranger is not an arbitrary gesture but a practice governed by a shared code—one that defines who may be welcomed, under what conditions, and within what limits. The difference, then, is not between law and its absence, but between written and unwritten forms of law; there is no absolute divide between the two. For our purposes, we may therefore say that what ultimately determines a being's proper dwelling is "law," understood in this extended and inclusive sense.

From this, we can derive the second condition of the parasite. This condition lies in the continual transgression of established law through the act of inhabiting places where one is not meant to be. What does this mean? Discussions of parasitism often emphasize the "gift" offered by the host who receives the parasite. The parasite's existence is said to be made

possible because the host provides lodging or food without compensation, or even against their own inclination. Let us reconsider this arrangement in relation to law as defined above. It is indeed true that providing shelter or nourishment to one who has no legitimate claim to them requires an element that exceeds contractual or juridical obligation—a provision that may be described as non-contractual. Yet what gives rise to such a provision is nothing other than the parasite's sudden and uninvited arrival at the host's doorstep.

In this sense, the parasite succeeds in acquiring a dwelling to which it has no legal right, and in securing, by illicit means, a *de facto* right that does not properly belong to it. The host's "gift" does not precede the parasite's presence but is instead precipitated by it. Parasitism thus involves not merely receiving what is offered, but actively producing a situation in which the boundaries of legal entitlement are forced open.

For this reason, a being that freely moves among places where hospitality is already guaranteed cannot, in the strict sense, be called a parasite. Where welcome is institutionally assured, no transgression takes place. The second condition of parasitism, therefore, lies in entering a place to which one has no legal claim and, often imperceptibly, treating it as though it were one's own.

From here, we can derive the third condition of the parasite. A parasite is a being that moves into a place where it is not meant to be, continually transgresses established law, and yet never fully becomes one with its host. Once a dwelling is acquired by legitimate means—through recognized membership, contractual right, or formal inclusion—and once the food provided there is enjoyed as an acknowledged entitlement, the being in question can no longer be called a parasite. Parasitism persists only insofar as the parasite retains an essential strangeness to the community on which it depends. Once it is welcomed as a full member of that community, it loses the very mode of existence that constitutes parasitism. By definition, therefore, the parasite has no true "end."

This point becomes clearer if we consider the biological parasite. It is called a parasite precisely because it never achieves complete fusion with its host but instead maintains, however minimally, its own individual contour. Parasitism is not a transitional phase that culminates in assimilation, but a mode of coexistence that remains structurally unresolved.

Let us summarize these three conditions. First, the parasite is defined by its movement into a place where it is not, in principle, meant to be. Second, the parasite continually transgresses existing law, thereby

threatening at a fundamental level the juridically determined order of ownership and possession. Third, although the parasite lives alongside its host, it never fully becomes one with it; despite coexisting with another, it remains in a state that is autonomous yet unstable.

What these three conditions share is a topological structure involving migration, transgression, and habitation. One might immediately think here of ghosts, which seem to embody these features in an exemplary manner (and, as we shall see, the basement dweller in *Parasite* functions in precisely this way for the young Da-song). A ghost, first, is by definition a being that “ought not” to be present from the perspective of the living inhabitants of a place. Second, ghosts—often depicted as lacking physical substance—appear without regard for legally or physically ordered space, and thus operate as extralegal beings. Third, it is difficult to imagine a ghost ever becoming fully assimilated into its host; it remains, to the very end, unstable and autonomous. In this sense, the ghost appears to exemplify the conditions of parasitism quite well.

And yet, it may be possible to think the conditions of the parasite-to-come without relying on such paradigmatic figures. Ghosts are doubtless parasitic in a general sense, but precisely because they bypass juridical order too effortlessly, the dynamism of transgression that should characterize parasitism is largely absent. A ghost is, in this respect, too far outside the law to be called a parasite in the strict sense. A truly parasitic being would instead be one with whom dialogue remains possible and who nonetheless continues to inhabit a place in an unmanageable way—one whose expulsion is legally conceivable, yet factually impossible.

Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener* could be described as a story of parasitism. This short narrative, famous for its refrain “I would prefer not to,” has generated a volume of commentary disproportionate to its modest length. Indeed, much has already been written about the text, and philosophers, literary scholars, and critics have explored it from nearly every conceivable angle. As Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, and many others have shown, it is nearly impossible to say anything both new and interesting about this work.⁵

With this in mind, let us proceed with our reading *Bartleby* as a narrative of parasitism. Set in the mid-nineteenth century, the story follows a Wall Street lawyer who hires a man named Bartleby as a scrivener. For the

⁵ Jacques Lezra, *On the Nature of Marx’s Things: Translation as Necrophilology*, Fordham University Press, 2018, p. 108.

first few days, Bartleby appears to be an exemplary employee, silently and diligently copying legal documents. In contrast to Turkey and Nippers—whose volatile temperaments disrupt the smooth functioning of the office—Bartleby’s calm efficiency seems almost ideal. Yet as the narrative unfolds, his strangeness becomes increasingly apparent. When asked to perform routine tasks integral to the juridically ordered space of the office—proofreading, running errands, or even verifying copies—Bartleby responds only, “I would prefer not to,” a phrase that is neither refusal nor consent. Eventually, he ceases to work altogether.

After months of tolerance, the lawyer attempts to dismiss Bartleby. Yet Bartleby merely repeats his formula and remains in the office, showing no intention of leaving. Matters worsen when the lawyer visits the premises on a Sunday and discovers clear evidence that Bartleby has been living there. What had been a workspace regulated by legal norms and professional routines is revealed to have become a dwelling. Bartleby’s behavior soon begins to affect those around him. The lawyer himself, almost without noticing, starts to echo Bartleby’s peculiar phrasing—“I would prefer ...”—as does Turkey, who had never used such language before. This linguistic contagion signals more than eccentricity: it marks a disturbance in the normative order governing speech, obligation, and authority within the office.

Eventually, the lawyer, unable to expel Bartleby by any means available to him, abandons the office altogether. Yet even this act of withdrawal fails to resolve the situation. Complaints from the new tenants continue, and in an almost absurd scene, the lawyer finds himself fleeing the outskirts of the city by carriage. In his anguished reflections, Bartleby is described as nothing less than a ghost:

What shall I do? I now said to myself, buttoning up my coat to the last button. What shall I do? what ought I to do? what does conscience say I should do with this man, or rather ghost. Rid myself of him, I must; go, he shall. But how?⁶

Here, the ghostly quality of Bartleby is not merely metaphorical. As discussed earlier, a ghost is a being that can be named and addressed, yet

⁶Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street* (1853), in *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, D. Campbell, 1997, p. 43.

cannot be spatially or practically managed. Bartleby occupies precisely this position: his expulsion is legally conceivable, yet factually unachievable.

The conclusion of the story is well known. Bartleby is eventually removed through police intervention and dies in prison. What concerns us here, however, is not the narrative's outcome but the process through which the parasite drives its host toward disintegration. A parasite that inhabits a specific site—in this case, the lawyer's office—is not a passive being that merely extracts resources from its host. As Bartleby demonstrates, parasitism can actively transform the normative and spatial order of a place, even to the point of reversing the relation between host and inhabitant. The rightful occupant finds himself displaced, while the illegitimate presence persists.

What emerges here is the active force of parasitism: a force that is neither violent nor overtly coercive, but normative and topological in nature. Often dismissed as weak or passive, the parasite nonetheless possesses the capacity to unsettle the juridically sustained order of dwelling, obligation, and possession, thereby provoking decisive transformation. It is this potential, rather than mere dependency, that the term “parasite” ultimately names.

7.4 FROM COEXISTENCE TO PARA-EXISTENCE

To speak frankly, I have never been able to accept the position that treats “coexistence” as an ideal to be achieved. Coexistence does not designate a goal toward which we might orient ourselves; rather, it names the unavoidable condition in which we are already and inescapably entangled. This is true not only of those others whom we readily recognize as such but also of those whom we barely perceive—or fail to notice at all. Long before any decision to live *with* something or someone is made, we are already living together with them. This condition is not psychological in nature; it is, fundamentally, an ontological one.

At the same time, caution is required with arguments that begin by asserting that “human beings are always already sharing in one another's existence.” Such formulations often lead to a problematic elevation of communality or relationality over the individual. The “I” is thereby absorbed into an impersonal dimension of being, deprived of the outset of any possibility of distance or separation. What results is the reaffirmation of a community that precedes the individual, without offering any guarantee of liberation from it. This is not the direction I wish to pursue here.

My concern is instead the materialist problem of coexisting—a form of coexistence already operative both within and beyond the human world, regardless of our awareness of it.

This problem becomes immediately apparent if we attend to a simple and inescapable fact: our lives are sustained by ingesting the corpses and excretions of others. We survive by breathing oxygen, which is itself the waste product of plants. At this level, the issue at stake is no longer the ethical question of what we choose to eat, but the ontological condition that makes any such choice possible in the first place.

In recent years, the philosopher Emanuele Coccia has drawn considerable attention through his writings on “the life of plants.” Although trained as a medieval philosopher, Coccia developed his philosophical orientation through an early engagement with agricultural practice, an experience that decisively shaped his philosophy of life. His book *The Life of Plants* (2016) brought him widespread recognition. According to Coccia, no form of life can exist without other forms of life. We receive life from others and sustain ourselves only by continually incorporating other lives into our own. Life neither begins nor endures in isolation.

To live one’s own life is therefore always to live the life of another. Such a condition cannot be adequately captured by the mild term “coexistence.” As Coccia provocatively insists, the domain of the living is structured instead by relations of “parasitism” or “cannibalism.”

The survival of the near totality of living beings presupposes the existence of other living beings: every form of life requires that there be life in the world already. Humans need the life produced by animals and plants. And higher animals would not survive without the life they exchange among themselves, thanks to the process of nourishment. To live is essentially to live the life of another: to live in and through the life that others have been able to construct or invent. There is a sort of parasitism, a universal cannibalism, that belongs to the domain of the living: it feeds off itself, without realizing that it needs other forms and modes of existence.⁷

Importantly, such relations are not confined to familiar predator–prey models. Even breathing can be understood as the voluntary intake of a plant’s excretions. At this microscopic level, the exchange of life exceeds any simple model of domination or consumption. Without eating or

⁷ Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. Dylan J. Montanari, Polity, 2018, p. 7.

drinking at all, our everyday survival already presupposes an immense circulation of life.

Breath is already a first form of cannibalism: every day we feed off the gaseous excretions of plants. We could not live but off the life of others. Conversely, every living being is first of all what makes possible the life of others, a product of transitive life, which is capable of circulating everywhere, of being breathed in by others. The living being is not satisfied with giving life to a restricted portion of matter that we call its body; it also gives life especially to the space that surrounds it. That is where immersion lies—the fact that life is always its own environment and that, because of this, it circulates from body to body, from subject to subject, from place to place.⁸

Life is always situated between what precedes it and what follows it. It comes into being by consuming the life of others and eventually becomes nourishment for others in turn. No life exists in complete independence; every life belongs to a chain of lives. From this perspective, the immobile plant—traditionally placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of living beings—emerges as the most fundamental organism, insofar as it sustains the entire chain of life through immersion in its milieu. It is here that the transformative gesture of Coccia’s “metaphysics of mixture” becomes apparent, placing plants at the very center of ontological reflection.

This is not to suggest that Coccia’s thought is without difficulty. One can discern behind it a vision of the world in which all distinctions threaten to dissolve into a single, unified whole—a monistic and potentially totalitarian image of life. While this tendency remains relatively muted in *The Life of Plants*, it becomes more pronounced in *Metamorphoses* (2020), which may be regarded as its companion volume.

For the moment, however, I set these concerns aside. What I wish to designate by the term “parasitism” is the concrete reality of our lives: lives that cannot exist without drawing upon the lives of others. More precisely, it names the impossibility of an autonomous life. The task before us, then, is to move from the familiar paradigm of “co-existence” to a newly articulated paradigm of “para-existence.”

⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

7.5 EPILOGUE: IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Bartleby carried out his strange “boycott” on Wall Street in the mid-nineteenth century. Almost a century later—and here the story is no longer fictional—a philosopher in exile was giving lectures not far from Wall Street, in Greenwich Village. The philosopher was Hannah Arendt. After the end of the Second World War, she taught a course on Kant’s political philosophy at the New School for Social Research, an institution that had become a refuge for European émigré intellectuals. The lectures in question were delivered in the fall semester of 1970, five years before her sudden death.

Their content can now be read in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1982). According to the editor, Ronald Beiner, the text is based on Arendt’s own notes prepared for the course and may therefore be taken as a faithful reflection of what she taught. After reviewing Kant’s notions of “taste” and “sensus communis,” Arendt remarks: “Kant was very early aware that there was something nonsubjective in what seems to be the most private and subjective sense.”⁹ We take pleasure in an object only insofar as others agree with our judgment of it. As Kant puts it, Man “is not contented with an object if he cannot feel satisfaction in it in common with others.” Likewise, “we are ashamed if our taste does not agree with others.” Drawing on these passages, Arendt closes her lecture with the following conclusion:

Judgment, and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgments into account. This is necessary because I am human and cannot live outside the company of men. I judge as a member of this community and not as a member of a supersensible world, perhaps inhabited with beings endowed with reason but not with the same sense apparatus; as such, I obey a law given to myself regardless of what others may think of the matter.¹⁰

Before turning to my own concluding remarks, I want to draw attention to a brief sentence Arendt inserts just prior to this passage: “You must be alone in order to think; you need company to enjoy a meal.”¹¹ In the

⁹Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1982), University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 67.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 67–68.

¹¹Ibid., p. 67.

manuscript, Arendt places this observation in parentheses. Did she voice it aloud in the classroom? If she did—or even if she did not—who exactly is included in this company, and who is excluded from it?

What this recalls is the fact that eating necessarily involves forms of contact. In eating, one encounters the life and death of another being; one comes into contact with the multitude of microorganisms that swarm around food; one exchanges breath and airborne droplets—and with them, bacteria and viruses—across a table. Eating is touching, and in touching, the distinction between host and diner scarcely functions at all.

Jacques Derrida once observed in *On Touching* that the act of touching is always haunted by something. In a characteristic rhetorical question, he writes:

I ask whether there is any pure auto-affection of the touching or the touched, and therefore any pure, immediate experience of the purely proper body, the body proper that is living, purely living. Or if, on the contrary, this experience is at least not already *haunted*, but *constitutively* haunted, by some hetero-affection related to spacing and then to visible spatiality—where an intruder may come through, a host, wished or unwished for, a spare and auxiliary other, or a parasite to be rejected, a *pharmakon* that already having at its disposal a dwelling in this place inhabits one's heart of hearts [*tout for interieur*] as a ghost.¹²

In touching, a “parasite to be rejected” is always present. This is not an abstract figure, but the concrete name for those lives that appear at every scene of eating and touching—lives excluded from “company,” yet always already present within it. We had forgotten something: that countless guests—uncounted in what Arendt calls “company”—have always lived beside us, sustaining their lives at our side.

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¹²Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry, Stanford University Press, 2005, pp. 179–180.

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Co-becoming and Value Paradox

Brook Ziporyn

To delineate what is denoted by the neologism “co-becoming,” and what significance it might have, it is useful to distinguish it from a more familiar term: co-existence. “Coexistence” is a widely held ethical ideal, one among many that human beings have proposed. The idea of co-existence, in its most robust sense, is to maximally enable the continued existence of both oneself and others, especially others with whom one may have fundamental disagreements with respect to both beliefs and values, and whose customs or lifestyle differ sharply from one’s own.

An alternate view holds that it is intrinsic to holding any ethical position that one would want others to also accept it; on this view, this is what is entailed in what it means to “hold a position.” The weak version of this premise might see this only in terms of a desire for maximizing shared community and solidarity; one wants others to live and think as one does, not because one is necessarily right in an objective sense, but because it is more comfortable to live among like-minded people; tolerant co-existence will thus not be desired. A stronger version would go further and regard tolerant co-existence not only as not something one would desire to promote, but as an actually terrible idea, even an immoral one: what we should do instead is identify which beliefs and values are the *true* ones, and

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what behaviors are *good* ones, and then do everything we can to convince others also to accept them, with the ultimate goal of getting everyone to agree to them, not merely because this would provide a more agreeable environment of like-mindedness for oneself, but because those beliefs, values, and behaviors are objectively true and good. This might entail a weak sense of “coexistence,” in that other people and other groups are to be allowed to continue to exist as long as they have come to agree with those true beliefs and values. If not, our ethical endeavor will be to continue striving to convince them, or else to eliminate them from the present or future world. If our endeavor is to convince them, we will then also have to make decisions about what means are allowable for doing this convincingly (rational persuasion? emotional appeals? material incentives? physical threats?). If we opt for the second alternative, elimination from the world of those embracing what is not-true and not-good, we again have to decide what methods are acceptable (censorship? imprisonment? eugenics? extermination?). There is a third position that might be called ethical only in the broadest sense, that is, in that it is an ethos that guides behavior: the endeavor to get what we want, at whatever costs to others, and without regard for whether or not they share our beliefs or values. Strictly speaking, both “coexistence of each divergent ethos” and “universal acceptance of one’s own ethos” cease to be a value here at all, except perhaps in the weakest sense of allowing for the existence of others also ruthlessly struggling to realize their own desires as an inevitable condition for one’s own struggle to do the same. But here, as in the most ruthless version of the second version, the goal will be to eliminate as much as possible anyone with alternate values, that is, those who want *their* desires to be realized rather than *ours*.

But whether our actions are guided by a ruthless desire to get what we ourselves want, no matter the cost to others, or by a desire to make everyone want and what we want, or by a more generous desire for some, or all, others to also get what they want, conflict seems to be inevitable—as long as our ethos is committed to any *definite* ideal at all. For any definite ideal, even the ideal of maximal tolerance proposed by “co-existence” is by nature exclusive of, and in potential conflict with, alternate ideals. To be “de/finite,” indeed, is to be “finite,” which means to have boundaries which exclude something. “Co-existence” is itself one ideal among others, as we have just displayed. As such, it must be in opposition to the other positions which it rejects, and struggle against them for prevalence. This is the so-called paradox of tolerance: tolerance must either tolerate

intolerance or reject it. In either case, it is doomed to perpetuate conflict—in the first case, conflict with the intolerance of others that will, by definition, be engaged in trying to eliminate it, and in the second case, its own struggle against its enemy “intolerance,” and perhaps even more damagingly, its conflict with itself, in that its intolerance of intolerance entails a contradiction with its ideal of tolerance.

The problem is even more acute if the value of co-existence is regarded not only as definite but also as “objective,” as we see in the stronger version of the second position, rather than being viewed as simply a subjective preference, as in the weaker version. For we have reason to suspect that the idea that what we want is an objective good—implying an objective morality, that is, a “moral realism,”—will actually end up obstructing the realization of this good, no matter whether our good is “tolerant co-existence of various beliefs, desires and behaviors” or “the victory of one particular set of true and good beliefs, desires and behaviors.” According to moral realism, there are some things, states or behaviors, that are just plain better than others, full stop, and that is why we should pursue them. Notably, moral realism thus shares with the pre-moral hedonistic attitude a base assumption that is typical of pre-reflective experience: that we want things because they themselves possess some value. When in the throes of desire, the thing desired generally appears to us magically transformed, invested with uncanny specialness as if saturated with an immanent charisma, an inherent desirability that seems to us to be the very reason we’ve found ourselves so desirous of it in the first place. When we desire something, it feels like the desirability of the thing *precedes and grounds* the desire. Indeed, this might be viewed as the intrinsic phenomenological structure of unreflective desire per se. That potential romantic partner, that prestigious job, that large sum of money, that chocolate cake present themselves to us, when we want them, as possessing value-laden attributes that seem to inhere in them, and we feel that it is due to these desirable qualities possessed by these objectives that we have, quite naturally, come to desire them. When desiring it, it seems to me that the cake just is good, and that this is why I want it. Similarly, moral realism posits a preexistent, substantive, desire-independent concept of the Good, something which simply has value in itself and should therefore be what motivates us, or in some versions always already is the unavoidable implicit aim of all desires, of which all lesser desiderata are pale reflections. Such ethical systems, most evident in the mainstream Platonic-Aristotelian-Theistic traditions of European thought, and their aftermaths, but found elsewhere as well,

motivate the intensification of the determinateness of the ethical ideal, problematized in the preceding paragraphs: they make it their business to specify as clearly and definitely as possible what this Good is, what the ethical ideal is. In some cases it is just the abstract idea of Goodness itself, or its embodiment in the concept of God; in others, it is a particular standard or virtue or state that is specified as what is good: utility, or virtue, or flourishing, or conformity to rules, or justice, or love, or knowledge, or obedience to God, or an ideal society, or an ideal personality, or what have you. The work of the ethicist is understood by these moral realists to involve making this highest value as clearly defined and completely determinate as possible, to clarify what we really desire or at least what we should desire—what should orient and direct all our actions—and to strive to maximize its availability to all. This conception has the advantage of positing some concept of a shared goal struggling to surface amidst seemingly disparate or even opposed values, hoping thereby to unify and harmonize these conflicting inclinations by means of a shared universal.

The cost, however, is very high: it means setting up a single standard by which to judge the degree of accuracy and relative goodness of all conflicting values; but the determination of the content of this allegedly universal standard itself is subject to, indeed is a function of, the very same divergent particular values that it seeks to unify. Once the idea that some single particular form of value must be the sole truly universal value for all times and places takes hold, there will again be inevitable conflict among rival claimants, and at a greater level of intensity; what was previously merely a struggle between avowedly particular interests now becomes a war waged between rival claimants for the one true universal—a struggle that is bound to become all the more black-and-white zero-sum, because the stakes have become so high. The holdouts against one's own vision of the Good are now no longer just obstacles to one's project, but offenders and traitors against the ontological truth at the basis of all reality. A struggle to the death against them now becomes almost a moral imperative. As it is said in the *Daodejing*, "When all in the world know the good to be good, there already is the bad" (*Daodejing* 2).

But if an ethical ideal not only eschews universality, but even definiteness, how can it be an ethos at all? How can it guide? If it doesn't pursue some particular goal, the same thing in all cases, it is not one ethos but a random collection of unrelated impulses, it would seem. If it presents nothing that is shareable not only among one person's various individual

actions but also recognizable as something available also to others, how is it an ethos and not just a character trait of that one individual, a bare descriptive idiopathic fact about him rather than any kind of normative value? And if it's not even *definite*, well, what even *is* it? Is it even anything?

The answer can only be: yes and no. And it is this "is it anything?" sort of ethos that will be what is meant in this article by "co-becoming."

For here I want to explore a counter-tradition to moral realism in the sense described above, which nonetheless does not simply amount to relativism or normless behavioral description in the sense which emerges against, or even in opposition to, this dominant moral realist background. This alternative tradition is most evident in the classical Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhist systems of pre-modern China. Our aim will be to see how this counter-tradition facilitates "co-becoming," and in what sense—and the role of the concept of "co-becoming" itself not as an ideal, but as an anti-ideal. An answer to how an anti-ideal can function not as a norm but in lieu of a norm, doing the job for which normativity was thought to be needed—to enable and encourage changes to present de facto states and behaviors that lead to more satisfactory states and behaviors—while avoiding its insidious side-effects, is to be sought in the two components of this term: the "co-" and the "becoming." While also presenting a form of commonality among disparate values, beliefs, and behaviors (the "co-"), the nature of that shared substratum in this counter-tradition is conceived along very different structural lines, rooted in an immanent paradoxicality that replaces unification with unobstructed interchange and transformation (the "-becoming") and at the same time undermines the life-and-death stakes of unification, allowing for the co-becoming of disparate and even opposed values which remain deeply intertwined and mutually supporting. How exactly this is supposed to work in these traditional Chinese systems will be our main topic below.

But this should not be taken to imply that this counter-tradition is the exclusive monopoly of pre-modern China. Some similar ideas can be found in the value theories of a few contrarian European thinkers, although these ideas have to wait until the seventeenth century to start to see robust development, and it is perhaps useful to preface our examination of the mainstream traditions in China by briefly exploring the exposition given in the perhaps more familiar language of these European outliers. I have in mind Spinoza's notion of *conatus* and Nietzsche's notion of will to power in particular. Such terms, especially the latter, appear at first glance to be

at the very opposite extreme from not only any ideal of co-becoming, but even of the ideal of co-existence; “will-to-power” has often been associated with the sort of ruthless zero-sum struggle of social Darwinism, aligned with the third of the three positions discussed above, the ethos of trying to make my own values prevail, to get what I want no matter what the cost to others might be: winner takes all, every-man-for-himself. Before getting to the classical Chinese cases, it is important to dispel this impression, and to show why, for structural reasons embedded in these very notions of *conatus* and Will-to-power, it is unexpectedly to these seemingly outlier positions rooted in an unqualified affirmation of raw selfish desire that we must look for European resources that might dialogue with the mainstream Chinese notions, in the interest of constructing a viable modern notion of co-becoming. For these positions are unique in European thought in that they undermine the definiteness of the desiderata guiding human behavior, which is the real cause of the inevitable conflict produced by any other type of moral system, even those that appear the most tolerant and generous. This is because this minority contrarian position in European thought sees pre-reflective factual desire (*conatus*, will) as the *prior ground* of any conception of goodness. As Spinoza tells us, “[W]e do not endeavor, will, seek after or desire because we judge a thing to be good. On the contrary, we judge a thing to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after and desire it.”¹ The attribution of goodness is not derived from any quality of the thing or state that is called good; rather, some things are called good only because someone desires them. The desire is not motivated by any perceived good; rather, amorphous desire without any particular object is prior, and some things (whether specific virtues, states, objects, or anything else definite) come to be specified as good as a derivative of that prior desire. Why do we desire one thing rather than another, then? Because we are ourselves embodied desire (for Spinoza has told us that “desire is the very essence of man”), and all our provisional desires for external objects are actually indirect ways of serving this most fundamental desire, which is our actual essence. Is this prior desire which is our actual essence itself then something definite? Not exactly. Our *conatus* is our endeavor to continue to exist. But here “exist” means to be active, that is, to be *causally interactive*. For to “continue” does not mean simply inertly continuing to exist as a fixed and

¹Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *Spinoza: The Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2002), III, 9.

self-enclosed substance, since for Spinoza individual beings are not themselves substances, and are distinguished from one another only modally, as characteristic forms of motion (and rest) of the sole existent substance (God or nature). Each of these entails a particular form of causal activity, continual interaction with the environment, again because they are not themselves self-standing substances. They are constituted precisely by ceaselessly affecting and being affected by (and even ingesting and excreting) other finite modes, which means other finite forms of motion and activity.

For Spinoza, the continuity of a particular mode and relative stability of physicality—that is, a finite body—is constituted by a certain ratio of motion and rest, its homeostatic bodily organs and functions remaining in a constant relation to one another as they execute these continual environmental exchanges. The more complex this ratio is—the more systems within systems compose it—the more it is *able* to trade out some of its component parts for others that will serve the same function in the overall ratio, which is just what Spinoza means by “existing”: continuing to experience the world in more and more ways, to be more able to incorporate various external elements as parts, and more able to drop previously constituent parts in exchange for others, more able to take in and let out parts of itself (including its perceptions and experiences, which are themselves modifications of its own self caused by external relations), yet without itself—without its characteristic ratio—ceasing to exist. To be able to continue to exist is to be more able to affect and be affected, to interact and change in more ways. To continue to exist means to continue to move in this characteristic way and to exercise this causal effectivity in more and more situations and more and more manners—that is, to expand the power of our activity. This is the desire to preserve our ratio of motion and rest as the immanent cause of a greater and greater number of possible perceptions, which perceptions are in fact the number of types of motion and rest on our bodies (which motions, considered under the attribute of thought rather than extension, are precisely ideas in our minds) that can be endured without destroying that ratio, that can be integrated into that ratio. The more complex the ratio, the greater the number of possible combinations that can instantiate it, and thus the greater our own power of activity, the greater number of states we can assume and be the active cause of, the more we can move and experience.

In sum, *all of our wants really boil down to the ability to move our bodies and minds in more ways*. This is the desire that we are, the *conatus* that is our actual essence. This is why we say that even this fundamental desire, which is prior to and grounds all particular desires and their attributions of goodness to their desiderata, is itself not exactly something definite. This is why we find Spinoza can even make this general statement about what is really advantageous, that is, what is really desired whenever we desire: “That which so disposes the human body that it can be affected in more ways, or which renders it capable of affecting external bodies in more ways, is advantageous to man, and proportionately more advantageous as the body is thereby rendered more capable of being affected in more ways and of affecting other bodies in more ways. On the other hand, that which renders the body less capable in these respects is harmful.”² What is said here of the body applies *mutatis mutandis* for the mind, for the body and the mind are for Spinoza one and the same thing, considered under different attributes. The power of our bodies to act and move, to affect and be affected by more external things, is the power of minds to think, conceive, perceive, and experience more things, and in both cases what we are seeking always and everywhere is ways to have more of these powers. Any desire for a particular object, state, virtue, or action is an attempt, successful or unsuccessful, to alter the body so as to enable it to move in more and more diverse ways and (what is the same) to alter the mind so as to enable it to experience more and more diverse contents.

For Nietzsche, whatever we may think we want, what we really want is “power.” But this concept of power is itself anything but straightforward—it involves also the crooked zigzag of having to always eventually contravene itself:

And this secret did Life herself tell me. “Behold,” she said, “*I am that which must always overcome itself.*”

Indeed, you call it will to procreate or drive for a purpose, for what is higher, farther, more manifold: but all this is one and one secret.

I would rather go under than renounce this one thing: and verily, where there is going-under and falling of leaves, behold, there life sacrifices itself—for power!

²Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, 38.

That I must be struggle and Becoming and purpose and conflict of purposes: ah, whoever guesses my will also guesses along what *crooked* ways it has to walk!

Whatever I create and however much I love it—soon I must oppose both it and my love: thus my will wills it.³

Here too, any specific thing I may desire is really a desire only because I believe it in some way expands my power, which allows me to overstep some limitation of myself—to make myself less finite, *less* definite. But in so far as “specificity” itself involves limitation, this desire for any specific manifestation of power must eventually turn against itself, must transcend itself. Any *specific* state I achieve will be something I must overcome and contravene, in that it excludes my being in the opposite state. My desire for any given thing is a temporary proxy for a more fundamental desire that involves the desire for a transformation of *myself*—and indeed even of my desire. This means also that if I lack the power to be powerless, I will also need, for power’s sake, to overcome that lack. I will need to oppose and overcome “power” just as I would have to oppose and overcome any other definite goal—for the sake of increasing my power. The idea may sound complicated and paradoxical but is really very simple. What is wanted is just the ability to be more, to be both/and, to not be restricted by any specific state, to be able to assume as many states as possible without being destroyed. It may even involve the desire to be destroyed, to “go under” (*untergehen*)—for exactly the same reason: this will be the overcoming of yet another limitation. This will immanently involve the desire to assume states that contravene any specific virtue or state of strength—simply and precisely because it is a specific, and thus limited, state. Will to power is tautological, to be sure (for to want “power” really just means “to want to be able to get what I want”—which is already entailed just in the concept of “wanting”), but it is also self-transcending and necessarily indeterminate. For indetermination is itself power. It is precisely because it is at once a tautology *and* a self-contradiction (a kind of second-order paradox, since these are normally opposites) that it can serve as a master concept for us in these reflections—a candidate for a self-verifying concept that fulfills Spinoza’s definition for what alone can serve

³Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Self-Overcoming,” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 99.

as a reliable starting point for thinking: something that can only be conceived as existing, that is, that fulfills the unfulfilled promise of Descartes's *cogito* to be something the very thinking of which confirms its existence, which is as much confirmed by its denial as by its affirmation—the only basis for a viable metaphysics.

We can thus see that this minority European tradition does *not* posit a unifying concept of the good but *does* identify a commonality among values, though only as a shared structure of intrinsically diverse and even conflictual desires. This is because the commonly shared value is itself structurally contradictory and intrinsically entails a reversal, due to its unsurpassable *indeterminacy*. If indeed no theory can do without positing *some* ultimate value, for structural reasons, it is when this ultimate value is maximally indeterminate that seemingly mutually exclusive specificities can successfully be integrated into it, for its paradoxicality will necessarily be intrinsic to it. This is the structural feature that enables the maintenance of both the diversity and the unity of alternate desires and valuations in mutually fruitful equilibrium, making possible a co-becoming that does not ultimately devolve into a zero-sum contest. Even in these outlier European versions, we have here a path that can lead us past notions of morality as *control*, including *self-control*, to the notion of the good as *power*, to the necessary *self-contradiction or self-overcoming of strength* embedded, ironically enough, in the *tautology* of will to power. The shared value in such theories must be at once tautological and self-contradictory, which are two adjectives that are themselves mutually contradictory. But this deep and intrinsic paradoxicality is not a bug but a feature. A truly universal first principle must be something that affirms itself even in and through its denial, something which applies even in all attempted contradictions of itself, as is the case with Descartes's *cogito*, and, as a rethinking and expanded application thereof, in Spinoza's conception of Substance. The paradoxicality must be built-in to it, for its universality is rooted in its own inner contradiction, its embrace of both its own affirmation and its own negation. Indetermination plays a special role in making this possible. The more indeterminate the ultimate value, the more self-undermining, and thus the more infinitely productive of alternate expressions, and the most accommodating of alternate specific values—which is why, unexpectedly, the indeterminacy of the highest principle does not thwart the explanatory power of such a system, but instead enables it. The engine of this possibility lies in the nature of indetermination itself, and indeed in the nature of determination (or, to give them their more familiar names,

infinity and finitude, respectively); what is implied but only invoked in the most gingerly manner in these systems is the core insight that “determination itself is negation,” to use Spinoza’s language again. Turned the other way around, this point entails another: indetermination and determination are not actually different things, but alternate determinations (and indeterminations) of each other. Whatever is indeterminate is also determinate, and whatever is determinate is also indeterminate: to be is to be ambiguous. This means also that whatever is finite is also infinite, and whatever is infinite is also finite. This is, however, almost taboo, not to say blasphemous, to the ears of the mainstream traditions of European philosophy, and is perhaps for this reason difficult for these thinkers to announce explicitly. For it also profoundly reorients our understanding of ethics.

Be that as it may for these late blooming European instances, we must look to Ancient China for the most thoroughgoing and undiluted versions of the ontological paradoxicality that is crucial to this ethical vision, which will thus be the focus of our exploration of such ideas here. It is in Daoist writings like the *Zhuangzi*, in particular in the exploration of “the transformation of things” (*wuhua* 物化) specifically as “vast open passage” (*datong* 大通) or even (to use the alternate and possibly earlier variant of this trope from the *Huainanzi*) “transformative passage” (*huatong* 化通) that we find the most direct and unwavering instance of this mode of thinking. We must also attend to what can be plausibly interpreted as certain Confucian and Chinese Buddhist elaborations thereof, already in the *Analects* and also in Tiantai Buddhism.⁴ The crucial entailment of this view lies in the convergence of strength and weakness as the ultimate strength, and finally in the simple notion of *tong* itself, and closely related terms like *da* 達 (“unblocked all the way through, success, comprehension”) and (as I shall argue) *neng* 能 (“capable, capability”), as the final term of any system of value, one for which the extensiveness of range is exactly proportional to the variability, uncontainability, or non-identifiability of content: the overcoming of determinations and limits as the motivating force even in, and especially in, the establishment of determinations and limits.

For the sake of simplicity, we can begin to understand this claim by considering a striking passage from the *Liezi*, put into the mouth of

⁴There are relevant aspects of this idea differently but also very thoroughly developed in the traditions associated with the *Book of Changes* and with Huayan Buddhism as well, but for lack of space I will postpone discussion of these for another time.

Confucius although this is generally considered a text expressing Daoist ideals:

Zixia asked Confucius, “What kind of person is Yan Hui?”

Confucius said, “Hui is more humane than I am.”

“What about Zigong?”

“He is a more eloquent debater than I am.”

“How about Zilu?”

“He is more courageous than I am.”

“How about Zizhang?”

“He is more authoritatively dignified than I am.”

Zixia pressed forward off his mat and asked, “But then why do the four of them serve you as their master?”

Confucius said, “Settle in, and I will tell you! Yan Hui has the power to be humane but he has no power to be contrary. Zigong has the power to eloquently debate but he has no power to be tongue-tied. Zilu has the power to be courageous but he has no power to be cowardly. Zizhang has the power to be authoritatively dignified but he has no power to be common. If someone offered me the combined virtues possessed by these four in exchange for what I have, I would not accept. That is why they all serve me so devotedly.”

子夏問孔子曰：「顏回之為人奚若？」子曰：「回之仁賢於丘也。」曰：「子貢之為人奚若？」子曰：「賜之辯賢於丘也。」曰：「子路之為人奚若？」子曰：「由之勇賢於丘也。」曰：「子張之為人奚若？」子曰：「師之莊賢於丘也。」子夏避席而問曰：「然則四子者何為事夫子？」曰：「居！吾語汝。夫回能仁而不能反。賜能辯而不能訥，由能勇而不能怯，師能莊而不能同。兼四子之有以易吾，吾弗許也，此其所以事吾而不貳也。」

I am translating the adverbial *neng* here as the noun “power” to draw out an important implication and continuity with what we’ve seen in our

European examples.⁵ The point of singling this word out is that this passage tells us something crucial about the idea of ability, capacity, or power, as construed in the traditions I will focus on here. The point is that this passage makes a claim about the very nature of *value* as such. Humankindness, eloquence, courage, and authoritative dignity are considered values—in Confucianism, to be sure, but also more broadly. What this *dao*-ified Confucius claims is that there is more value in being able to be both humane and not humane than in only being *able* to be humane, and so for all the other virtues. There is more value in being able to be *both* what is initially identified as valuable *and* what is initially identified as not valuable: to be humane and contrary, both eloquent and tongue-tied, both courageous and cowardly, both dignified and common, is better than to be merely humane, eloquent, courageous, and dignified. This implies that real value in these four valued virtues lies not in the virtues themselves, but in the ability, the power, to perform them, and that this power is fungible, that the very thing that gives them value is limited insofar as these virtues make one unable to do something else. To put it more pungently, there is less value in being “valuable” (scare quotes to indicate that this means whatever is *delimited and identified* as valuable) than in being *able* to be both “valuable” and “non-valuable.” This suggests that humankindness is only good because it is itself a kind of power and the same goes for the other three virtues. Its goodness lies in its *enabling* of something that would otherwise be disabled, of overcoming some kind of limit to activity. So humankindness plus the ability to do what it normally disenables, “being contrary,” would be even more valuable—even more of the same kind of value, the same fungible substance of value.

This may seem counterintuitive at first. In what sense can we consider humankindness a power overcoming limits to activity? Is not morality rather a kind of restraint, a limiting, an exclusion of immoral actions? To offset this intuition, we might first interrogate what it is about humankindness that makes it more valuable than “being contrary” in the first place. And yet this is not so difficult to understand and indeed is what was later singled out as the very essence of humankindness, of (*ren* 仁) by neo-Confucian thinkers. As Cheng Hao famously says:

⁵ A more colloquial translation would simply be, “Yan Hui is able to be humane but unable to be contrary,” and so on. We might also translate this word, less controversially, as “ability” or “capacity.”

Students must first recognize what Humankindness is. Humankindness means to form one body with things. Rightness, ritual, wisdom, and reliability are all Humankindness. Once one has recognized this coherence, all you need to do is maintain it by means of sincerity and reverence. There is no need for protective surveillance, no need for exhaustive search. It is only when the mind grows lazy that it needs protection. As long as it is not lazy, what protection need there be? When something is not yet coherent, there is need for exhaustive search. But when one long preserves this coherence, all becomes naturally clear of itself—what need is there for exhaustive search? This way does not stand in opposition to any thing. Calling it vast is not sufficient to explain it. All the functions of heaven and earth are my own function. When Mengzi said, “All things are fully present in me,” all that was needed was to “introspect sincerely,” which thus became the “greatest joy” [citing Mengzi 7A4]. If one introspects without yet being sincere, this means there are still two things there opposed to each other, so that oneself can never join with the other—how then could there be any real joy?

學者須先識仁。仁者，渾然與物同體，義、禮、智、信皆仁也。識得此理，以誠敬存之而已，不須防檢，不須窮索。若心懈，則有防；心苟不懈，何防之有！理有未得，故須窮索；存久自明，安待窮索！此道與物無對，「大」不足以明之。天地之用，皆我之用。孟子言「萬物皆備於我」，須「反身而誠」，乃為大樂。若反身未誠，則猶是二物有對，以己合彼，終未有之，又安得樂？

Humankindness is here seen to boil down to overcoming the apparent limits between self and other, between self and things, between self and heaven and earth—and concomitantly, between humankindness and the other traditional Confucian virtues of rightness, ritual, wisdom, and reliability. It is the *co-becoming* not only of oneself and other people, and indeed of all things between heaven and earth, but also of the various specific values that at first blush may seem to be unrelated or even opposed to humankindness itself. It means seeing that the limitation separating self from other is overcome, and that the limitation separating humankindness from rightness (including duty and justice, which in many contexts appear to be contraries to humankindness) is overcome, so that the development of any one of these always involves also the development of the others.

And this is not a wild neo-Confucian speculation on the nature of humankindness, lacking basis in the more down-to-earth teachings of classical times, of Confucius himself as represented in the *Analects*. Even there, it is somewhat intuitive to say that humankindness is the

overcoming of a boundary: as Confucius says in *Analects* 6:30, “Humankindness means that one desires to stand oneself and thus puts others on their feet, one desires to be unblocked and thus helps others get unblocked. To take an analogy from what is nearby [in oneself] can be called the method of Humankindness” 夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人。能近取譬，可謂仁之方也已。 Or again as in *Analects* 12:2, “not doing to others what one does not desire” 己所不欲，勿施於人。 The reference to desire, *yù* 欲, and indeed to “one’s own desires,” in both of these passages, is crucial. Humankindness on this account is a matter of expanding the range of interestedness, of desire, beyond the boundaries of self-interest to embrace also the interests of others, so that wanting to stand oneself, one puts others on their feet; wanting to be unblocked oneself, one removes obstructions from others. The boundary that normally exists between one’s own desires and the desires of others, between one’s own welfare and the welfare of others, is what is overstepped by humankindness. The implied identification of what those desires for human welfare most fundamentally are, whether pertaining to oneself or to others, is also profoundly significant here. The relevant desires of a human being, whether oneself or another, are encapsulated in two verbs: to stand and to get unblocked. The first verb suggests getting on one’s feet in preparation for greater mobility, expanding the vista of one’s view by rising to one’s full height, and entering the survey of others, being accepted among them as a member of a community; the second, though it commonly means “to succeed” and “to arrive” and “to understand,” means literally to get through, to become unobstructed—of which success, arrival, and understanding are special cases, are instances in their respective realms of endeavor. I will translate the usage of *da* 達 here (and, at great length below, its synonym *tong* 通) with a neologism: *de-obstruction*, denoting the passage into unobstructedness, the overcoming of an obstacle or limit so as to expand the range of one’s activity or indeed of one’s identity. (The *Shuowejiezi*, the earliest Chinese dictionary, gives a definition of *da* that is instructive here: 行不相遇, “to proceed without meeting anything”—that is, activity not being confronted by any obstacle, motion proceeding into unobstructed space, to be unblocked by anything.) So we have these most general impulses, the presumed content of one’s own desires, and also those of others: first, to find one’s feet, to stand on one’s own power, allowing one greater motility not only because one is now in a position to walk but also in that one thereby enters the purview of others and, if allowed to stand among them, has earned their recognition to the point of

not being prevented from taking one's place among them, and to be able to move freely without obstruction among them, to begin to have social interactions with them based on this mutual recognition. And next, to have the more generalized power of de-obstructed motility itself, to not be blocked in any prospective actions.

I submit that we do well to interpret these simply as encapsulations of "capability of activity" *per se*, without any particular aim beyond this capability itself.⁶ What differs is their scope, their range, their blockage or lack

⁶This is important for understanding exactly what is meant by the later Confucian condemnations of "private desires" 私欲, which can be too easily misconstrued as implying a rejection of the desires themselves. What is condemned in "private desires," even when they are renamed "human desires" 人欲 or "thing-bound desires" 物欲, is not the desires themselves considered as affective impulses of striving and preferring, but their restriction to only a private scope, to a biased perspective or limited range of application. The strict exclusionary either/or sometimes found in Confucian demands to exclude or excise these "private" or "human" or "thing-bound" desires applies to their restricted state, not to that which is thereby restricted. We can see this clearly in the first authoritative versions of this motif in the pronouncements of the Cheng Hao (1032–1085) (though the same model remains in play even in the seemingly more exclusionary attitude of his brother Cheng Yi [1033–1107], where it is more easily missed), asserting that these same desires, expanded according to their own expansive nature, are what are called the Principles of Heaven. The name is changed when they are in their expanded, unrestricted, unblocked "natural" or heavenly form—clear as opposed to muddled, balanced as opposed to one-sided. "Clear" and "balanced" are both in this context synonyms for unobstructedness: not trapped in one side or the other (due to entanglement with obstructive conditions of body and mind that block full expression) but penetrating both, the innate ability to move and transform not obstructed but cleared. But as even the most stringent of these writers make clear, there are not actually two different sources or substances involved in this contrast of heavenly principle and human desires. See, for example, the crucial passage, most likely from Cheng Hao, comparing the good nature to the clarity of water, present even when blocked by muddiness:

What is inborn is the Nature. The Nature is qi, qi is the Nature—this is what is meant by the inborn. The different endowments of human beings of qi naturally include both good and evil. But this does not mean that when born there are originally within the Nature two opposed entities. There are indeed those who are evil from youth, for there are such endowments of qi. Good is definitely the Nature, but evil also cannot be said not to be the Nature. The meaning of "the inborn is the Nature" is like [what the "Record of Music" means by] "man is born in quiescence"—this is because nothing more primordial than this can be described in any way. As soon as we call it the Nature, what we are referring to is no longer the Nature itself, but rather [what the Great Commentary means when it says] "what continues it is goodness." This is what Mengzi referred to when he said the Nature is good. What is meant by "what continues it is goodness" is something like the downward trend of flowing water. All of it alike is water, but some flows all the way to the sea without getting dirtied—what need is there in that case for any human intervention, anything done to it at all? Some flows just a little way before gradually getting muddled, some more and some less.

thereof—and this change in context equals a qualitative change in their effect and value. But without these desires, without a personal sense of what is unreflectingly enjoyable, there is nothing to be expanded into a recognition of the joy of others. What makes them “private” or “human” (as opposed to heavenly) or “thing-bound” is the stunting of their natural (heavenly) expansiveness. Being able to stand and move—to change and adapt—are themselves the only ultimate values; any other values are posited and justified only in the service of these. We have goals to enable us to move about more, not the other way around: ultimately what we want in moving about is not to reach any particular goal but to be unblocked in our moving about, to be unconfined, to be free to move. The positing of particular goals at which our motion might arrive, on this view, is really just a way to give our motion a temporary support and direction, but, contrary to appearances, what we really want is not whatever is set up as a particular goal in any situation, but rather the *ability to reach* that goal, and go beyond it: what we want is unobstructed power of activity, expanded beyond whatever limit presently restricts it. We want *neng*.

Whenever one of these goals, once reached, turns into something that instead limits our further motility, it has subverted its original purpose and its sole justification—and in that instant, it ipso facto becomes undesirable. Importantly, I would suggest that here, given the implication of “entering social relations, establishing an identity through its recognition by others” of the Confucian usage of *li* 立, even one’s sense of identity is not prior to

Although there may be differences in how muddy or clear it is, we cannot say that muddy water is not water. In those cases, it is necessary to apply the human effort of clarifying and purifying it. If effort is applied with care and courage, it is clarified quickly; if not, more slowly. But once it is clear, it is just the original water it has been all along. It is not that some clear water has been brought in to replace the muddy water, nor is the muddy taken out and put in a corner somewhere. The clarity of the water is what is meant by the goodness of the Nature. So it is not that in the Nature there are two opposed entities, good and evil, which come out in it separately.

生之謂性。性即氣，氣即性，生之謂也。人生氣稟，理有善惡。然不是性中元有此兩物相對而生也。有自幼而惡，是氣稟有然也。善固性也，然惡亦不可不謂之性也。蓋生之謂性，“人生而靜”，以上不容說。才說性時便已不是性也。凡說人性，只是說“繼之者善也”。孟子言性善是也。夫所謂“繼之者善也”者，猶水流而就下也。皆水也，有流而至海終無所汙，此何煩人力之為也？有流而未遠固已漸濁，有出而甚遠方有所濁。有濁之多者，有濁之少者。清濁雖不同，然不可以濁者不為水也。如此則人不可以不加澄治之功。故用力敏勇則疾清，用力緩怠則遲清。及其清也，則卻只是元初水也。不是將清來換卻濁，亦不是取出濁來置在一隅也。水之清，則性善之謂也。故不是善與惡在性中為兩物相對，各自出來。

but posterior to these basic desires: one does not want to stand and move to serve one's self; rather one wants to have a stable and recognized self only in order to enable increased power for standing and moving. Whatever else one may want—food, sex, position, fame, money—can be viewed as attempts to enable one to attain these basic desires for the power to stand and move, the power to overcome restrictions to one's activity, to be able to move and feel and think and act in *a greater number of different ways*. The attainment of private desires for food and sex and position and fame and money may indeed work to a degree in facilitating doing so, for all of these do overcome some prior restrictions to one's motility. Indeed, we can argue, with Spinoza, that “pleasure” itself is precisely the feeling of overcoming a boundary to activity, of an increase in power: the food allows one's energy to do what one could not do when hungry, the sex breaks through a limit between self and another, and, as an extra bonus, perhaps transgresses some restrictive taboos or accesses a usually constrained aspect of the body or self-image; the position and fame and money all seem to allow one to do many things one could not previously do. That is exactly why these are all felt as pleasure. But Confucius here suggests that these secondary goals only go so far, that the real aims—*li* 立 and *da* 達—are better attained, more thoroughly attained, more expansively attained, through other means: that is, through humankindness, which enables free motion and the ability to stand all the better for not being limited only to the motion and standing of one particular agent.

On this view, the selfish non-humane person has a certain range of self-interested actions, to stand and move freely, while the humane person has these *plus more*: he does not renounce the initial self-interest to stand and move freely, but merely expands its range of application in the interest of more standing and more de-obstruction, a still greater number of alternate ways of standing and moving. If there come to be conflicts between these two, between one's own desire for standing and de-obstruction and the desire of others to stand and de-obstruct, the principle of expansion remains the criterion of choice: if my own desire to de-obstruct is thwarted by someone else's desire to de-obstruct, it is my own general desire for unobstructedness that will decide in favor of whichever course of action facilitates the greater unobstructedness. That means whichever allows for the greatest range of activity full stop, rather than just my own activity—since “my own” is in this case a limitation on precisely the desired activity. This theme is developed at length in the *Mengzi*, where “making it vast” or “sharing it” is repeatedly invoked as the way to transform a vice into a

virtue.⁷ The point is that what we find when we introspect into our own spontaneous impulses “sincerely” is that they not only are restricted to the individual self but also enfold a spark of a desire that extends one’s own desires for standing up and de-obstruction beyond the range of any one particular self, that in desiring these things for oneself, one also desires them for others—for it is of the nature of de-obstruction not to be limited to any one self or any one perspective.

So my desire for more motility is correctly understood by Cheng Hao and the subsequent Confucian tradition to involve also the overcoming of the restriction of these desires only to one particular self, instead also involving a desire to be unobstructed also with respect to whose motility is involved: my original desire to move in more ways, introspected sincerely, involves the desire for there to be fewer limitations to unobstructed movement itself, for the existence in the world of more and more ways to move, irrespective of “whose” moves they are. I form one body with all things, and all of us want to stand and to get through, including getting through to one another. Here is the Confucian solution to the seemingly irresolvable conflict between self-interest and virtue. Why should desire extend beyond selfish desire? Why should it overstep the limit that restricts to wanting only my advantage, rather than the advantage of others? Precisely because desire is, in its essence, simply the desire to overstep limits. The key lies in recognizing what desire really wants whenever it wants anything: it wants pleasure, to be sure, but pleasure itself is merely the overstepping of boundaries, the transcending of limits. And this is the very essence of any and every desire, selfish and otherwise. Intrinsic to desire is its inclusion of both the present self and what lies beyond it; if the present self is limited to selfishness, selfish desire itself pushes it to what is otherwise to this present form of its existence, the overcoming of the limit between being thus and being otherwise.

This may be as far as we can go with the specifically Confucian vision of value as power as de-obstruction. But the *Liezi* version of Confucius takes a further step in this direction. This version of Confucius sees the true humankindness to be valuable only in terms of something more basic, *neng*, and thus similarly but more thoroughly finds the true value also in the ability to be contrary—that is, the ability to *not* be “humane” as such. This thought is also virtually present, though in a less expansive form, in Cheng Hao’s pronouncement: to be truly humane is also to be

⁷ See *Mengzi* IB1, IB3, 1B5, 7B25, and *passim*.

“righteous” and “ritualized” and “wise” and “reliable”—and it is crucial to see that these are also *contrasted* to humaneness in its original, narrow sense. True humankindness is not always humane and not always kind: sometimes it is just and severe in its manifestation as righteousness and justice, and indeed is sometimes *restricted* in its activity by ritual. How and why can de-obstruction also embrace these obstructions that limit its activity? Already here we see the basic principle writ large in the *Liezi* passage earlier in this chapter: any strictly *defined* characteristic, or indeed any definitely *identifiable* characteristic—which is to say, *any characteristic at all*—whether it is selfishness or morality, is ipso facto a limitation and must seek to transcend itself once realized. Since selfishness is really just a form of the desire for de-obstruction, it will be better fulfilled when it is no longer obstructed even by the requirement to remain within the confines of the idea of “selfishness.”

This is the step, rooting the overcoming of selfishness in the very “desires” at the base of selfishness itself, taken in the orthodox Confucius of the *Analects*, and the elaborations of Mengzi and Cheng Hao, among many others. There, the originally selfish desires are rooted in a more basic desire that involves an expansiveness to include others, because the nature of desire as such is the quest for de-obstruction. But here in the *Liezi* version, more searchingly, this will be better fulfilled when activity is no longer obstructed even by “de-obstruction,” when it is no longer limited even to the range of “unlimitedness.” Any habitual commitment to a particular goal will start repeating itself in a boring cycle of pleasures, greed, enjoyment. This is fun for a while—for just as long as it continues to break through prior restrictions. But once it becomes established as the way of one’s life, it becomes endless repetition of the same, habituation, and as such it is another limitation. By forcing oneself to do what one doesn’t want to do, one becomes able to do more than one was formerly able to do. There is pleasure in overcoming one’s addiction to pleasure, one’s restriction to the realm of pleasure only—for all pleasure is really the overcoming of a restriction. The very addiction to habitual pleasure becomes a limitation—and paradoxically, since the essence of pleasure is really just the overcoming of limitation, these self-indulgent pleasures necessarily become displeasurable once they are gained. We just need to be attentive and fair-minded enough to notice this. Precisely because interactions with other humans will involve overcoming the restriction into the narrow confines of self-interest will in fact produce *more* types of motion through the limiting of some impulses, they serve the original hedonistic impulse to

pleasure—insofar as “pleasure” really is just a word for the overcoming of limitation, for the stepping over of a boundary.

A restriction of motility in one area yields a sum total increase of motility in the whole, or even in the part restricted, as when the temporary limitation of a muscle’s activity to the repetitious lifting of a weight, rather than it being allowed to move in ever different ways, results in the increase of strength that allows that muscle to do *more* than it could do before. Its power is increased by restriction, and power is the overcoming of restriction. Certain types of restriction are thus ways of reducing our overall restriction. Our ability to communicate and coexist with other humans allows many new experiences to be possible for us, many new torques and twists of bodily and mental motion, many new environments and rhythms of activity. Since entering into social relations is conceived as depending on a certain restricting of ourselves according to commonly accepted traditional ritual norms—however irrational these may be—this too becomes conceived as another expression of humankindness and its base motive of standing and getting through. In the *Liezi* version, this idea is taken to heart and stated in its starkest and most radical terms, without the need to sugarcoat it in terms acceptable to political and moral authorities: the true essence of all that morality is simply *neng*, capability to do either X or non-X.

As an example, most people consider it better to be rich than to be poor. Why? The usual answer is that wealth is a good in itself. What we want to suggest here is rather that being rich seems better than being poor because, to our naive intuition, it seems to us not only that to be rich enables us to do many things we could not do when poor but also that it *entails the ability to be poor*, that it will involve no sacrifice of whatever meager power of motility we already have but will simply add some additional powers. Having lots of money includes having less money, while having less money does not include having more money. On the face of it, therefore, it seems that a rich person can do all the things a poor person can do, *and more*. All he has to do is use only the small quantity of money he would have as a poor person, and he would be able to live and behave just like a poor person: having a lot of money entails the possession also of the smaller amount of money. The same would apply for the preference for strength over weakness: the assumption is that strength simply *means* being able to do everything weakness can do, *plus more*. In practice, however, this does not usually turn out to be the case.

A rich person soon finds that he *cannot* in fact live the way a poor person does: he has lost that ability. A strong person finds he has lost the *ability* to be weak. It may be that this involves an *exchange* of one type of power for another, rather than the supplementing of the unchanged prior power with some more of the same; we are not adding power but sacrificing one power in exchange for the gaining of another, with the assumption that this will involve a net gain. Whether or not it does so, whether or not this trade is a good deal, is something “maximalist” moralities may argue about: some may claim that it is better to stay poor, in terms of overall value, while others may plausibly argue that, while there is indeed some small sacrifice made when one gives up being poor and weak, it is well worth the gain—again, simply in terms of the powers gained or lost. Confucius’s remarks here in the *Liezi* point us to a minimalist morality that does not weigh in on this controversy but instead focuses on the core issue, as if to say, “So and so is richer than me,” “So and so is stronger than me,” and so on, and then, when asked why these persons still serve Confucius as their master rather than the other way around, answers, “Because he can be rich but cannot be poor, he can be strong but cannot be weak—whereas I can be both rich and poor, both strong and weak. Therefore, I have more of what they seemed to have, but did not really have, in being rich or strong, what alone caused us to think it was more valuable than being poor or weak: the *ability* to be either rich or poor, strong or weak.” On this view, whether rich is better than poor or poor is better than rich, one thing is certain: to be able to be both is better than to be able to be either one considered separately. This is because what really matters is the ability, the *neng*, itself.

The same applies here to humankindness and contrariness. Humankindness appears to be the kind of thing that would involve all sorts of human relatedness, all kinds of ways of relating to other human beings, and indeed to all the world around us. It is an enabler of a maximal set of relations and interactions. But in practice it limits and excludes certain kinds of interactions: contrariness, opposition, meanness, exclusion. Hence the more comprehensive way to attain the value embedded in humankindness is to be *able* to be both humane and contrary.

How about courage, eloquence, and dignity? Can these also be boiled down to *neng*? Yes. Courage is the ability to do more than one is inclined to do, to overcome the limits imposed by habitual fear. But what about the limits imposed by this courage itself, by the need to maintain the reputation or self-image of a courageous person? That can really limit one’s

options! It thus becomes a new limitation to be overcome—courageously. Hence one must also be able to be brave enough to sometimes be cowardly. Eloquence is the ability to express what others cannot, what one formerly could not. But what about the limits imposed by always needing to be expressive? Hence one must be able also to be tongue-tied. Dignity is the ability to rise above the habitual least resistance of common slovenliness and scattered inattention to one's own demeanor. But if one is locked into dignity and unable to be common sometimes, it becomes another limitation.

This idea, explicitly singling out the word *neng* as the focal point, is indeed developed elsewhere, also in the *Liezi*, into a more general metaphysical vision:

Master *Liezi* said, “Neither heaven nor earth have total power; nor does the sage have comprehensive ability (*neng*), nor among the ten thousand things are there any with comprehensive functions. Thus heaven's work is giving life to and covering things, earth's work is forming and supporting things, the sage's work is teaching and transforming, each thing's work is what suits it. Thus it is that heaven has its shortcomings while earth has its strong suits, the sage has his obstructions while each thing has its own de-obstructions (*tong*, that is, its area of success). Why is this so? What gives life to and covers things is unable (*buneng*) to form and support them. What forms and supports things is unable (*buneng*) to teach and transform them. What teaches and supports them is unable to contravene what suits them. What suits each one is fixed according to the limits of its own position. Thus the way of Heaven and Earth is either Yin or else it is Yang; the way of the sage is either humane or else it is righteous; what is suitable to each thing is either firm or else it is yielding. All of these follow what fits them according to the restrictions of their position. And so, there is life and there is what gives life to life. There is formation and there is what forms formation. There is sound and there is what sounds sound. There is appearance and there is what makes appearance appear. There is flavor and there is what gives flavor to flavor. What gives life to all that lives is the lifeless, which yet gives life to the living without cease. What forms all formations is actuality, which yet forms forms without ever being a definite presence. What sounds all sounds is hearing, which yet in sounding all sounds has never been expressed. What makes all appearances appear is manifestation, which yet in making appearances appear has never appeared. What gives flavor to all flavor is taste, which yet in giving flavor to flavor has never been experienced. These are all the recognitions of wuwei, of nondoining. *It can be (neng) Yin and it can be Yang, it can be yielding and it can be firm, it can be short and it can be long, it can be round and*

it can be square, it can be alive and it can be dead, it can be hot and it can be cool, it can float and it can sink, it can be the gong tone and it can be the shang tone, it can emerge and it can submerge, it can be the black and it can be the yellow, it can be sweet and it can be bitter, it can be pungent and it can be fragrant. Though devoid of knowledge and devoid of ability, there is nothing it does not know, nothing it cannot do. (italics added)

子列子曰：「天地无全功，聖人无全能，萬物无全用。故天職生覆，地職形載，聖職教化，物職所宜。然則天有所短，地有所長，聖有所否，物有所通。何則？生覆者不能形載，形載者不能教化，教化者不能違所宜，宜定者不出所位。故天地之道，非陰則陽；聖人之教，非仁則義；萬物之宜，非柔則剛：此皆隨所宜而不能出所位者也。故有生者，有生生者；有形者，有形形者；有聲者，有聲聲者；有色者，有色色者；有味者，有味味者。生之所生者死矣，而生生者未嘗終；形之所形者實矣，而形形者未嘗有；聲之所聲者聞矣，而聲聲者未嘗發；色之所色者彰矣，而色色者未嘗顯；味之所味者嘗矣，而味味者未嘗呈：皆无為之識也。能陰能陽，能柔能剛，能短能長，能員能方，能生能死，能暑能涼，能浮能沈，能宮能商，能出能沒，能玄能黃，能甘能苦，能羶能香。无知也，无能也，而无不知也，而无不能也。」

The premise here is again that any definite entity of any kind is limited: to be (de)finite is to be finite. A thing's virtues are among its specific forms of activity, but its activity is limited insofar as it is a definite entity. So only the absolutely indefinite, the indeterminate, is the unlimited, transcends the restrictions of either side of any pair of opposites, capable of participating in bothness, of being or enabling both this one and that one of any pair of opposites. Only the unmanifest, only the nondoing, is what manifests and does all characteristics, all virtues, without exception. To be infinite is to be indeterminate, to be nothing in particular. And as we see in this passage, the uttermost positive word for what this nothing is, is *neng*, power. It is the power to be and do not only whatever it is being and doing at any given moment, in any specific position, but also to be and do the utmost opposite of that. As such it has no particular characteristics. *Neng* is the ability to be either of any two opposite determinations, is that which is neither of them, is that which is the *dao* itself, the source of all determinations. The ethic of Confucius in the other *Liezi* passage is thus an instance of becoming more like *dao* itself: the more indeterminate we become, the more like the *dao* we are, and this is the source and essence of all value and all being. This crucial idea, that power is indetermination, flies in the face of the most basic assumptions of most early Greek

metaphysics, for example, where apeiron, the unbounded, the formless, the infinite, is thought of as the least powerful, least articulated, least effective thing in the world. Thus it is among the most precious of the resources that can be gained by a study of Chinese philosophical traditions, where alone this idea seems to have flourished. The less determinate we are, the less restricted to any specific virtue or trait, the greater an expanse of being we occupy, the more we are, and the more valuable we are, the more powerful we are.

But there is a catch—or as Zhuangzi puts it, 雖然，有患：“[N]evertheless, there is a problem here.” For there is no such thing as “indeterminateness” as such. All indetermination is also determination—for even “indeterminateness as such” would already be a determination. Thus what we are looking for in our *minimalist* morality is not zero determination, which is impossible, but rather the kind of determinations that will be at the same time the *maximally* indeterminate (and indeed, only determinations can be more or less determinate than one another!). This is the whole ball game, the holy grail of all metaphysics and ethics: to understand the convergence of determination and indetermination, to grasp the definitions of both that make their coextensivity possible, and to work to maximize those determinations that maximize our indetermination—the determinations that maximally minimize their own determinateness!

This global metaphysical vision is adumbrated already in the (probably earlier) opening passage of the *Huainanzi*:

Dao covers heaven and supports earth, opens out the four directions, divides the eight extremes. Its height cannot be boundaried, its depth cannot fathomed. It encompasses and enfolds heaven and earth, endowing and bestowing formlessly. Flowing like a wellspring, bubbling like a font, an emptying surge that slowly fills; intermixing and sliding, a muddiness that slowly clarifies. Thus when set upright it fills heaven and earth, when lain on its side it fills the four seas. Putting forth inexhaustibly, it never rests day or night. Unfolded it expands to the six coordinates, enfolded it does not even fill one's fist. *It is contracted but able (neng) to expand, dark but able to be bright, weak but able to be strong, yielding but able to be firm.* It stretches out the four dimensions and contains yin and yang, suspends time and space and displays the three luminaries of the skies. Profoundly saturating and soaking, profoundly minute and subtle, the mountain is high because of it, the abyss is deep because of it, animals run by means of it, birds fly by means of it, the sun and moon are bright by means of it, the constellations and stars move

by means of it, the *qilin* roam by means of it, the phoenix soars by means of it. (italics added)

夫道者，覆天載地，廓四方，柝八極，高不可際，深不可測，包裹天地，稟授無形；原流泉淳，沖而徐盈；混混滑滑，濁而徐清。故植之而塞於天地，橫之而彌于四海；施之無窮，而無所朝夕。舒之幌於六合，卷之不盈於一握。約而能張，幽而能明，弱而能強，柔而能剛，橫四維而含陰陽，紘宇宙而章三光。甚淖而潏，甚纖而微。山以之高，淵以之深，獸以之走，鳥以之飛，日月以之明，星曆以之行，麟以之遊，鳳以之翔。

Here the *neng* motif is not yet entirely symmetrical: the unmanifest nature of *dao* is tilted toward the weak, the soft, the hidden, the contracted, in accordance with the general procedure of the *Daodejing*. What it is, is contracted, dark, weak, yielding; but these characteristics have a special feature (unlike their positive counterparts): they are *able* (*neng*) to also encompass and perform the other, the opposite characteristic. But here as in the *Daodejing*, this privileging of what I have elsewhere called the B categories—the negative, the disvalued, the unthematized, the indefinite, the unhewn, the feminine, the weak, the unseen—also emphatically entails both the negation of the A categories—the positive, valued, definite, articulated, masculine, strong, visible—and the inclusion of both A and B. The *Liezi* passages have dispensed with this key expedient, no longer seeing B as both the opposite of A but at the same time as what encompasses both A and B and what is neither A nor B, but leaping straight to the “neither A nor B” without even provisionally privileging either side, and thus without providing the key structural insight on which earlier Daoist thinking was founded. This may be argued to be either a huge breakthrough or a fatal oversight. The more evenhanded presentation in the *Liezi*, with its symmetrical treatment of both the putative positive value and the putative negative value, may seem more judicious. But the earlier lopsided treatment, here in the *Huainanzi*, is a breakthrough for the reasons suggested earlier: this is precisely the Daoist solution to the “holy grail” problem, that there are certain determinations that are structurally conducive to maximizing the convergence of determination and indetermination: namely, precisely not strength and wealth and fullness and brightness and loftiness and so on, but the opposites: weakness, lack, emptiness, darkness, lowness, and so on. These are all determinations, to be sure, but they have a structure that at the same time maximizes their indetermination, their

inclusion of their opposites—in the way the opposite values (wealth, strength, and so on) seem to do, but in fact precisely fail to do. It is in this sense alone that they are the true strength, the true wealth, and so on—they do what strength and wealth were supposed to do: make possible both themselves and their opposites. I have attempted to explicate how this structure works in the case of the *Daodejing* elsewhere and will not repeat it here.⁸ But it does bring into sharp relief the essential nature of what matters here: *neng*, power itself, in its paradoxical but necessary embrace of powerlessness, as the essence of those determinations that are maximally indeterminate.

The roots of this conception are evident even when the term *neng* is not yet forefronted. We can see the same tendency in the usages of *tong* 通, a term that is basically synonymous with Confucius's 達 (“unblocked all the way through, success, comprehension”), in many parts of the *Zhuangzi*. This term points us to openness, non-obstruction, unblocking, the making of a connection that overcomes a boundary that separates any term from its opposite. The second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* takes the bull by the horns right from the outset: *tong* is the non-obstruction, the open connection, the ability to traverse both “this and that” 彼是, 彼此, “acceptable and unacceptable” 可不可, “right and wrong” 是非, for *any* proposed quality or characteristic: since “this and that” (for things) and “acceptable and unacceptable” (for propositions) and “right and wrong” (for actions) are most general and encompassing possible opposites, which can apply to any proposed claim about any proposed characteristic, this way of framing the question discloses the heart of the matter in the most direct possible way. This *tong* is another word for “the course,” *dao*: for a course is precisely a *tong*, a way of getting from one point to *another, different* point. In this sense, *dao* itself is precisely connection and *biantong*, and the immanence of the *dao* in any and every determination is an indicator of bothness as such, the “Walking Two Roads” 兩行 that pertains to the walking of any *one* road, that pertains to any determination as such, encoding the “thatness” belonging to every “this” as such, the otherness belonging to every self, the otherwiseness of the thusness, the beyondness belonging to any and every confining and defining limit:

⁸ See Brook Ziporyn, “Interpreting the Daodejing: ‘The Minimally Discernible Position’ (Supplement to Liveright Edition, 2023),” Moretoitivities, <https://voices.uchicago.edu/ziporyn/interpreting-the-daodejing-the-minimally-discernible-position-supplement-to-liveright-edition-2023/>, for a full exposition of this point.

Something is affirmative because someone affirms it. Something is negative because someone negates it. Courses are formed by walking them. Things are so by being called so. Whence “thus and so”? From thus and so being affirmed of them. Whence “not thus and so”? From thus and so being negated of them. Each thing necessarily has someplace from which it can be affirmed as thus and so, and someplace from which it can be affirmed as acceptable. So no thing is not right, no thing is not acceptable. For whatever we may define as a beam as opposed to a pillar, as a leper as opposed the great beauty Xishi, or whatever might be from some perspective strange, grotesque, uncanny or deceptive, there is some course that opens them into one another, unblocking them to form a oneness. For their fragmentation is formation, their formation is destruction. And all things thus having neither formation nor destruction also unblocks connection with [their formations and their destructions] to again form a oneness. It is only someone who really gets all the way through them without blockage [da] who can see how the two sides open into one another, unblocking them to form a oneness. Such a person would not deploy any one particular way of defining rightness, but would instead entrust it to the everyday function [of each being]. Their everyday function is what works for them, and “working” just means this nonblockage. Nonblockage just means getting what you get: go as far as whatever you happen to get to, and leave it at that. It is all just a matter of going by the rightness of the present “this.” The sense in which everything and everyone is always already doing precisely that, but without knowing it, and without knowing it to be right, is just what we mean by the Course.

But to labor your spirit trying to make all things one, without realizing that it is all the same [whether you do so or not], is called “Three in the Morning.” What is this Three in the Morning? Once a monkey trainer was distributing chestnuts. He said, “I’ll give you three in the morning and four in the evening.” The monkeys were furious. “Well then,” he said, “I’ll give you four in the morning and three in the evening.” The monkeys were delighted. This change brought them no loss either in name or in fact, but in one case it brought anger and in another delight. He just went by the rightness of their present “this.” Thus the Sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others, and yet remains at rest in the middle of Heaven the Potter’s Wheel. This is called Walking Two Roads.

可乎可，不可乎不可。道行之而成，物謂之而然。惡乎然？然於然。惡乎不然？不然於不然。物固有所然，物固有所可。無物不然，無物不可。故為是舉莖與楹，厲與西施，恢恠憭怪，道通為一。其分也，成也；其成也，毀也。凡物無成與毀，復通為一。唯達者知通為一，為是不用而寓諸庸。庸也者，用也；用也者，通也；通也者，得也。適得而幾矣。因

是已。已而不知其然，謂之道。勞神明為一，而不知其同也，謂之朝三。何謂朝三？曰狙公賦芋，曰：「朝三而暮四。」眾狙皆怒。曰：「然則朝四而暮三。」眾狙皆悅。名實未虧，而喜怒為用，亦因是也。是以聖人
和之以是非，而休乎天鈞，是之謂兩行。

Three in the morning is one morality, one way, one virtue, one conception of the good. Four in the morning is another, opposite, one. *Dao* is the co-becoming that allows the walking of both roads, spinning heaven's potter's wheel from one position to the other one. As in the previous examples, its key characteristic is the unblocking of opposites—self and other, humankindness and contrariness, three in the morning and four in the morning. But each of these ways of moving is *itself* also a *tong*: self is a *tong*, other is a *tong*, humankindness is a *tong*, three is a *tong*, four is a *tong*—as Zhuangzi says here, “Their everyday function is what works for them, and ‘working’ just means this nonblockage. Nonblockage just means getting what you get: go as far as whatever you happen to get to, and leave it at that” 庸也者，用也；用也者，通也；通也者，得也。 *Tong* is just *yong* “用，‘functioning’ per se—and further, pushing further back, this *yong* is no different from *yong* 庸: just what things are already doing in their everyday lives, nothing special. So *dao* is *tong*, the unblocked openness that is at the same time the ability for two opposite courses to connect and change places: *neng*, capability as such. But each of these opposed “everyday functions” is itself already a *tong*: the *tong*, the *neng*, is what enabled the two opposite moralities or everyday preferred ways of life themselves to function to begin with, which gave them their value and functionality in the first place. *Dao* is just more *tong*, which *tongs* these prior *tongs*, just as Liezi's Confucius is more humane by being both humane and contrary: it was *neng* that made humankindness valuable in the first place, as discussed earlier, and Confucius's greater value lies simply in expanding it further, in being *more* of the same. Here this is given a more general expression: to do anything is *tong*, unblockedness, and *dao* is just more of the same, unblockage between various forms of unblockage.

This unblocked openness, this transformative passage, is already applied to the transcending of the limitations of defined Confucian virtues in chapter 6 of the same text:

Yan Hui said, “I am making progress.”

Confucius said, “What do you mean?”

Yan Hui said, “I have forgotten humankindness and responsible conduct.”

Confucius said, “That’s good, but you’re still not there.”

Another day he came again and said, “I am making progress.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have forgotten ritual and music.”

Confucius said, “That’s good, but you’re still not there.”

He returned another day and said yet again, “I am making progress.”

“What do you mean?”

Yan Hui said, “I just sit and forget.”

Confucius, jolted as if kicked, said, “What do you mean, you sit and forget?”

Yan Hui said, “It’s a dropping away of my limbs and torso, a chasing off of my sensory acuity, which disperses my physical form and ousts my understanding until I am the same as Transformative Openness [i.e., transformative passage].⁹ This is what I call just sitting and forgetting.”

Confucius said, “The same as it? But then you are free of all preference! Transforming? But then you are free of all constancy! You truly are a worthy man! I beg to be accepted as your disciple.”

顏回曰：「回益矣。」仲尼曰：「何謂也？」曰：「回忘仁義矣。」曰：「可矣，猶未也。」他日復見，曰：「回益矣。」曰：「何謂也？」曰：「回忘禮樂矣。」曰：「可矣，猶未也。」他日復見，曰：「回益矣。」曰：「何謂也？」曰：「回坐忘矣。」仲尼蹴然曰：「何謂坐忘？」顏回曰：「墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知，同於大通，此謂坐忘。」仲尼曰：「同則無好也，化則無常也。而果其賢乎！丘也請從而後也。」

Through dropping the specific values as confined within their own limits, as against their opposite vices, one arrives at what enables all of them: the

⁹Reading *huatong* 化通 for *datong* 大通 (“Great Openness”), as in the parallel passage in *Huananzi* 淮南子, “Daoyingxun” 道應訓.

transformative openness to mutual passage, *huatong* or *biantong*, the non-obstruction that is power or capability to change from any one position to whatever that position had seemed to exclude, an ability to orient oneself to ability itself as opposed to its limited partial expressions. And we can see this thought developing from the ethical to the metaphysical in later portions of the *Zhuangzi*, as in chapter 22:

For life is the follower of death, and death is the beginning of life; who understands the thread that connects them? The birth of man is just a convergence of *qi*. When it converges, he lives. When it scatters, he dies. Since life and death follow one another, what is there to worry about? It is in this way that all things are one. People take what they consider beautiful to be sacred and wonderful, and take what they dislike to be odious and rotten. But the odious and rotten transform into the sacred and wonderful, and the sacred and wonderful transform into the odious and rotten. Hence it is said, “Just open yourself into the single energy that is the world.” It is for the sake of this that the sage values oneness.

生也死之徒，死也生之始，孰知其紀！人之生，氣之聚也，聚則為生，散則為死。若死生為徒，吾又何患！故萬物一也，是其所美者為神奇，其所惡者為臭腐；臭腐復化為神奇，神奇復化為臭腐。故曰：『通天下一氣耳。』聖人故貴一。」

Note that the “oneness” here, as in the *Zhuangzi* passage on *tong* cited previously, is all about the unification of opposites, not as their elimination but as the *enabling* of the unblocked transformation from one to the other. Oneness is presented not only as the *tong* between the opposites but also as an ethical opportunity to *tong* this oneness, to *tong* this *tonging* of all prior *tongs*: it is a way not to be restricted within the limitations of any one way of being, any one virtue, or even virtue qua virtue itself, to be able to enact what enables all prior abilities at once. *Tong* in this ethical sense means comprehension and mastery of something—in this case, of the unblockage between all the various forms of unblockage (i.e., the capability to overstep the boundary between all forms of activity, i.e., between all forms of overstepping boundaries). It is the ability to be where and what you are and also to be elsewhere and otherwise.

Though we must skip a long way forward in time and dance over many intervening theoretical developments, it is perhaps worth noting, in conclusion, how this theme has been developed, most thoroughgoingly and unapologetically, in the writings of the great Tiantai Buddhist thinker

Siming Zhili 四明知禮 (960–1028). For it is in Tiantai Buddhism, emerging through the longue durée of the aftermath of these early Chinese developments, that the Indian Buddhist notion of Emptiness (Sk: *śūnyata*, Ch: *kong* 空), the denial of any self-nature (*svabhava*) for any possible entity, is expanded into the Three Truths (Empty, Provisional Positing, and Middle 空假中), which, to make a long story short, is simply the explicit elaboration of the meaning of Emptiness, what it means to be, as our Indian sources tell us, “neither being nor nonbeing, neither same nor different” and so on. On the Tiantai reading, this does not land us in a simple wordless and conceptless apophaticism, returning us to direct experience, which by denying all predicates ends up affirming the lack of predicates (despite all denials to the contrary), but rather a thoroughgoing and exceptionless *ontological ambiguity*. What is neither this nor that, neither same nor different, neither being nor non-being, is ambiguity. The Tiantai view is that all determination is ambiguous determination—indeed that determination as such is ambiguity. There is no other kind of determinateness. By the same token, indetermination too is simply ambiguity; there is no other kind of indetermination, no pure non-being or blankness or predicatelessness. Determination itself, thus, is indetermination, and vice versa—and neither is what it seemed to be when these two were mistakenly thought to be mutually exclusive opposites. This also entails the non-exclusivity, the co-becoming, of all possible determinations. For if any determination were to exclude any single other determination, it would ipso facto (*per impossibile*) cease to be ambiguous to exactly that extent. To be ambiguously X is to be ambiguously non-X. To be is to be determinate/indeterminate/superdeterminate, that is, to be ambiguous.

Note that “ambiguity” as ultimate principle shares the same absolute structure that we saw in Spinoza’s Substance and Nietzsche’s Will-to-Power, that is, that any challenge to it only further confirms it. It enfolds its own negation. If I say “All determinations are ambiguous” and you oppose me by saying, “No they are not,” you have thereby demonstrated that all determinations, which I had viewed as ambiguous, can also be viewed otherwise. To be capable of being viewed otherwise is to be ambiguous. The claim is in that sense undisconfirmable, and thus amounts to a meaningless tautology, just as Will-to-Power and Spinoza’s Substance are. But like them, it is also paradoxical, entailing a self-contradiction: to be ambiguous is not to be (definitely, unambiguously) ambiguous. A non-paradoxical position which dismantled all possible opposition would be the very definition of pernicious ideological stagnation. For example, if I

oppose the theory that “God is good, and all opposition to Him is demonic,” that theory has a built-in response: it can dismiss this as one more proof of demonic opposition, which only confirms its claim. If I dismiss the claim that all theoretical positions are weapons of class struggle, motivated only by the attempt to protect class interests, the theory can say that this is exactly what a bourgeois intellectual like myself would be expected to say to protect his class interests. If I raise doubts about a theory claiming that all is a deceptive cover story for repressed unconscious drives, the theorist can point to this as a demonstration that I am repressing the uncomfortable truth. In all these cases, we have a version of the structure of “confirmed even by its negation”—which makes them functionally impervious to criticism. What distinguishes the Spinozian, Nietzschean, and Tiantai confirmation-via-negation structures is that the position so confirmed is itself *self-contradictory and self-negating*, necessarily and immanently opening out into all possible opposed positions, which then likewise take on this self-confirming structure. This is the key *tong* structure we have already seen in our classical Chinese examples. It is only because of this coinciding of paradoxicality and tautology that such positions can “walk two roads,” opening out to their own negations and enabling the maximal co-becoming of every position.

This thoroughgoing embrace of co-becoming ambiguity as unsurpassable ontological bedrock has huge implications for the rethinking of all metaphysical, ethical, phenomenological, and soteriological categories for Tiantai thinkers. Consider this passage from Zhili’s *Guanwuliangshoufojingshu miaozongchao* 觀無量壽佛經疏妙宗鈔 (a subcommentary to Zhiyi’s commentary on the *Contemplation of Amitayus Sutra*, often called for short the *Miaozongchao*), which ties all these themes together, again focusing on that little word *neng*. It starts with a contrast between the non-ultimate doctrine of the “Separate Teaching” and the ultimate teaching of the “Round Teaching”—pivoting on the understanding of *neng*:

In the Separate Teaching, the Dharmakāya is obscured by delusion, precisely because there they do not understand that “original enlightenment” inherently includes the meritoriously efficacious qualities of delusion and evil as its own nature, so for them delusion and evil are not meritoriously efficacious qualities at all. Thus for them the delusions of the Separate Teaching and those of the Shared Teaching, karmic consciousness and event consciousness, afflictions and karma, the three vehicles and the six paths of sam-

saric existence, transformations of mortality and all such delusions are not these two dharmas [that is, the meritoriously efficacious qualities of delusion and evil], and thus are not considered to be the two Buddha-natures.¹⁰ Since these are not considered to be Buddha-nature, they are instead considered delusions with the determinate capacity only to obscure. So for them, there is only the original enlightenment of the Dharmakāya, which is conditioned by tainted karma to perform all these deluded acts. This is what they call original enlightenment being obscured by delusion. But we must understand that when the scriptures speak of “obscuring,” it is not to be construed as similar to the way mud covers and obscures an inert rock. If they take it that way, obscuring the Buddha-nature of the exclusive center 但中佛性 embraced by the Separate Teaching, it is like a purely good person who originally has not the power (neng) to do all sorts of evil things, but is forced to do them by an evil person. Then we can say the good person is “obscured” by evil, and we need to trace back to and apply the enlightened nature of awareness which had been following the conditions of these defilements, separately tracking the underlying truth of emptiness, and also the truths of conventionality and the middle, each separately, and in sequence applying the conditioning and revealing practices of focusing on Emptiness and Conventionality, or on the Center and the two extremes, all sorts of cognitive and behavioral practices, starting either with the cognitive or the behavioral side, one after another overturning and destroying all the deluded dharmas and revealing the originally enlightened and aware nature of the Dharmakāya. Understood in this way, the so-called obscuring of principle is given a sequential and hierarchical [literally “vertical”] meaning. But a person of the All-Around Teaching is not thus. For he knows that original enlightenment inherently includes the nature of delusion and evil, and comprehends that the practiced delusion and evil are precisely the Buddha-nature as conditioning and revealing cause. Thus all the various dharmas of delusion described above are precisely these two forms of Buddha-nature, just as they are exactly how and where they appear. How could the Buddha-nature obscure the Buddha-nature? *The case is like that described by the saying “The noble man is not a specialized tool”—he is capable (neng) of both good and evil. If he sometimes goes along with an evil man in doing evil things, he is merely manifesting a power (neng) of his own—where is there any obscuration?* (italics added)

¹⁰That is, Buddha-nature as revealing cause and as conditioning cause 了因佛性、緣因佛性, meaning consciousness of ultimate reality and the actions concomitant to it, respectively.

別教法身為惑覆者。良由不知本覺之性具染惡德是故染惡非二德也。故別惑通惑 業識事識煩惱結業三乘六道。變易分段此等一切迷中二法。非二佛性既非佛性。乃成 定有能覆之惑。是故但有法身本覺。隨於染緣作上一切迷中之法。以是名曰為惑所覆。應知覆義不同泥土覆彼頑石。既覆但中佛性之理。如淳善人。一切惡事非本所能。為惡人逼令作眾惡。故說善人為惡所覆應須還用隨染覺性。別緣真諦及以俗中。次第 別修空假緣了或中邊緣了種種二因。或初緣次了。或初了次緣次第翻破一切迷法。顯 於法身本覺之性。是故覆理成於縱義。圓人不爾。以知本覺具染惡性。體染惡修即 二佛性故通別惑事業識等一切迷法。當處即是緣了佛性。豈有佛性更覆佛性。如君子不器 善惡俱能。或同惡人作諸惡事。則彰己能何覆之有。

In a Buddhist context, whatever is determinate is conditioned, and whatever is conditioned is suffering. Freedom from suffering lies only in the unconditioned, which must be fully indeterminate. But if indetermination is capable of being “obscured” or covered up by determination, it is not really indeterminate, not really unconditioned, not really liberation from suffering. For this kind of indetermination would be subject to a condition: if any determination at all could prevent it from being what it is, if it could be blocked by being determined in any way at all, if getting obscured or limited by conditionality made it any less unconditioned, if it could only be seen as what it is if it were seen as free of conditionality, it would ipso facto be conditioned. For “being impervious to conditions” is a condition, simply because there is an alternative, because being conditioned is ostensibly different from being unconditioned. Similarly, if the unconditioned were attained at any given time or place, or by any particular person or practice, it would ipso facto be conditioned. Hence the real unconditioned must be “original enlightenment,” always and everywhere already there, and this original enlightenment must be truly indeterminate in a way that is in no way obstructed by determination, by any determination.

Original enlightenment, Buddha-nature, is here understood precisely as *neng*—not as the indetermination that is “obscured” by determinations, but precisely as what can be both determination and indetermination, and in either case determination only as indetermination and indetermination only as determination. We have a simple word for being in one sense determinate and one sense indeterminate: ambiguity. Tiantai claims that ambiguity is literally a synonym for determination: whatever is determinate is ambiguous, and there is no other kind of determination. But as such, determination is ambiguously indetermination, and vice versa. This

ambiguity is thus a kind of power, a *neng*, a capability to pass freely between being one determination and another without having to stop being itself. Every determination, whatever state it can assume, whether good or evil, whatever way external conditions condition it to appear, is thus not a limitation of its power, but a manifestation of it. For its indetermination is precisely its ability to determine and be determined in a literally illimitable variety of ways. If it lacked any susceptibility to being determined, or lacked any way of determining, it would be limited in power, limited in scope, limited in determinations—and therefore not indeterminate, not unconditioned, not enlightenment.

The karmic activities and delusions of sentient beings that obscure unconditioned Buddhahood by limiting it into one or another form of conditionality are themselves the activities and cognitions of this very unconditioned Buddhahood—indeed, the real Tiantai point is that it is the non-dwelling or ambiguity (*wuzhu* 無住) of unconditionality and conditionality themselves (which is to say, of indetermination and determination themselves, of infinity and finitude themselves). This denotes the fact that each of them lacks a self-nature in that they each can always also be read as the other, that conditionality and unconditionality depend on one another (in that they are defined only in contrast to one another) and are identical to one another (in that this being-defined-only-in-contrast-to-another is the very non-dwelling which both of them are). This non-dwelling (*wuzhu* 無住), the intrinsic slippage of ineradicable ambiguity or undecidability, describes the ultimate nature of the groundless activities of conditional delusion—they have no firm basis, are constantly reconfigured by outside influences, are impermanent, suffering, and non-self: all are synonyms of non-dwelling.

But non-dwelling equally describes the ultimate unconditional nature of Buddhahood: all conditions are “inherently included” in this pure unconditionality, because if anything could affect it in any way from outside, it would ipso facto be conditioned. Yet at the same time, what blocks non-dwelling is just further exemplification of non-dwelling (karmic conditionings), while its ability to be blocked by them is also an exemplification of non-dwelling: indeed, if it could *not* be blocked, that would mean it was “dwelling,” that is, that it had a definite constant self-nature. These two non-dwellings, the conditioned and the unconditioned, can be neither the same nor different—which is exactly what non-dwelling means: the undecidable ambiguity between conditionality and unconditionality.

This much is understood by both the Separate 別教 and the Perfect Teachings 圓教. But the Tiantai Perfect Teachings is distinguished by the further claim (as against the Huayan and Separate Teaching understanding of this necessary convergence of conditionality and unconditionality) that this point also means that every possible determination, even those “evil” ones that most “obscure” its ultimately indeterminate and unconditioned nature, are that nature’s own *neng*—not just the effect achieved by that unconditioned capability, but that unconditioned capability itself. As such, each conditioned determination has all the powers that had previously been attributed to the unconditioned indetermination that it ostensibly obstructed. The unconditioned had the ability to express itself as both itself (the unconditioned) and its opposite (the conditioned), and indeed as any other pair of opposites. So each conditioned determination, on the Tiantai view, also has this ability: to express itself as itself and as its opposite, and indeed as both of any two contraries—including the two most all-inclusive possible contraries, conditionality and unconditionality themselves. Each of these conditioned determinations is itself endowed with this ultimate power of infinite *neng*, of the unconditioned power to operate and transform in an exceptionless infinite of other conditions, to remain unconditioned precisely in being distorted and affected by all other conditions. This amounts to pushing the logic of this paradoxical *neng* ontology to the utmost: the point is that the conditions themselves, those things that limit power, are themselves power. The powerlessness of conditioned cognitions and actions (their “suffering” in the sense of passivity) is this power itself: these deluded cognitions and actions not only *have* but actually *are* the power to recontextualize and reinterpret themselves as the very power about which they are deluded.

We saw earlier how Spinoza claims that not only the power “to affect” other things, but also “to be affected” by other things, constituted the power which is sought in all activity—the power to be “passive,” astonishingly, is also an instance of power. This is because, for Spinoza, there is no absolute passivity in the ordinary sense: a finite mode of being is considered “active” to whatever extent what happens to it follows solely from the power of its own nature, while to be “passive” means that what happens to it follows from the power of its own nature in combination with the power of the natures of other things. Nothing can be even passively undergone except through the contribution of one’s own power. To be able to “undergo” a change is a function of being able to survive an alteration to

oneself without being destroyed by it, which is itself a form of strength: the ability to replace some component part of one's body and mind without disturbing one's overall ratio, the fixed relation among one's parts. This is an expression of a power. Here in the Tiantai case, if we were to take the time to unpack it, we would find an expansion of a similar idea: to be able to be affected, to get limited, to be restricted, to suffer the effects of other things, is precisely what it means to exist, to be dependently co-arisen, to be empty, which means to be constrained to neither side of the affecting-affected relationship; the power that limits oneself is as much one's own power as another's power, and the ability to be so limited is a further instance of that power, as is the power to overcome this limitation. Again, that power is, in Tiantai, called non-dwelling 無住: the power to be affected by conditions is also the power that escapes any condition. For dependent co-arising, expanded into the Tiantai Three Truths, means simply the absolute identity of determination and indetermination, of conditionality and unconditionality, precisely in and as their constitutive ambiguity and contrast.

It is as if a Buddha added one line to our opening passage from the *Liezi*: "Confucius has the power to be both humane and contrary, eloquent and tongue-tied, brave and cowardly, dignified and common, and it is because of this power to be both that he is superior to the other four who cannot do both. But all sentient beings have the power both 'to be both' and 'not to be both,' the power to be both unconditioned and conditioned, the power to be unlimited and limited, indeterminate and determinate, and it is because of this power to be both, and for the bothness to always subvert and transform itself even into restriction into one or the other without losing itself, to lose itself without losing itself, that makes every sentient being a Buddha." Whatever may happen to any sentient being, even its loss of power, insofar as it is something this sentient being has the power to undergo, is a further manifestation of its own power, its own *neng*. As in Spinoza's case, simply being able to experience more limited states is a manifestation of greater power, greater being, greater good.

In other words, the ethical power of all Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) practices and conditions is here conceived as ultimately boiling down to the unfolding of this *neng*, this ambiguity, this power for each determination to transform and pass through (*huatong*) into all other

determinations without ceasing to be what it always was; it is the unobstructed ability to be both itself and its other. Insofar as it is a determination, it is an eschewal of that very bothness, as is whatever determination it passes into—yet in this passage between these two eschewals of bothness, the un-eschewability of bothness is instantiated and realized. The ultimate point here is the insight into the nature of *neng* itself as something whose eschewal and non-eschewal are literally *synonymous*. It may seem paradoxical and astonishing that Zhili cites this famous line from the *Analects* 2:12, which simply says, “The noble person is not a specialized tool” 君子不器, as if this were an obvious proof-text for his contention that the noble person is capable of both good and evil, and that this serves as a fitting analogy for the Buddha-nature, for the ultimate metaphysical and ethical fact of the universe. But this makes perfect sense if the real goodness of the good man lies precisely in this *neng*, which, as we have seen in the examples above, is what really gives value to the first-order “goodness,” and thus is made all the more good when the limitation to this determinate and limited goodness is transcended into pure *neng*, the *hualong* between good and evil, and between each particular form of each, however they may be conceived or defined, just as long as they *are* conceived and defined, that is, are determinate and thus limited. It is here that I suggest we find the path of Zhuangzi’s “walking two roads,” the path of true co-becoming, which has the power both to establish and to negate any and every other possible path, any other value.

8.1 CONCLUSION: THE MORE CIRCUITOUS THE PASSAGE, THE BROADER THE GOOD; THE GREATER THE PASSAGE, THE GREATER THE GOOD; THE MORE TRANSFORMATIVE THE PASSAGE, THE MORE COMPLETE THE GOOD

Some readers may feel uneasy at this point. If both good and evil are forms of *neng* (capability) which is *tong* (de-obstruction), and only the ability to pass through both good and evil counts as complete good, then if good and evil are both capabilities, are they not simply the same thing? If so, does that mean there is no difference between good and evil?

The answer is: not quite. In order to explain this difference, thinkers of different periods have offered accounts at different levels. These may be classified as follows:

8.1.1 *Good and Evil Differ in Magnitude*

The greater the *tong* (capacity to pass through), the more it counts as good; the smaller the *tong*, the more it counts as evil. Although there is no pure evil, and thus no essential difference between good and evil in their nature, the greater the degree of passage, the greater the goodness.

8.1.2 *Good and Evil Differ in Direction of Subsumption*

The vast *tong* of good can encompass the smaller *tong* of evil, but the small *tong* of evil cannot encompass the great *tong* of good. As the Tiantai Zhiyi said, both the Buddha, exemplar of the ultimate goodness, and the *icchantika*, exemplar of maximal evil, have the same nature, the nature of all things, which is replete with all possible goods and evils. The difference between them is just that the Buddha has unobstructed access to both the good and the evil inherent in the nature of all things, and thus has free availability of both, while the *icchantika* lacks it, and is thus limited to only evil; if he had this unobstructed access to both good and evil, he would no longer be called an *icchantika*, but rather a buddha.¹¹

8.1.3 *Good and Evil Differ in Straightness and Circuitousness of Tong*

Evil understands only straightforward, manifest, and direct *tong*, restricted to only *tong* as *tong*, whereas good understands circuitous, indirect, and reverse *tong*—*tong* as both *tong* and *non-tong*, that is, the *tong* of *tong* and *non-tong*. Evil opens only by opening, while good knows how to open by closing, for it opens also the passage between opening and closing.

“Circuitous *tong*” means being able to use restriction as a means to attain a greater unrestriction, skillfully using self-limitation in order to expand one’s range of capability. One sets up limits that allow one to overstep more limits. For example, all forms of discipline block off one direction of change in order to maximize change in another direction. One narrows oneself in one respect so that the scope of one’s action can expand in another. For instance, in physical training one forces oneself to do

¹¹ 闍提既不達性善，以不達故，還為善所染，修善得起，廣治諸惡。佛雖不斷性惡，而能達於惡，以達惡故，於惡自在。故不為惡所染，修惡不得起，故佛永無復惡。以自在故，廣用諸惡法門化度眾生，終日用之，終日不染，不染故不起，那得以闍提為例耶？若闍提能達此善惡，則不復名為一闍提也。(T34.882—3.)

nothing else, repeatedly enduring the hardship of lifting weights at the gym. One does nothing else, renounces many kinds of activity, restricting oneself to only this activity for large amounts of time. This narrows the range of one's activity and reduces one's immediate "degree of transformation and interchange," producing a kind of suffering. Yet at the same time it strengthens one's muscles, expanding one's range of action and increasing one's "degree of transformation." By making a rule that restricts what one can do, one has expanded the range of what one can do. By allowing oneself to do less, one has enabled oneself to do more. In other words, one increases overall open passage to otherness through partial non-passage, through closing oneself off in certain directions. Learning a language, practicing an instrument, or hard work in general, all follow this same logic.

This third level already moves us much further toward the full interchange of opposites, as opposed to abstract unification—Zhuangzi's "oneness as transformative interchange," 道通為一 leading on to 復通為一 and not 道同為一, always 通一 rather than 統一, and now moved to the second level of abstraction, a meta-application of passage even to itself, the passage between passage and non-passage. Here we have Zhuangzi's 復通為一 the 通 of 通 and 不通. However, the third level still functions as a one-way street. The distinction between the "partial" and the "total" is still fixed according to the first level's hierarchy of greater and lesser passage.

8.1.4 Good and Evil Differ in Thoroughness of Meta-Level Application of *Tong*

Going one step further brings us to the radically thoroughgoing application of transformative passage at all levels, pushing on to the meta-level of full intersubsumption not only of whole and part, but of wholeness and partiality themselves. At step 3, any and every part opens into all other parts in a maximally expansive whole, where the greater the totality of such inter-passing parts is, the more it can encompass even narrowed limitations into its total system of limit-overstepping interchanges, maximizing its total ability to overstep limits and engage in interchanges with more and more of the world, the more "good" it is. Here at step 4, because each of these parts, whether self-enclosed into its determinate limits or expanding its power and identity by opening out beyond its determinate limits, is determinate only as inescapably ambiguous, each transforms into all

others while not ceasing to be the restricted determination it always was, or remains as it always was without failing to also be recontextualized at all times by the transformations against which it is defined, and thus transforms even while remaining the same. But to remain the same though transforming, and to transform though remaining the same, is the unique power of the whole, the highest good in terms of which all else was determined. As such, this means that each is itself functioning as that whole. At this stage, then, the two abstract poles of “part” and “whole” themselves transform into one another in unobstructed interchange. One enters the transformative passage described in the *Zhuangzi*’s “*Qiwulun*,” where a fixed whole (i.e., totality of de-obstructions of all parts into each other, geared to the maximal expansion of its power to step beyond its limits while maintaining its identity, which was previously identified with goodness) is no longer preserved as the goal toward which the closed-off restriction of the disempowered definite parts and the expansive interchange of the empowered interchanging parts is subordinated. Instead, positions can constantly shift, and the whole itself has no fixed content. Any part may take the leading role, so that all the other parts de-obstruct over to it and into it—where indeed even the maximally open wholeness of the whole becomes at this time merely a disempowered definite subordinate part of this one part. Here we have transformative passage without fixed position, where obstruction and de-obstruction are de-obstructed, openly passing from one to the other without obstruction. There is no whole beyond the passage itself, applying at all levels.

This amounts to saying that the co-becoming of all things under heaven cannot be unified under “goodness.” Rather, it can only be unified in *tong*—in open passage through all transformation amid difference. This is what the “*Tianxia*” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* describes as follows:

The world is presently in great disorder. People no longer understand real sagehood and worthiness. The Course and its intrinsic powers are no longer unified. Many in the world congratulate themselves complacently for their insight into some single aspect of it. It is as if the ears, eyes, nose, and mouth each had its own understanding, without being able to interconnect. Thus do the skills of the various schools each excel in some part of it, each of which is useful at a certain time. But they are partial and incomplete, nook and corner scholars only.

This passage uses the metaphor of “one body with many organs” to illustrate what it means to be interconnected. Just as the ears and eyes in a single body each have different functions, the body as a whole requires all of them to be complete so that the different organs can successfully communicate their information and exchange functions as needed. Only then can the body be healthy.

However, the significance of this bodily metaphor is actually quite limited and may even oversimplify the true implications of full transformative interchange of the fourth type: “without constancy 無常, without fixed preference 無好, without fixed goodness 無善.” For when we speak of a whole and its parts in this way, we presuppose an already completed, stable, and unchanging body (what the *Zhuangzi* calls a “formed body” 成形), along with a unified goal for the whole person—a single conception of the good.

When the body needs to see, the eyes become primary and the ears, nose, and hands become servants assisting the function of sight. When the body needs to hear, the ears become primary and the other organs assist the function of hearing. Although there is interchange among the organs, all of it ultimately serves the predetermined goal of the unified body. This still presupposes the single top-down unification of 統一; it is not yet the illimitably transforming inter-unifications of 通一.

To avoid this problem we must supplement it with the bodily view presented in the *Zhuangzi*’s “Qiwulun”:

The hundred bones, the nine openings, the six internal organs are all present here as my body. Which one is most dear to me? Do you delight in all equally, or do you have some favorites among them? Or are they all mere servants and concubines? Are these servants and concubines unable to govern one another? Or do they take turns as master and servant? If there is a genuine ruler among them, its genuineness would have to be of some kind that is the same whether any definite reality could ever be found for it or not.

The so-called genuine ruler here corresponds to the master of the unified body mentioned earlier. This would apply directly to one who governs the whole, but also more subtly to any unchanging one (one principle, one law, one structure) that oversees or enables the organs’ functioning as ruler and servant in turn. If we interpret this passage as indirectly affirming the existence of such a “genuine ruler” in either sense, it remains like the

account in “Tianxia”: it presupposes a stable unified self whose overall purpose shifts over time but always remains singular at each moment. However, if we interpret the passage in the context of this chapter’s own questioning of the stable unified self, we may see it instead not merely as rejecting the existence of this genuine ruler, but as deconstructing the very concept of a genuine ruler. The point would then not be that the genuine ruler does or does not exist, but that whether such a ruler exists or not makes no difference at all; its existence is indistinguishable from its non-existence. Its existence has no definite verifying sign—and the same is true of its non-existence. As something which cannot be said definitively to exist or not to exist, it is precisely what we described above as ambiguous. This means we need neither fear nor hope for its absence or its presence. Whether one finds it or not does not alter the ceaseless interplay in which the myriad differences take turns acting as ruler and servant. Thus the existence or non-existence of such a ruler has no real significance. Having unity and lacking unity amount to the same thing; having governance and lacking governance amount to the same thing.

How is this possible? What kind of unity could meet this standard? It is a unity that is equivalent to non-unity, or a non-unity equivalent to unity. In fact, this is not a single top-down unification 統一 at all; it is the illimitably transforming inter-unifications of 通一, (every) path’s de-obstruction into (various) unities 道通為一, of transformative passage 化通, of which we may also say, borrowing Zhuangzi’s words again, “its oneness is one, and its non-oneness is also one.” “其一也一，其不一也一。It is like a “true ruler without a true ruler,” or a “non-true ruler that is the true ruler.” In truth it is not a ruler at all, but Dao. And what is Dao? Nothing but transformative passage, which, as the Daodejing says, “clothes and nourishes all things, but without being a ruler.” 衣養萬物而不為主。

Accordingly, when we interpret the mutual interchange among the organs in the “Tianxia” chapter, we must strip away the assumption that their purpose is to realize the health of a unified body. What remains is simply openness to passage for the sake of openness to passage itself—as in Spinoza, where all desires boil down to the urge to be able to move body and mind in more ways, in more contexts, in more forms. Unimpeded passage into more forms itself becomes the supreme good precisely because it is “without goodness.” This is what the *Zhuangzi*’s “Dazongshi” calls “being together in not being together, acting for each other is not without acting *for* each other.” 相與於無相與，相為於無相為。

From this perspective, the bodily view presented in the “Qiwulun,” like that in the “Tianxia” chapter, also implies that when the body needs to see, the eyes take the lead, and when it needs to hear, the ears take the lead. But the difference is that this no longer serves the unity of a single body, nor does it fall under the control of any determinate concept of the good (“health,” “the whole,” “success,” etc.). Rather, the whole body becomes eyes; the whole body becomes ears. There is no separate whole body apart from the transitory wholenesses of these functions themselves. There is only the mutual passage of seeing and hearing, each of which is itself an instance of passage between internal and external. Similarly, when Zhuang Zhou dreams he is a butterfly, the entire Zhou is butterfly; when he awakens, the entire butterfly is Zhou. The function of the butterfly becomes Zhou, and the function of Zhou becomes butterfly. There is the de-obstructing passage between them—no true Zhou, no true butterfly, and certainly no ruler beyond the two. Likewise, instead of saying that ears and eyes are unified in one body, we might say that the body is unified in each ear and each eye. Instead of saying that Zhou and the butterfly are unified in some single truth, we might say Zhou/butterfly is unified in Zhou, and Zhou/butterfly is unified in butterfly—and these unities interchange in the open passage of their mutual transformations. Instead of saying that all people and things are unified under heaven, we might say that the world is unified in each person and each thing—and these countless unities open out into one another, interchanging in the open passage of their mutual transformations. Instead of saying that all functions are unified in one good, we might say that all functions interchange in the open passage of their mutual transformations with all functions, of all goods in transformation with all other goods. There is no separate “good,” and no separate “attainment.” All these examples show the fundamental difference between a single top-down unification, however abstract, and the illimitable transformations of inter-unifications. We can now return to the passage previously quoted from the *Zhuangzi*: 為是不用而寓諸庸。庸也者，用也；用也者，通也；通也者，得也。Since the single good of “doing the right thing” is not employed, “rightness” comes to reside in the everyday interchange among the organs. Because deliberate “rightness” is unused, this ordinary functioning becomes the only true use. And what is this use? As we saw above in the discussion of Confucius’s 達, use is de-obstructed passage 通. And de-obstructed passage is the very definition of success, the satisfaction of any desire 得也.

De-obstruction is transformation. Transformation is capacity. Capacity is non-being. Non-being is completeness. Completeness is goodness. Goodness is the capacity for both good and evil. As the *Daodejing* says: “True words seem paradoxical.” For here we have the interpassage of ideal and anti-ideal that is the essence of co-becoming: the paradoxicality of illimitable transformative interpassages, inter-unifications, inter-identities.

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Co-Becoming Humanities: An Alternative Perspective for Examining Co-becoming and Convivialism

Youngseo Baik

9.1 WHAT IS CO-BECOMING HUMANITIES?

We are undeniably living through an age of great transition. A poly-crisis arising from intersecting factors across multiple levels is reshaping our lives with tremendous force. With climate change, its attendant eco-crises, and regional conflicts all reaching acute levels, the time has come to more closely examine and address the limitations of the existing capitalist system and its growth-first ideology. Before proceeding with this vast agenda, however, I will begin this chapter by examining our current knowledge production system. I believe this kind of research can facilitate innovations in knowledge production and dissemination, which can, in turn, prompt us to explore the limitations of the capitalist world-system and thereby seek a civilizational alternative.

I propose the concept of “Co-Becoming Humanities” as a means for effectively grasping these issues. This concept combines two key elements. The first part, “co-becoming” (共生), can be defined as a process of

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co-generation and mutual reviving. The second part refers not to the narrow discipline of humanities that emerged from the modern split between the “two cultures”—humanities and science—but to an integrated, comprehensive field requiring fundamental renewal. These two newly defined terms give rise to a concept that operates on two levels: as a field studying the co-emergence and radical critique of various academic disciplines and as an inquiry seeking to guide the co-becoming of human and non-human entities within the broader biosphere.

In proposing Co-Becoming Humanities, I am not seeking to put forward a new institutional framework or methodology but rather aim to enrich the existing humanities by adapting our scholarly approach to the emerging trajectory of civilizational change. The first essential step in charting such a course is recognizing the need for us to fundamentally “un-think” our conception of the truth. The following discussion is underpinned by an awareness of that need. Based on a reflection of my previous research approaches, I will now outline two mindsets essential for the development of Co-Becoming Humanities.

The first mindset is to regard social issues as subjects of academic inquiry. This approach has been previously explored through collaborative work under the banner of “Social Humanities” at an institute affiliated with Yonsei University in South Korea. However, the existing body of research undoubtedly requires further improvement if we are to simultaneously accomplish the tasks of reviving the resources of social humanities and adapting to the demands of a civilizational shift in an era of profound change. If it is to truly embody the spirit of humanistic inquiry, the social humanities, as a holistic field of study, must transcend its conventional boundaries, incorporating fields such as science and technology studies (STS). Now more than ever, in this age of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, it is necessary to rigorously reevaluate the relationship between humans and technology. This explains the need for a holistic discipline to build upon the social humanities—namely, the “Co-Becoming Humanities.”

The second mindset, which concerns the life path of the “knowledge activist,” involves reflection on both the personal ethics of everyday existence and the concrete interconnectedness of personal life and academic research. This dimension, which remains inadequately addressed by the social humanities, could be termed the “mind practice” of the knowledge activist.

Korean scholar Paik Nak-chung (1938–)'s conception of mind practice is somewhat unique. For Paik, this practice makes use of the Confucian spirit of “cultivating oneself and governing others” (修己治人) while also drawing upon the broader wisdom of the Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions. Its underpinning, however, lies in the Threefold Study of Won Buddhism—which inherits pioneering ideas from Donghak and Cheondoist thinking. “Study” here refers not merely to a contemplative spiritual practice but to an approach to learning and cultivation that addresses the concrete challenges of our materially driven modernity. As a process, it involves continuous discipline in three respects, namely, Cultivating the Spirit, Inquiry into Human Affairs and Universal Principles, and Choice in Action.

These terms, which may be unfamiliar, warrant some further explanation. “Cultivating the Spirit” represents the power of cultivation (修养力), which allows one to achieve the awakening state of mind. Spirit here does not refer to a mind bound by a material/spiritual dichotomy, but rather to a spiritual state enabling us to master the methods of using material reality and applying the mind (用心法). “Inquiry into Human Affairs and Universal Principles” represents the power of inquiry (研究力). This points to the capacity to grasp scientific knowledge about worldly operations based on an understanding of their underlying principles. Finally, “Choice in Action” refers to the power of action (取舍力) in the application of all things. This involves embracing what is righteous while rejecting what is not. Righteousness in this context can be defined as that which is mutually beneficial for both oneself and others. As the practical culmination of the Threefold Study, this final dimension extends beyond the individual moral conscience to encompass social justice at familial, societal, national, and global levels.

This mind practice described in the Threefold Study refers to a state that every individual can achieve in their daily lives, namely, unwavering attentiveness on one specific matter and the application of focus throughout the entire process of its study and exploration. On this basis, we should seek to gain a holistic and substantial understanding of pressing real-world issues in our respective life locations. This learning method, which aims to transform both the self and social reality, is vital to the practice of Co-Becoming Humanities.

Of course, this approach is not entirely new, and similar intellectual resources can be found throughout Eastern and Western intellectual and religious traditions. Still, in this age of great transition, it is necessary to

revitalize these resources. This endeavor should be undertaken with a probing, critical attitude that is informed by real experiences in our respective locations. As forces capable of transcending capitalistic modernity, such resources can only truly come into being when their potential is fully harnessed. If the humanistic discipline is to remain true to the mission of conceptualizing and implementing new ways of life to address contemporary challenges, we must work tirelessly to reactivate accumulated wisdom and practical experiences from the past as we move toward an alternative universal civilization. The following discussion, therefore, will center on the intellectual resources accumulated over the course of Korean history.¹

9.2 ANOTHER APPROACH FOR CONSIDERING CO-BECOMING AND CONVIVIALISM

Next, I want to examine the efficacy of the Co-Becoming Humanities. In doing so, I will critically engage with previous discussions about alternative civilizations that have centered around the concepts of co-becoming and convivialism. Through this attempt, I hope to establish philosophical foundations for the Co-Becoming Humanities while also honing a more concrete universality for both co-becoming and convivialism.

Bing Song has previously conducted a detailed comparison between the philosophies of co-becoming and convivialism.² However, to focus exclusively on finding similarities between these two theories runs the risk of reducing them to overly broad and abstract concepts. I believe there is also a need for participants in this discussion to ground themselves in their respective “core sites” in order to reflect on how these philosophies are practiced in daily life and manifested (in not necessarily similar ways) across various cultures, with a view to finding clues for further reflection.

Therefore, I will attempt to contribute to the discussion by drawing on the intellectual resources and modern history of South Korea. To begin, is it too simplistic to conclude that the principle of creative opposition, as articulated in the Convivialist Manifesto, finds comparatively weaker

¹For a more detailed discussion of “Co-Becoming Humanities,” please see the following article: Youngseo Baik, “Da Bianju Shidai De Gongsheng Renwen Xue: Yi Dongya Wenming Wei Shijiao” [Symbiotic Humanities in the Era of Great Changes: From the Perspective of East Asian Civilization], *Exploration and Free Views*, no. 6 (2024): 136–143.

²Bing Song, “What Intellectual Shift Do We Need in a Time of Planetary Risks?” In *Gongsheng Across Contexts: A Philosophy of Co-Becoming*, edited by Bing Song and Yiwen Zhan, 3–36 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

expression in the East Asian concept of co-becoming? For example, consider the history of the Korean Peninsula, particularly its enduring growth over the past century since South Korea was forcibly drawn into the capitalist world system. Incremental and cumulative achievements can be found during this period. In both the political and social spheres, perspectives on resistance can be identified, as well as experiences of “resistant solidarity” underpinned by relevant intellectual resources.³

Moving further back in time, we find a distinction between the Chinese and Korean understandings of the relationship between *tian* and man. Whereas Chinese thought emphasizes the Unity-of-*Tian*-and-Man (天人合一), the Korean traditions of *Donghak* and Cheondoism have a sophisticated concept of Interaction-between-*Tian*-and-Man (天人相与), which, although still centered on the concept of life, places greater emphasis on the direct relationship between humans and nature. Similarly, the Korean notion of Embodying-*Tian*-in-Action (体天行道) is also compelling. It more explicitly denotes a reciprocal and cyclical relationship between *tian* and man, compared to the Chinese concept of Acting-on-*Tian*’s-Behalf” (替天行道). Uncovering such internal variations within East Asia can help make our interactions on co-becoming at the global level more productive and meaningful.

In Korean, the term for “co-becoming” (공생 *Gongsaeng*) was initially used as a translation for the biological term “symbiosis.” Gradually, the Korean term evolved to convey the broader social connotations of mutual assistance and living in unison. However, few have so far attempted to provide a specific definition for this concept or to establish its philosophical foundations. Even so, a wealth of related intellectual resources with similar meanings exists. Particularly notable is the concept of *Gaebyeok* (Great Opening) and the school of thought it represents, which align closely with the ideals of co-becoming. It emerged during the civilizational crisis of the late nineteenth century as Korea was forcibly drawn into the world capitalist system.

Gaebyeok thought seeks not only a fundamental renewal of the human spirit and consciousness but also revolutionary changes aimed at creating a new world. Originating from the *Gaebyeok* religions or new religious movements of the late nineteenth century, it gradually gained widespread

³Youngseo Baik, ed., *Hyakunen no henkaku: San-ichi undō kara kyandoru kakumei made* [A Century of Change: From the March First Movement to the Candlelight Revolution] (Tokyo: Hōsei Daigaku Shuppanbu, 2021).

popularity by combining fundamental ontological insights with political philosophy while also becoming embedded in politics and society at a practical level. Drawing on this foundation, I will attempt to engage in a productive dialogue, in summary form, with the perspectives that have been deepened through the project of co-becoming of the Berggruen Institute China.

First, the implications of the convivialist theory of the gift, especially its propositions regarding “political operators” and “recognition operators,”⁴ are profound. This theory suggests operational principles for a system beyond capitalism based on a non-monetary form of compensation that could potentially become the driving force for a civilizational alternative. This echoes my emphasis on the notion of the “public value of desire.”

Of even greater interest, however, is convivialism’s astute use of Marcel Mauss’s theory of *Hau*, which refers to the spiritual essence within objects. In convivialist thinking, this essence is regarded as the force behind the cycle linking the obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate gifts. Further development of this notion has given rise to “methodological animism” (enlightened animism), which establishes an entirely new ontological relationship between humans and non-human beings by defining the latter as gift-givers, thereby providing a starting point for a social theory based on a non-dualistic ontology.⁵ In my view, however, an even more significant contribution of this theory is perhaps its capacity to facilitate mutually beneficial dialogue between East and West. For example, the theory of Oneness-of-All-Beings (万物一体论), which serves as the backbone for the co-becoming philosophy and the metaphysical basis for the idea of “universal camaraderie” of all beings, can be linked back to the theory of *qi*, which holds that all things are self-generated, formed, and animated by *qi*.⁶

This theory of *qi* was established as the dominant school of thought in the Korean Confucian tradition. It was from this inspiring foundation that the new religious movement of *Donghak* emerged, synthesizing elements of Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist thinking. In the face of aggravated domestic and international crises, the movement sparked a large-scale

⁴ Alain Caillé, “Origins and Theoretical Foundations of Convivialism,” in Song and Zhan, 2024, 231.

⁵ Frank Adloff, “Ontology, Conviviality, and Symbiosis Or: Are There Gifts of Nature?” in Song and Zhan, 2024, 255.

⁶ Song, “What Intellectual Shift,” 15.

peasant revolution (1894) grounded in religious spirituality. Though the revolution drastically ended in failure, the influence of *Donghak* was preserved in the form of Cheondoism under Japanese colonial rule. The *Donghak* worldview regards *Hanul* (Heaven/Heavenly Lord) or Supreme Qi as a unified existence integrating both the personal and the impersonal. The spiritual force of Hanul is understood to pervade the entire cosmos, while also constituting the essence of individual human selfhood. Thus, no individual exists in isolation but is linked to all forms of life through this universal spiritual energy. Moreover, it is held that every person who “serves God within him or her” (侍天主) will live an unalienated existence.

In the early twentieth century, another new religious movement emerged in the form of Won Buddhism. Though grounded in Buddhist thinking, the new movement also utilizes in practical spirit *Donghak*’s syncretic integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism to articulate a new conception of truth termed the Unitary Circle (*Il-Wŏn*).⁷ The Unitary Circle, which is both empty and the source of all existence, is manifested in the universe through the Four Graces, which are believed to sustain all living things. The Four Graces teach that no being can exist without the Grace of Heaven and Earth; none can come into being without the Grace of Parents; none can live without the Grace of Fellow Beings; and none can survive without the Grace of Laws. These graces necessitate a three-fold response: feeling grace, knowing grace, and repaying grace. I have tentatively termed this a dependent-origination theory of grace expressing a unified truth through four modalities. The elements of this framework correspond to the abovementioned Threefold Study: the capacity to feel grace aligning with the power of cultivation, the knowledge of grace with the power of inquiry, and the repayment of grace with the power of action.⁸ Won Buddhism, with its original truth-conception and methodological approach, is similar to and different from both convivialism, which emphasizes gift-giving and methodological animism, and the

⁷ Paik Nak-chung, “Won-Buddhism and a Great Turning in Civilization,” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, no. 22 (March 2017).

⁸ Among the “Four Graces,” the “Grace of Laws” is perhaps the most easily misunderstood. This is because it could be interpreted as suggesting that all laws in the world are bestowed by truth. However, following the law means conforming not to unjust laws but those that are humane, just, and fair. The doctrine of the Grace of Laws is aligned with the “Choice of Action” from Won Buddhism’s “Threefold Study,” which means “embracing what is righteous while rejecting what is not.”

Chinese conception of Oneness-of-All-Beings. Further investigation into such parallels and distinctions promises to yield valuable insights.

Second, the most compelling feature of convivialism is perhaps the notion of “autonomous civic organization” (also known as “associative self-organization”). As the defining element of convivialist theory and practice, this notion offers a “third way” beyond the absolutization of market and state.⁹ Although this perspective is undoubtedly useful for critiquing both state and market fundamentalism, I wish instead to focus on its potential for reimagining the state and, specifically, popular sovereignty. In doing so, I do not wish to get bogged down in the conventional binary discourse pitting the individual against the state, nor do I seek to provide a “depoliticized” endorsement for state intervention. Instead, I am proposing a far more urgent task: to provide new conceptualizations and imaginings for democratic collective agency and solidarity that can facilitate meaningful political intervention in state intervention itself. In doing so, I seek direction in re-conceptualizing the idea of “self-governance by the people” or “popular sovereignty”—that formidable subject of European intellectual history that defines the very essence of democracy. To view sovereignty as popular in nature means not only critiquing state sovereignty but also regarding sovereignty as a contested concept. More explicitly, it means awakening both the political and practical will to reinforce popular self-governance.¹⁰ While associative self-organization offers an effective means for revitalizing popular self-governance, its true transformative potential lies in its application to state reform.

At this point, I would like to turn to the issue of “units of practice.” Both convivialism and co-becoming tend to gravitate toward the planetary perspective when engaging with the issues of climate change and ecological crisis. Critics of this spatial expansion contend that it may lead to a loss of focus owing to the difficulty humans have in dealing with such vast dimensions. Such criticism deserves serious consideration. It may help explain why we experience the ecological crisis as both imminent and distant—creating an oxymoronic sense that urgent action is both necessary and futile at the same time. To liberate us from this conundrum, Bruno Latour has proposed the succinct concept of “landing on Earth” in order

⁹ Frank Adloff, “Experimental Conviviality: Exploring Convivial and Sustainable Practices,” *Open Cultural Studies* 2020, no. 1: 112, 115.

¹⁰ Youngseo Baik, “Fukugō kokka-ron no kanōsei: Minshu shugi no kiki to mukiau” [The Possibility of “Compound State” Theory: Facing the Crisis of Democracy], *Shisō*, no. 119 (February 2024).

to provide a foothold for starting anew. Latour terms this foothold the “Terrestrial” or “*Gaia*,”¹¹ which refers to a “well-connected locality” where all actors—including countless microscopic organisms—are interlinked through continuously forming waves and nodes, or alternatively, to a “metamorphic zone” where connections catalyze transformations among various actors.¹²

Latour’s perspective prompts us to shift our view from the “local” and “global” to a new center—the Terrestrial—and reconstruct our concepts of space and time. I have previously suggested the need to focus on the overlapping of local-regional-global dimensions in spatial terms, and on the coherence of short-, medium-, and long-term perspectives in temporal terms in order to recalibrate our practical agenda. Furthermore, I have contended that the “core site” should be regarded as the fundamental unit of practice, as this is where spatiotemporal contradictions find their clearest expression.¹³ In focusing on resolving concentrated contradictions in the core site, my intention is to pioneer pathways for the establishment of co-becoming societies. While re-conceptualizing popular sovereignty is central to this endeavor, Latour’s thinking, along with the broader discourse on convivialism and co-becoming, has prompted me to recognize that any discussion of the core site must also consider the need to foster a responsibility toward non-human beings. At the same time, I believe caution is warranted, as there is a risk that when we expand our thinking to the macro-dimensions of the planetary perspective (and move away from anthropocentrism), we may inadvertently become unmoored from our

¹¹ Hwang Jeong-a, “Beuruno Latureuui jeongchisaengtaerongwa munhakui (saengtae) jeongchi” [Bruno Latour’s Political Ecology and the (Ecological) Politics of Literature], *Angwabak* [Inside/Outside], no. 55 (2023): 42.

¹² Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 58, 136.

¹³ Of course, any location in which life exists can potentially become a core site. However, this is only truly achieved when we recognize the temporal-spatial contradictions and concentrated contradictions (objective conditions) involved and adopt a practical approach for overcoming them (subject formation). See Youngseo Baik, *Hengguan Dongya: Cong hexin xianchang chongsi Dongya lishi* [Horizontal View of East Asia: Rethinking East Asian History from Core Sites] (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2016); Youngseo Baik, *Kyōsei e no michi to kakushin genba: Jissen kadai to shite no Higashi Ajia* [The Path to Coexistence and Core Sites: East Asia as a Practical Project Task] (Tokyo: Hōsei Daigaku Shuppanbu, 2016).

historical and social realities and neglect the agency and initiative of political subjects rooted in the core site.¹⁴

Here, let us then consider the perspective of Korean scholar Hwang Jeong-a, who has suggested that “[p]erhaps the democracy that ensures we survive our current crisis is a form of self-governance built on respect rather than possession.” Hwang’s proposal draws on the *Donghak* notion of the “Three Respects,” which posits an organic interconnection between reverence for *Tian*, humanity, and the material world. The idea of “*Tian* eating *Tian*” (以天食天) perfectly encapsulates this philosophy. Because *Tian* finds expression in all existence, the simple act of humans eating food is one of *Tian* eating *Tian*, thus revealing a world connected by the process of eating and being eaten. This metaphor reflects the idea that all things, whether earthly or divine, exist through mutual life-giving relationships because they share the essence of *Hanul*. In fact, based on the concept of “parasitic symbiosis” put forward by Japanese scholar Hoshino Futoshi, we already exist within such a symbiotic web. Futoshi thus contends that co-becoming is not an ideal or goal to be achieved but a reality we already inhabit, indicating that its meaning should be explored through a historical lens. This perspective demands serious attention.¹⁵

The final topic I wish to address is the question of religiosity. On this point, Bing Song draws a crucial distinction between convivialism and co-becoming, stating that convivialism “is a political philosophy. ... It has little or no discussion on metaphysical or transcendental pursuits.” Conversely, the narrative of co-becoming “is a means to the end, which is the ultimate comprehension of *Dao* or realization of enlightenment (Nirvana).” It is only natural then that Song would look to Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism to define the characteristics of co-becoming.¹⁶ However, this does raise the question of how we should interpret Alain

¹⁴The rebuilding experiment of “Itate Village” in Fukushima, Japan, as introduced by Nakajima Takahiro, and the thought of Tao Yōichi (1941–), who led this experiment, offer us significant insights as an example of a “core site.” Moreover, we need to ensure the practicality of co-becoming by excavating examples of experiments in regional co-becoming communities throughout East Asia.

¹⁵Futoshi Hoshino, *Parasitology* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2023), 6–8.

¹⁶Song, “What Intellectual Shift,” 33.

Caillé's suggestion, in reference to Auguste Comte's concept of a religion of humanity, that convivialism could be viewed as a secular religion or an "avatar" for Comte's religion of humanity.¹⁷

It is clear that the contemporary growing interest in the interconnections between nature, material existence, humanity, and spirituality calls for a deeper examination of the religious dimensions distinguishing convivialism from co-becoming.¹⁸ Given the scope of the present discussion, I can only briefly put emphasis on the need for us to move beyond values traditionally associated with democracy, such as ownership, toward alternatives that require a heightened sense of consciousness at both the individual and collective levels—particularly with regard to insights concerning religious and spiritual convictions, such as the comprehension of the *Dao*.

Here, I would like to return once again to Won Buddhism, and specifically to its Threefold Path of Governance and Cultivation, which refers to Governing through Laws and Regulations (政治), Governing through Virtue (德治), and Governing through the *Dao* (道治). Under this framework, the first form of governance encompasses the various forms of real-politik and rule of law found in both the Eastern and Western traditions. Governing through virtue represents the primary means of Confucian ritual-based politics and emphasizes the moral cultivation of leaders. Governing through the *Dao* is a novel concept, which suggests that an ideal world will naturally emerge when people reach the state of the *Dao-Ren* (or those who embody the *Dao*). In other words, this last form of governance is possible only through individual enlightenment. However, merely articulating the theoretical necessity for this threefold approach is far from sufficient. The riskier task of developing methodologies for its realization within specific historical contexts must also be undertaken.¹⁹

¹⁷ Caillé, "Origins and Theoretical Foundations of Convivialism," 228.

¹⁸ Comte attempted to fill the void left by the disappearance of God with positivist science, establishing a communal organization called the Religion of Humanity, which he freed from the shadow of capitalism. His proposal of an "a/theological theology" can be understood as a buffer plan to prevent the recurrence of revolution and cut off the possibilities of democracy in his time. Kim Mincheol, *Nuga minjujuireul duryeowebaneunga: Sasangsa-reul tonghan byeomo minjujuui-ui yeoksa* [Who Fears Democracy: Reading the History of Democratic Aversion Through Intellectual History] (Paju: Changbi, 2023), 227.

¹⁹ This is a fresh interpretation of the three methods of governing religion proposed by Jeongsan Song Gyu (1900–1962), the second Supreme Dharma Master of Won Buddhism. See Paik Nak-chung, *Seobangeui gaebyeok sasangga Deibi Heobeuteu Roleonseu* [David Herbert Lawrence: A Western Great Opening Thinker] (Paju: Changbi, 2020), 484–485.

On the matter of taking risks, I want to emphasize that in pursuing a civilizational alternative over the long term, it is important to map out realistic medium- and short-term strategies tailored to the distinct trajectories of different nation-states. The role of state reform is particularly crucial over the medium term, as it can help bridge long-term and short-term objectives. Without this focused practice, we may make misguided plans based on mistaken alternatives that ultimately weaken the momentum for change.

Although a global or planetary perspective is essential for examining the Co-Becoming Humanities as a holistic discipline, its practical implementation fundamentally depends on the attitudes we adopt within our immediate lived contexts. The mindset of “achieving great change through small steps” is of particular value here. In practice, the momentum for civilizational transformation is generated through small actions. However, we must also keep the larger goal in mind to avoid becoming overwhelmed by minor details. Let us recall that a key element of the Co-Becoming Humanities is the methodology of simultaneously changing oneself and social reality within our respective locations.

The *Dao* is both our ultimate goal and the path to getting there. This is why I have consistently emphasized the pursuit of the *Dao*, and particularly stressed that the simultaneous practice of personal cultivation and social transformation serves as the driving force for a new civilization. The source of this force lies in small-scale autonomous civic organizations formed at core sites, that is, in mind-practice communities. Therefore, the humanistic authenticity long pursued by the humanities lies in seeking the *Dao* through what the Korean poet Shin Dong-yep called “the path within our hearts, the soul’s path that opens in our spirit.” Perhaps then, rather than calling the *Dao* the “Way of Heaven” (天道), it would be more apt to describe it as the “Terrestrial Path” (大地上的路).

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Our *Kyōsei*: How the Personal Works

Takahiro Nakajima

10.1 CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF THE *KYŌSEI*

In the first place, let us look back at the history of the concept of *kyōsei* in Japan. In this respect, Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) who is the founder of Pure Land Buddhism called Jōdo-shū 浄土宗 in Kamakura era is often referred to. What Hōnen actually said is as follows: “I wish to be with all sentient beings together and go to and live in a land of peace and happiness.” Here we have the two words “together” and “live” which are combined into one notion *kyōsei*, that is, living together. So, *kyōsei* is a compound word of the two. However, Hōnen’s words originally come from the words in *Wangsheng lizan* 往生礼赞 (Praise of Reincarnation) by Shandao 善導 (613–681), a monk of Pure Land Buddhism of China’s Tang dynasty. The original meaning is to “let us be altogether reincarnated in the paradise of pure land.”

The person who reinterpreted Hōnen’s idea as *tomoiki* 共生 (co-living) was Shiio Benkyō, 椎尾弁匡 (1876–1971), also known as Benkyō Shōnin 弁匡上人 (Benkyō the Saint), who served as the head monk of Zōjōji Temple 増上寺 of the Pure Land sect. He was the founder of the “*Tomoiki* Movement” in 1922. According to Kikuyama Takayoshi, Shiio Benkyō

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regarded Buddhism as the religion of humans and society, and his study of Shandao's Pure Land Buddhism, which served as the basis for his thought, and especially Shandao's view of ordinary people, led him to name the awakening movement "*Tomoiki*." The name "*Tomoiki*" was decided upon by Shiio himself at a preparatory meeting for the opening of the "*Tomoiki Assembly*" (Kikuyama 2017, 23). This "*Tomoiki*" became *Kyōsei*.

If we further trace the history of the concept of *kyōsei*, we then come to a frightening phrase. As time went by, expressions such as "*Kyōsei Dōshi*" 共生同死 (living and dying altogether) or "*Dōsei Kyōshi*" 同生共死 (living and dying altogether) were used by leaders of Asian countries under pro-Japanese puppet regimes (Ueno 2010, 266). In other words, it was used in the sense of "sharing the fate of life and death with Japan as State" (Ibid., 266). And at the extreme point, the idea of "living and dying altogether of soldiers-government officers-citizens" (Ibid., 267) emerges from the Battle of Okinawa. It is a co-living and co-dying, as if one were to give one's life and death to militarism. This is the exact opposite of Hōnen's desire to "let us be altogether reincarnated in the paradise of pure land."

10.2 NUCLEAR POWER AS STATE SOVEREIGNTY

The contemporary symbol of "sharing the fate of life and death with Japan as State" is the nuclear power plants. Right after the March 11, 2011, disaster, in the magazine *Seiron* 正論 in August 2012, Professor Yamana Hajimu of the Kyoto University Research Reactor Institute wrote a piece entitled "Be Aware that Nuclear Power is the Bedrock of Sovereignty" in which he said:

In an extremely regrettable act on the anniversary of the end of WW2, a Hong Kong activist forcibly landed on the Senkaku Islands. Just prior to this, the South Korean President visited Takeshima and two years ago the Russian President visited the Northern Territories. These and other acts threatening the territorial sovereignty of our country have been escalating and probably many of our citizens have a real sense of crisis about "the country's sovereignty over its territory." However, probably few of our citizens have recognized that "energy policy," just like territorial issues, is the fundamental root of the sovereignty of our country and of our national existence. (Yamana 2012, 7)

This declaration that the bedrock of sovereignty is not merely in territory but in “energy policy” and especially in nuclear power is worthy of note, because it gets right to the essence of Japan’s policy on nuclear power generation. In June 2012 the basic law on atomic energy was amended and the following addition was made to article 2.

Article 2

2. With regard to “ensure safety” in the preceding paragraph, activities shall be carried out accordance with established international standards and with the aims of contributing to the security of our country, preserving the environment, and protecting the property, health and lives of the citizens.¹

More than half a century since the atomic power basic law was passed, the inserted phrase “contributing to the security of the country” has made it crystal clear that nuclear power is state sovereignty itself.

Let us think of *kyōsei* in this framework. What we are asked to think of from *kyōsei* is the nature contaminated by nuclear energy as state sovereignty. If we borrow the concept of “core site”² by Young-seo Baik, a Korean intellectual on modern East Asian history, in which the contradictions in modernity are condensed, Fukushima after March 11, 2011, is one of the “core sites.” To engage in this contradiction, I would like to pick up the activities of “Resurrection of Fukushima” in Iitate village in Fukushima prefecture.

10.3 THE CHALLENGE OF *KYŌSEI* IN THE “RESURRECTION OF FUKUSHIMA”

“Resurrection of Fukushima” is a nonprofit organization (NPO) having its mission as follows:

“Resurrection of Fukushima” is a nonprofit organization which aims to rebuild lives and reconstruct agriculture-centered industries that have been affected by the accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant.

In June 2011, Yōichi Tao, with other 15 members, visited Iitate village and deeply sympathized with the victims. They are the ones who evacuated from

¹ See <https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=330AC1000000186>. Access on March 23, 2024.

² See Baik 2016.

radiation-contaminated area but still keep strong and unchanged attachment to their original lives and the lands inherited from generation to generation. The voluntary group, “Resurrection of Fukushima,” was formed spontaneously for the purpose of reviving their lives and agriculture-centered industries.³

Before it was contaminated by the nuclear power plant accident, Iitate village was a truly beautiful village. It was selected as one of the “most beautiful villages in Japan” and the Iitate beef raised there was really exquisite. However, after the nuclear power plant accident, Iitate villagers were forced to leave their home village. The population of Iitate was slightly over 6000 before the nuclear power accident, while the returner to the village is approximately 1500 today.⁴

The representative of “Resurrection of Fukushima” is Tao Yōichi 田尾陽一. He sent me a document by email on March 11, 2024, in which he described the *kyōsei* with nature in Iitate as follows:

Iitate village is at the forefront of solving the three major issues of the 21st century: food/energy/super-aging population. There are many people who think that the “village will eventually sink into the forest” as it has not been able to recover from the nuclear accident. However, leaving behind a lifestyle and livelihood where humans and nature can do *kyōsei* is a challenge not only for Iitate village, but also for Japan and the world.

The resurrection of the relationship between nature and humans is the foundation of everything. Since the high economic growth period of the 1980s, Japan has been chasing the common illusion of becoming the most advanced industrialized country in the world, surpassing Europe and the United States. However, the original Japanese archipelago is a society based on agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and animal husbandry that do *kyōsei* with nature. The social structure must be reformed based on this starting point. Industry is the technology that supports this social structure, and the idea that we should just import food and feed using the money earned from the export of industrial products will lead to the decline of this archipelago. (Tao 2024, 1)

Tao severely criticized Japanese “common illusion of becoming the most advanced industrialized country in the world.” It had already caused the

³ See <http://www.fukushima-saisei.jp/en/en-purpose/>. Access on March 11, 2024.

⁴ See <https://www.vill.iitate.fukushima.jp/soshiki/2/424.html>. Access on March 11, 2024.

destruction of the social structure by being accelerated by technology before March 11. The nuclear power plant accident was an inevitable result of the “common illusion.”

How can we change such “common illusion” and realize the *kyōsei* between nature and humans? In this point, Tao challenges the “centralization” in modern Japanese nation-state and empowers the “local creative subjects” in local communities (Ibid., 1). It is the activity to partagé the state sovereignty represented in the atomic energy and to create NPO.

In another article, he sketched a new idea of the sovereignty partagé.

Therefore, I think that it would be better for the future and for peace if Iitate village were to unite with local areas in Korea, China, and the rest of the world. It may sound like a pipe dream, but originally, community units gradually grew larger and larger to form a modern nation. I am simply saying, “Why don’t we create a ‘community-based federation society’ so that we can once again form a proper popular will at our own feet” instead of only thinking about strengthening it. (Tao 2021, 23)

If we seriously think of the difference between state sovereignty and popular sovereignty, and enlarge the possibilities of the latter, we could think of “community-based federation society” with other villages and cities in “Korea, China and the rest of the world” over the national borders. This is the central idea of the sovereignty partagé. For that sake, we must focus on the local communities instead of nation-state.

10.4 HUMAN CO-BECOMINGS

In October 2016, the 13th activity report meeting of the “Resurrection of Fukushima,” entitled as “The Next Five Years: Thoughts of Iitate Village Residents,” was held at the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Tokyo. The reason why the meeting was held at the Faculty of Agriculture was because Iitate village and the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Tokyo were working together to decontaminate the fields and to develop new agricultural practices amid high radiation levels. I was very impressed by the way the villagers themselves of Iitate were looking back over the past five years and weaving their own words in the debriefing session. I am not sure if it is appropriate to put it in this way, but their words seemed philosophically well-developed and flowered as crystallized concepts. Among them, I would like to introduce the words of Kanno Eiko 菅野榮子:

I also decided that my final place in life would be Iitate village, so the sight of those mountains and rivers, the clean air, the clear streams and murmuring of the water, are etched in my mind. I have decided to return to the village with Yotchan (Kanno Yoshiko 菅野芳子).

I cannot live alone, but together with her we can. [...]

The encounters we had with people after the evacuation, by making the *miso* and the frozen rice cakes together, and the people who participated in this debriefing session, became a great treasure. I would like to take the first step toward the resurrection of that beautiful village, while fully demonstrating this treasure, even though I am an old person. I had no hope for my life in the radiation-infested evacuation zone, but now I have found a point of hope. I am going home with Yotchan. (Tao 2020, 253–254)

Kanno Eiko, who thought about that human co-becomings live thoroughly at the evacuation site, decided to return to Iitate village with her friend, Kanno Yoshiko, who had a desire to return home. The phrase “I cannot live alone, but together with her we can” tells us the meaning of human co-becoming, which shows that we would become human with others.⁵ If there is hope for our *kyōsei*, it is in the activities of meeting people, creating something together, and reporting through speeches.

I also happened to be present at the debriefing session, and the words of not only Kanno Eiko but also those of the Iitate villagers shook my whole body and resonated with each other.

This is precisely the new public organization/openness that Tao has managed to realize. I look forward to the continued philosophical and practical challenges of the “Resurrection of Fukushima,” and hope that new public organization/openness will open up here and there based on an understanding of the significance of these efforts.

10.5 PROVINCIALIZE THE HUMAN

Let us return to the problem of *kyōsei* between nature and human co-becomings. Tao was educated in the department of high-energy physics at the graduate school of science in the University of Tokyo. He has wide and deep knowledge about natural science and advanced technology.

⁵ As for the concept of human co-becoming, see <https://www.hitachi.com/rev/column/ci/vol07/index.html>. Access on March 11, 2024.

However, he confessed: “When I was a student in graduate school, I majored in high-energy physics. I remember being strongly opposed to a nuclear engineering professor who assured us that nuclear power plants were absolutely safe” (Ibid., 8). How can we transform our way of living by delimiting the power of advanced technology? I think it is a narrow way to re-unite the local and indigenous wisdom for way of living and the nature contaminated by the knowledge of technology.

In this respect, I would like to refer to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s idea of “intellectual kin-making.” Chakrabarty is known as a leading scholar of subaltern studies. In order to listen to the voices of marginalized and alienated people like the subaltern, we have to provincialize Europe-centered social structure.⁶ Nonetheless, provincializing of Europe is not sufficient to face the planetary crisis in contaminated nature. We take a further step to provincialize the human.

If someone were to ask me today, “What do I provincialize in my climate-related work?” I would probably say that I provincialize the human and do so as a humanist historian of human beings. (Chakrabarty 2023, 18)

What Chakrabarty imagines in the provincializing of the human is “imagining and then implementing a process of scaling back the realm of the human-modern” (Ibid., 42). We need a withdrawal from the “human-modern” exploitation of nature.

It is interesting that Chakrabarty here introduces Robin Wall Kimmerer’s activity as the exemplified one for a new attitude toward nature. Kimmerer is a biologist known for her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Kimmerer describes the process of mushrooms rising up and coming out of the soil by means of the indigenous word “Puhpowee” (Kimmerer 2000, 48), and tries to connect the science of biology with indigenous wisdom. Chakrabarty explains her activity in this way:

I do not claim any universality for Kimmerer’s thinking. What I claim is exemplarity. She teaches. She shows by her own example how to speak across real and serious differences. Differences that exist within her—her trained biologist-self and herself as an Indigenous person. This is the politics of “being with” in the face of the gathering emergency of climate change.

⁶Cf. Chakrabarty, 2000.

Kimmerer demonstrates that there could be kin-making between the science of botany and Indigenous knowledge of the country. Intellectual kin-making does not erase difference and produce identities. Like entanglements, it allows us to be plural inside, intellectually, inhabiting the dangerous pleasures of what Homi Bhabha once called “difference ‘within.’” (Chakrabarty 2023, 105)

To constitute oneself from plurally differentiated selves, as Kimmerer does, is to open oneself to a difference without identity or a difference of differences that cannot be reduced to any identity, be it cultural identity or self-identity. It is this that needs to be shared in an exemplary way today. The important thing is to make kin between the scientific knowledge of biology and “indigenous knowledge of the country,” rather than having them as two separate things.

This empowers us to consider the art of “being with.” *Kyōsei* with others, other societies, and other cultures can never be realized if each remains attached to its own unitary, identity-based way of being. It is only when we are already plural and potentially capable of making kin between them and always existing in a different way that we can open the horizon of *becoming others*, by borrowing the Gilles Deleuzian phrase to which Chakrabarty often refers.

10.6 COSMOTECHNICS

Incidentally, what the philosopher Yuk Hui is trying to think about is not separate from making kin between these differences. In *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, he takes Martin Heidegger’s “Question Concerning Technology” (1954) and reworks it in terms of the Chinese “indigenous knowledge of the country.” Heidegger’s question considers modernity at the limit of modernity through technology, and sees our existence, which has already been thoroughly penetrated by modern technology, as embedded in *Ge-stell*, or total drive system. It is not easy to escape this system, but here Hui introduces “re-orientation” instead of “disorientation” to go beyond it (Hui 2016, 282).

The invitation to move from spatial metaphor to temporal experience is an invitation to rethink rhythms that are in the process of synchronizing and becoming homogeneous, following the triumph of the global technological

systems that exist in every domain of our daily lives and traverse every territory: telecommunications, logistics, finance, etc. It is this rethinking that must be the main task of a programme of “re-orientation” after Lyotard’s postmodern “disorientation,” a programme that aims to go beyond the opposition between the global and the local as the constitution of cultural and political identity. Instead of negating technology and tradition, such a programme will have to open itself to a pluralism of cosmotechnics and a diversity of rhythms by transforming what is already there. The only way to do this is to unmake and remake the categories that we have widely accepted as technics and technology. (*Ibid.*, 281–282)

In this program of “re-orientation,” Hui attempts to pluralize China and open up a horizon that would not be reduced to a “total drive system” by reintroducing light to the traditional discussion of “器 *qi* [vessels]” as Chinese theory of technology, which is opposed to “道 *dao*.” And this pluralized China is nothing less than a *topos* that connects to differences in other cultures, societies, and histories.

As a preliminary definition, Hui states, “it [the definition of cosmotechnics] means the unification between the cosmic order and moral order through technical activities” (*Ibid.*, 19). More straightforward, however, is the explanation that immediately precedes it:

Technics is not anthropologically universal; technologies in different cultures are affected by the cosmological understandings of these cultures, and have autonomy only within a certain cosmological setting—technics is always *cosmotechnics*. (*Ibid.*, 19)

Technology is defined by the cosmology of each culture. If this is the case, we should be able to think of technology differently by presenting a new cosmology in place of the Western modern cosmology that defines technology as *Ge-stell*. For example, we could invent a new “cosmotechnics” by renewing the Chinese cosmology.

However, Hui is not so optimistic in this direction. Technology in China today is supported neither by traditional Chinese cosmotechnics nor by modern Western one. It is being developed in a state of thoroughgoing “deracination (*Entwurzelung*)” (*Ibid.*, 34). The reason I say “thoroughgoing” is that this “deracination” is two-fold. While technology as *Ge-stell* causes “deracination” as “fragmentation of forms of life” (*Ibid.*, 33), in China, where even the “question concerning technology” cannot

be asked, the “deracination” has become overwhelmed without any opportunity to question the “deracination.”

What should be done? Hui’s strategy is to reexamine the “question concerning technology” in China, to overcome the cosmotechnics of Western modernity, and to reinvent a new cosmotechnics that will allow us to escape from the two-fold “deracination.” In this respect, Hui tries to re-activate the traditional concepts such as “器 *qi* [vessels]” and “道 *dao*” and to re-unite these two concepts (technics and the principle of cosmos). I completely agree with his attempt, but, as a scholar of Chinese philosophy, I would like to reexamine the notion itself of *dao*.

I think *dao* has two different dimensions.⁷ One is a dimension as the principle of cosmos. It is indicated by the capital letter *Dao*. Another is a dimension as technics to define our way of life. It is indicated by the small letter *daos*. If so, the question must be asked how we translate and understand this double meaning of *dao* today.

While modern Europe has attempted to translate and understand *dao* as “logos” or “ratio (reason),” the greatest challenge has been the question of whether *dao* precedes God.⁸ It was a discussion of the capital letter *Dao* that shot to the heart of the European cosmology based on the creation by God. *Dao* presented a mystery that preceded God. That is why European sinologists tried to translate *dao* as Greek or Latin concepts such as “logos” or “ratio (reason)” in order to defend their cosmology.

However, *dao* has another dimension of technics that defines the way of life at the same moment. The mystery is not somewhere in the distance, but amid everyday life, and it delimits our everyday life. In the *Zhuangzi*, there is a stimulating phrase saying that “*dao* exists in the piss and shit too.” This is a dynamic overturn, in which the capital letter *Dao* as the mysterious is found in the humblest human excrement. This is a passage that Hui also quotes and discusses (Ibid., 67–69). And Hui puts it this way: “*Dao* is not a particular object, nor is it the principle of a specific genre of objects; it is present in every being, yet escapes all objection. *Dao* is *das Unbedingte*” (Ibid., 68).

What is being discussed in the *Zhuangzi* is that the unconditioned *Dao* is at the same time technics that defines the way of living of the being. The

⁷ Concerning the difference between the capital letter *Dao* and the small letter *daos*, see Cheng 1997, 116.

⁸ As for the genealogy of the translation of *dao*, see Nakajima 2021, 24–25.

dao as such a two-fold characteristic is at the core of Chinese cosmotechnics.

In this case, the question must be asked again how to translate and understand *dao* today. It is neither ratio nor logos, and it is even less what is transliterated as “*tao*.” Hayashi Fumitaka once tried to understand *dao* as temporality (Hayashi 2015, 61–66). There is a possible overlap with Hui’s argument, but we must be careful because here again Heidegger’s shadow intrudes.

I would like to see *dao* as the technics to give a foundation to all life and to define the way of life. This would breathe life back into the concept of 性 *xing* as a way of life, and shed light on the effort to complete *xing* while transforming it. I hope that from this, we can find a way to reinvent a new cosmotechnics today.

10.7 THE RITUAL AS TECHNIQS TO TRANSFORM THE WAY OF LIVING

We are now severely asked to change our way of living, thinking, and sensing in order to change the relationship with others, nature, and the world. We need a deeper self-transformation of humans by re-inventing and re-orienting an indigenous cosmology and wisdom. In the *Zhuangzi*, we find a deeper self-transformation of humans in its notion “物化 *wu hua* (becoming others).” In *Xunzi*, which was heavily influenced by *Zhuangzi*, we can also find a radical transformation of our way of living in “化性 *hua xing* (transforming our way of living/our nature).”

What type of technics can radically transform our way of living? This is a question the *Xunzi* tries to answer. One possible answer *Xunzi* finds is 禮 *li* (ritual). Ritual is a unique normativity. It does not appeal to any transcendence nor to the reason. It is based on human affections understood as dispositions (情 *qing*). Michael Puett thinks of ritual as follows:

The rituals thus come from the dispositions—they are responses that are deemed to be exemplary and are deemed to be capable of helping to train the next generations to pattern their dispositions as well. (Puett 2010, 59)

According to Puett, the ritual is an exemplary normativity that trains and transforms humans by appealing to the patterned affections. That is why the ritual is not an objective and universal normativity like laws that “flawlessly fit every situation” (Ibid., 62), but an exemplary normativity that is

always reviewed, transformed, and asked if it is adequate to the given situation.

This type of normativity is picked up in *Xunzi*. It raises a genetic question about the ritual as follows:

The previous kings hated such disorder, and therefore they established ritual in order to create distinctions in the world, to cultivate human desires. (*Xunzi*, 19:1, the translation is mine)

According to *Xunzi*, the origin of ritual is related to human desires and affections. We cultivate human desires and affections through rituals which realize a well-ordered and civilized society. Ritual is better than law, because it is deeply rooted in human ways of living or human nature based on desires and affections.

Xunzi thinks that rituals were artificially invented by sage-kings. As long as there are many sage-kings, the rituals differ, depending upon dynasties and regions. The rituals appear in different ways. That means we can find different types of cultivation of human desires and affections in different rituals. The rituals are weak normativities that vary with history and culture.

Nonetheless, we do not overlook that rituals have a basic characteristic in common. That is, by transforming human ways of living or human nature (化性 *hua xing*), they open up the normative dimension based upon artificiality (偽 *wei*). In order to constitute ritual, it is necessary to transform natural desires or emotions into “civilized文化 *wenhua*” ones.

10.8 THE PERSONAL

Let us get back to the concept of *kyōsei* again. Time and space to be together seem sine qua non for *kyōsei* to be possible. However, under COVID-19 pandemic, social distance and going online were encouraged, demanding that we be together as little as possible. It was as if those around us were potential enemies. No, in fact, you yourself may be the most potential enemy, since you do not even know if you are infected or not. Put another way, the situation brought about by COVID-19 is one that does not lend itself to a titular *kyōsei*. If we do not think through the circumstances in which it is decidedly difficult to be together, we will not ever reach the life that we speak of in *kyōsei*.

Being together is not an easy attitude. Being together represented by “共生共死 living and dying altogether” may be easy for those who insist on it, but it is not easy for those who it is imposed on. What is more important to think is the way of being together in each specific situation. Our experience has shown us that being together often does not work. Especially with hostile partners, we often end up without being together. Unless we think of *kyōsei* in the light of the fact that there are situations in which being together is not possible in a romantic way, we will not escape the COVID-19 yoke that gives priority to life without being together. In short, we are being asked to fundamentally rethink the human way of living and being together with others.

In considering being together and without being together, I would like to introduce the concept of the personal. It is neither private nor public. The public presupposes being together. The private, on the other hand, presupposes a private space that is separated from others. In many cases, our imaginations offer images of private individuals cutting off external relations in the public sphere. Without being together is to shut oneself up in a private individual in the inside, while being together is to coexist with others in the outside.

To be personal, however, is neither. This reminds me of Suzuki Daisez's (1870–1966) concept of “人 *nin* (Person)” and Izutsu Toshihiko's (1914–1993) concept of the “personal.” In the work *Japanese Spirituality*, Suzuki Daisez speaks of the “person that transcends individuality” (Suzuki 1972, 76), elaborating as follows:

The supra-individual Person is not without a relation to the individual self: there is a deep, in fact inseparable, relation between them. Though we cannot say that the Person *is* the individual self, still the Person cannot exist apart from it. The Person that transcends the individual self is truly a wonder, a “true man of no title” to use Rinzai's words, or in the terms of another master, “a solitary body revealing itself amidst the myriad phenomena.” *Mono no aware* as experienced by this Person is the rhythmic movement of Japanese spirituality. (*Ibid.*, 76–77)

Suzuki tries to find a dimension of the Person that is related to the private “individual self” but transcends it.

Following Suzuki's way of thinking, Izutsu Toshihiko was trying to re-read the *Daode Jing* by placing the “personal” in a kind of mystical experience, especially in the lineage of shamanism.

When we read the *Tao Tê Ching* with the preceding observation in mind, we cannot but feel the breath, so to speak, of an extraordinary man pervading the whole volume, the spirit of an unusual philosopher pulsating throughout the book. With all the possible later additions and interpolations, which I readily admit, I cannot agree with the view that the *Tao Tê Ching* is a work of compilation consisting of fragments of thought taken from various heterogeneous sources. For there is a certain fundamental unity which strikes us everywhere in the book. And the unity is a personal one. In fact, the *Tao Tê Ching* as a whole is a unique piece of work distinctly colored by the personality of one unusual man, a shaman-philosopher. (Izutsu 1983, 291–292)

Here we can see that Izutsu does not agree with the modern concept of the individual author at all. Rather, what is at issue in the *Tao Tê Ching* (*Daode Jing*) is the “personal,” that is, the person as a “shaman,” an ancient being that stands outside the modern self. *Sufism and Taoism* then goes on to discuss shamans in detail, but they must be understood as “personal” shamans, beyond the understanding of shamans that some types of cultural anthropology target.

This idea of the personal is developed in more detail in Izutsu’s English translation of the *Tao Tê Ching* (*Daode Jing*). While Izutsu admits that “in the *Tao Tê Ching*, on the contrary, there is absolutely no such personal concreteness observable” (Izutsu 2001, 21), he also says that he does not mean that “he (or the book attributed to him) is impersonal in every respect, in every sense” (Ibid., 21). Why?

Quite the contrary: the *Tao Tê Ching* is in a certain sense an extremely personal book. This “personal” nature of the book comes primarily from the fact that Lao- tzü speaks in the first person. Throughout the book, the subject of speech is always and everywhere “I.” And the “I” here is, instead of being the ego as the center of empirical experiential experience of an individual man, the existential awareness of a man who has lost his ego, who, having lost his ego as the “named” self, is now completely identified with the Nameless. It refers, in other words, to a nameless Self existing and acting in accordance with the creative activity of Nature itself. This nameless Self, which stands on the basis of a total negation of the individual ego and which, therefore, reveals itself only in a metaphysical dimension of Being beyond that of names, expresses itself in the *Tao Tê Ching* in the form of the first person pronoun. Hence the remarkably peculiar personal concreteness which runs through the book. (Ibid., 21–22)

We can clearly see that the “personal” is not the “individual ego” but its total negation. So, what is the personal? It is the first-person pronoun, “I.” It is the personal insofar as it is taken up as a pronoun rather than a noun, an argument that sends us back to the proper name and *haecceitas* (this thingness) discussed in European medieval theology.

10.9 OUR KYŌSEI

If the “personal” is “I” as the first-person pronoun, this “I” should be open to the plurality. It is a situation in which the “personal” may be constituted by other “I”s, while the “personal” is disconnected from the ego and the private. The personal “I” as the plurality would be a basis of *our* (based on “I”s) *kyōsei*.

Since this “I” is a pronoun, it is an I that can never be closed off privately, but is a replaceable “I” with others. And we are connected not in an external relationship, but in a more involved way because the situation itself is a “relationship as a self-existing thing” (Yamauchi 2020, 3).

Our kyōsei may be glimpsed in the constant movement between disconnection and connection, and I hope that *our kyōsei* will provide a hint to our new way of life as human co-becoming that is far from “共生共死living and dying altogether.”

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