

12-12-2008

Naturalism in the Philosophies of Dewey and Zhuangzi: The Live Creature and the Crooked Tree

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Naturalism in the Philosophies of Dewey and Zhuangzi:

The Live Creature and the Crooked Tree

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor in Philosophy
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Date of Approval:
December 12, 2008

Keywords: Pragmatism, Daoism, Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics

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Dedication

For P.J. – “Nature speaks louder than the call from the minaret.” (Inayat Khan,
Bowl of Saki)

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations	ii
Abstract	iii
Preface: West Meets East.....	1
Dewey's Encounter with China	6
Chapter One: What is Naturalism?	15
Naturalism and the Organic Point of View	16
Nature and the Language of Experience	22
Naturalistic Strategies in Philosophy	26
Chapter Two: Scientific vs. Humanistic Naturalism.....	40
The Development of Naturalism in the United States	42
Humanistic Naturalism	53
Two Examples of Humanistic Naturalism.....	59
Chapter Three: Dewey's Naturalism – The Live Creature	62
The “Subject-Matter” of Philosophy	66
Reforming and Transforming Experience	69
Nature as the “Affair of Affairs”	81
Experience and Nature.....	86
The Live Creature	99
Chapter Four: Zhuangzi's Naturalism – The Crooked Tree	102
The Background of Chinese Philosophy.....	102
Philosophical Daoism	106
A Note on Translations	111
On Zhuangzi's Naturalism.....	112
Chapter Five: Transformation and Democracy as a Way of Life.....	131
What Dewey and Zhuangzi Share.....	131
Development and Harmony	135
Community and Individuality	143
References.....	165
Bibliography	171
About the Author	End Page

List of Abbreviations

Works by John Dewey:

Southern Illinois University Press publishes a collection of John Dewey's complete works in 37 volumes. They are separated into three sections: *The Early Works*, *The Middle Works*, and *The Later Works*. My citations will follow the standard format of referencing the section, volume and page number in this collection, save for when the citation also can be found in a separately published volume. Then, I will include the following abbreviations.

<i>HWT</i>	<i>How We Think</i> (1910)(Rev. 1933)	(MW 6)
<i>DE</i>	<i>Democracy and Education</i> (1916)	(MW 9)
<i>RP</i>	<i>Reconstruction in Philosophy</i> (1920)	(MW 12)
<i>HNC</i>	<i>Human Nature and Conduct</i> (1922)	(MW 14)
<i>EN</i>	<i>Experience and Nature</i> (1925)	(LW 1)
<i>PP</i>	<i>The Public and its Problems</i> (1927)	(LW 2)
<i>QC</i>	<i>The Quest for Certainty</i> (1929)	(LW 4)
<i>ION</i>	<i>Individualism: Old and New</i> (1930)	(LW 5)
<i>ACF</i>	<i>A Common Faith</i> (1934)	(LW 9)
<i>AE</i>	<i>Art as Experience</i> (1934)	(LW 10)
<i>LSA</i>	<i>Liberalism and Social Action</i> (1935)	(LW 11)
<i>LTI</i>	<i>Logic: The Theory of Inquiry</i> (1938)	(LW 12)
<i>EE</i>	<i>Experience and Education</i> (1939)	(LW 13)
<i>FC</i>	<i>Freedom and Culture</i> (1939)	(LW 13)

Naturalism in the Philosophies of Dewey and Zhuangzi:
The Live Creature and the Crooked Tree

Christopher C. Kirby

ABSTRACT

This dissertation will compare the concept of nature as it appears in the philosophies of the American pragmatist John Dewey and the Chinese daoist Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu)¹ and will defend two central claims. The first of these is that Dewey and Zhuangzi share a view of nature that is non-reductive, philosophically liberal, and more comprehensive than the accounts recurrent in much of the Western tradition. This alternate conception of nature is non-reductive in the way that it avoids the physically mechanistic outlook underwriting much of contemporary Anglo-American thought. It is philosophically liberal in that it accepts a more generous and progressive position than predominant Western orthodoxies. And, it is more comprehensive in scope insofar as it draws as much from the social sciences as it does from the natural sciences.

The second claim defended will be that the synoptic vision gained from such a comparison offers a new heuristic program for research into the philosophical position known as naturalism, a program that can, at once, avoid the scientific tendencies of the current, mainstream treatment of nature and reconnect with earlier, more inclusive models. Where Dewey's and Zhuangzi's ideas converge, one

¹ Pronounced "jwong-dzuh"

finds similarities in the prescriptions each made for human action, and where they differ, one finds mutually complementary insights. Finally, this heuristic will be used to refute various interpretations of Dewey and Zhuangzi that tend to understate or ignore the importance of nature within their schemes.

Preface: West Meets East

Dewey and Zhuangzi – not two names one finds regularly in the same sentence. What basis is there for comparison of two thinkers so divided by time and place, between one who was a leading advocate of democratic ideals and one who preferred to drag his “tail in the mud?” In spite of the obvious differences, these thinkers actually held quite a bit in common – particularly when it comes to the way they viewed the relationship between human beings and nature. A point-by-point comparison may serve to illustrate.

The most important similarity between Dewey and Zhuangzi is that they defined nature in terms of a relational field of which change was a chief characteristic. As Dewey wrote, “Man finds himself living in an aleatory world... The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable.”² Zhuangzi put it similarly, “With open fields, bits of dust, and myriad creatures mutually oscillating and breathing, doesn’t nature take on a mainly deep, dark blue-green appearance?”³ But, in spite of nature’s precariousness, both Dewey and Zhuangzi believed that one could not merely survive, but flourish, in such a world if only one were able to get out of one’s own way and find attunement with the surrounding world.

² *EN*, LW 1:42

³ Zhuangzi. “Chapter Two – Qiwulun.” [My translation]

This led each to posit similar descriptions of the human being. Instead of appealing to disembodied reason or depicting humans as political animals, Dewey and Zhuangzi offered far less anthropocentric models. For Dewey, human beings were just one type of “live creature” among many. For Zhuangzi, a human being, like any of the myriad things, was a point of focus, or *dé* [德], that was inextricably linked to the field of nature. Both Dewey and Zhuangzi would have agreed that the entities of nature are not merely interconnected but interpenetrate one another – they are what they are because of the various relationships within the field.

Their advice for how one ought to comport oneself, given this view of nature, held many similarities as well. Each argued, in his own way, for a “live and let live” type of mutual respect. Each argued that happiness was achievable once human beings stopped trying to bend nature to their will and instead found a way to live in harmony as a member of a community. For Dewey, this was what democracy as a way of life entailed. For Zhuangzi, it was wandering at ease in spontaneity, or *wù wéi* [無為]. This is where many critics might see the comparison begin to break down. It is said of Dewey that his affinity for instrumentalist and pragmatic explanations leads directly to a crass opportunism, and that his focus on human experience prevented him from making deep metaphysical insights. Likewise, there are two main objections leveled against Zhuangzi – that his emphasis on non-action is an excuse for quietism, and that his mystical inclinations underwrite radical skepticism and/or jejune relativism. So, among their commentators, Dewey comes off as a superficial weasel and Zhuangzi, a frivolous hippie. Through juxtaposition, I believe it will become obvious that these interpretations are unwarranted, that

Dewey's philosophy is actually metaphysically rich and communally oriented, and that Zhuangzi provides both a manual for leadership and a *via media* between dogmatic absolutism and skeptical relativism.

The comparative points of this project, however, will serve us only if they are situated within a broader philosophical and historical context. After all, comparison can only be useful to philosophical inquiry when emphasis is placed not merely on pairing up concepts from disparate traditions and finding their similarities, but rather on the hope of finding insights about the methodology and conceptual schemes employed in each, as well as the problems toward which any similarities can be applied. Comparison for comparison's sake is at best uninformative and at worst intellectually irresponsible.

Dewey and Zhuangzi are not just conceptually linked, however. They both were at the cutting edge of what became a school of thought – pragmatic (or humanistic) naturalism for Dewey, and Daoism for Zhuangzi. Each suffered a subsequent misinterpretation of their ideas, too, by both their critics and supporters. In the centuries after his death, Zhuangzi's work was co-opted by superstition and folk religion and became part of the canon of religious Daoism. Dewey's work was largely eclipsed by analytic philosophy, which usurped Dewey's brand of naturalism with its scientifically reductionist view of the world.

The confusion about the meaning of naturalism that resulted from the rise of analytic thought requires that a comparison of naturalism between these two thinkers begin from a contemporary context. Much ink has been spilled over the philosophies of these men and if we hope to come to a clear understanding of the ideas they share,

we must first distinguish those ideas from the wrong-headed views that directly result from years of interpretation and appropriation. Otherwise, we stand in danger of falling prey to a selective emphasis that has rendered the concept of naturalism nearly impenetrable to contemporary readers. In that regard, this project will extend outward from the comparison of Dewey and Zhuangzi on two fronts. The first must address the frameworks into which each thinker's ideas fit. Toward this end, there seem to be at least four questions of major concern.

- 1) How does the view held in common by Dewey and Zhuangzi compare with other views that have worn the moniker of "naturalism?"
- 2) What were the philosophical problems to which Dewey and Zhuangzi were responding?
- 3) What was part of Dewey's intellectual equipment prior to his China visit and what can we attribute to his time there?
- 4) How did the landscape of ideas change in China because of Dewey's visit?

Were this a full-length manuscript, each of these questions would certainly warrant a complete chapter, and their answers are undoubtedly complex and rich enough to call for such a treatment. However, the scope of a dissertation will not allow for such a detailed analysis. Instead, my main focus will be the first two questions. I will only address the latter two questions wherever rigorous exegesis may call for them. As consolation, I offer some contextual and historical information regarding Dewey's encounter with China in the following section of this preface.

The second front upon which a worthwhile comparison must extend has to do with its application. I believe there are several directions in which naturalism, *à la* Dewey and Zhuangzi, can be useful. Philosophically, as I will contend, their mutual approach seems to help alleviate some of the metaphysical hang-ups that have plagued Western philosophy for over two millennia. Their views can also be seen as

a means of reconciling philosophy with recent work in the environmental and biological sciences as well as suggesting a normative theory that takes a broader view than previous moral philosophies and thus seems to link up ethical life with the rest of human experience, offering inroads to new political ideas. Unfortunately, forays into these topics will again be limited by the scope of a dissertation. Therefore, I will mostly treat the ethical and political ramifications of the Dewey-Zhuangzi comparison, as it is these that are most appropriate to traditional philosophical concerns.

This facet of Dewey's thought, which could be seen as the unification of nature with morality, is uncannily similar to the general Chinese view. The books of the *shū* 四書, the "Four Confucian Classics," each illustrate the intermingling of ontology with morality in Chinese thinking, and a view of the human self into which Hume's dictum about reason being a "slave to the passions" would never fit.⁴ The lack of the Western distinction between nature and a "moral agent" is even apparent in the Chinese language, where the nearest correlate to the Western concept of 'mind' – the lynchpin of ethical agency – is *xīn* [心], which is more closely related to the body (particularly the heart) than it is any transcendental or supernatural entity.

Comparisons of Dewey with the Confucian school of thought are relatively common in recent scholarship. Book length treatments of this comparison have been offered by David Hall and Roger Ames in *The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (1999), and by Joseph Grange in *John Dewey, Confucius and Global Democracy* (2004). Because Zhuangzi's

⁴ cf. Ames, Roger T. & Hall, David. *Thinking From the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.)

philosophy was largely a reaction to Confucianism, the prima facie concern might be that such a comparison with Dewey's political philosophy is inappropriate. Rather than a complete rejection of Confucian precepts, however, I will argue that Zhuangzi's ideas were more of a redirection thereof, with a special regard given to nature. This would place Zhuangzi right in line with Dewey.

Dewey's Encounter with China

In 1919, Dewey began a tour of China and Japan that he would later consider a professional rebirth. The lectures he gave while at Tokyo Imperial University were turned into a book under the title *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, of which Dewey would remark in a letter to his Columbia colleague John Jacob Coss that, "I tried to sum up my past in that, and get rid of it for a fresh start."⁵ But, his experience in Japan marked only the beginning of what Dewey called his "renewal of youth."⁶ For, it was the time he spent in China that would lead him to claim "[n]othing western looks quite the same anymore."⁷ In fact, he was so enraptured by China that he petitioned Columbia University to allow him to extend his stay from what was originally planned as a mere six-week jaunt to a yearlong teaching post at the University of Beijing. And upon the end of that year, he managed to again extend his stay. In all, Dewey's sojourn lasted for over twenty-six months. While there, he

⁵ Cf. Dewey to Coss, 1920.04.22 in *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 2*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

⁶ Cf. Dewey to Coss, 1920.01.13 in *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 2*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

⁷ Ibid.

published 30 articles concerning China and gave over 120 lectures (of which less than a third have been recovered) to a variety of institutions all over the country.⁸

In order to understand why Dewey was so compelled by China, a recapitulation of the events leading up to his visit must be offered. The era in which Dewey encountered China was unlike any other, past or present, in the nation's history. During this time, China was at a cultural, political, and philosophical crossroads. The old ways of the Qing dynasty, which had prospered since the mid-17th-century, were beginning to break down in the face of western industrialization. On one hand, there were older intellectuals and officials who had been educated in the neo-Confucian tradition of *dào xúe* [道學] (the Learning of the Way), a system which had so entrenched itself as the orthodox Chinese belief that from the year 1313 until the beginning of the 20th-century it was the basis of civil service entrance examinations.⁹ On the other hand, a large portion of the younger literati had been educated abroad, mainly in British and American universities (of which Dewey's Columbia held the largest contingent). This difference contributed to an uneven image of China both at home and abroad, which culminated in the events that transpired during the decade surrounding the turn of the century. If ever there were an individual who embodied the welfare of an entire nation, then that figure was Li Hongzhang – China's eldest and most respected statesman of the era.¹⁰

⁸ cf. Dewey, John. *Lectures in China, 1919-1921*. ed. by Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-Chen Ou. (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1973)

⁹ Cf. Wing-Tsit Chan's *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) p. 589

¹⁰ For an excellent monograph on Li Hongzhang, cf. Chu, Samuel C. and Kwang-Ching Liu, ed. *Li Hung-Chang and China's Early Modernization*. (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe) 1994.

Li Hongzhang was born in Hefei, Anhui – which is historically significant because Anhui and its neighboring province, Hunan, comprise the area once inhabited by the state of Song during the ‘Warring States’ period of China (480-222 BCE). The name Song was carried down by descendants of this state and was twice used to name dynasties, first in 420 C.E. and then again, five hundred years later from 960 to 1279 CE. It was during the latter that *dào xúe*, or Learning of the Way, was established by the philosopher Zhu Xi. Although *dào xúe* was, at its core, a neo-Confucian system, Daoist and Buddhist precepts so heavily influenced Zhu Xi that his thought should best be classified as an amalgam of the three. Li Hongzhang was an adept student of *dào xúe*, which was alternately known as the school of Song, and at the age of twenty-four he passed the civil service examination toward the rank of *jìnshì* – the highest of the three titles in the *dào xúe* system. As part of the highest level of gentry, and due to his superior military cunning, Li was quickly promoted to rank of general. On all accounts he was a model Chinese citizen.

So it was that in 1895, the 73-year-old Li journeyed to Japan to negotiate a treaty. His mission was to sate Japan’s imperialistic binge, which had already laid claim to Chinese tributaries in the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and the Korean peninsula during the short-lived Sino-Japanese war. Under the Meiji rule (1868-1912), Japan had already been largely westernized and was in a position, both economically and militarily, to make stringent demands on the struggling Qing dynasty in China. The image of this meeting, with the elderly Li and his group of traditionally dressed Chinese attendants paying tribute to the much younger Japanese

officials in their western garb, left a lasting impression on the European military powers.

China's apparent weakness in this affair was enough to pique the interest of several European imperial nations. Britain, France, Italy, Germany and Russia all vied for control in many Chinese provinces. In the north, Germany took Jiaozhou and Russia gained Liaodong; while, in the south, France acquired Guangzhou Bay and Britain leased several territories around Hong Kong – which it had occupied for nearly fifty years since the first Opium War. Of the European entrants, only Italy was successfully turned away by the Qing government. The more concessions the Qing government made to the imperialists, the more outraged the Chinese public grew, and by the end of 1898 a secret society comprised of farmers, villagers, and several scholars in the provinces of Shandong and Hebei had formed in opposition to Qing cooperation with foreign interests. This group, which consisted of mostly young men who had been displaced by the changes that imperialism introduced, called their society 'The Righteous and Harmonious Fists' and combined principles of martial arts and mysticism in their doctrines.

In 1898, intent on ousting what they believed were the Qing traitors, the 'Fists' organized a small skirmish that would later develop into a full-scale revolt. Although the 'Fists' were defeated in this initial encounter, they gained vast support from many other areas in China affected by the European incursion. Thus began what became known as the 'Boxer Rebellion.' Sensing the growing discontentment of the people, and under the advisement of several scholars, the young Qing emperor, Guangxu, issued a series of reform edicts known as the 'Hundred Days Reform'

which promised educational, economical, and political improvements. However, his efforts were thwarted from within his own court when his aunt and predecessor to the throne, the Empress Dowager Cixi, seized control of the palace and had many of Guangxu's aides executed. Rather than decentralize the power of the ruling family, the Empress Dowager sought to use the Boxers to strengthen the Qing government by playing them off against the Europeans. She sent military support to the rebels, who had now turned their attention towards foreign embassies, missions, and factories.

This strategy failed, and in 1900 the European governments, now joined by Japan and the United States, declared war against China and organized a combined force of 20,000 troops to march against the rebellion. When it was clear that the allied forces would be victorious, the Empress Dowager fled. Li Hongzhang, with his health failing, was again called upon to negotiate on behalf of China. In his journal, he wrote,

August 8. – A sick man has been appointed Peace Plenipotentiary to treat with the Powers. How can I hold my head up and demand consideration in this matter when my limbs are almost too weak to support my body? ... Oh, if my own hand were not so weak, and my cause so much weaker! The Court is in hiding, and the people are distracted. There is no Government, and chaos reigns. I fear the task before me is too great for my strength of body, though I would do one thing more before I call the earthly battle over. I would have the foreigners believe in us once more, and not deprive China of her National life...¹¹

After a month of protracted negotiations, Li was able to arbitrate the withdrawal of the foreign troops. However, the indemnities that China would pay in

¹¹ Foster, John W. (ed.) *The Memoirs of the Viceroy Li Hung Chang*. (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1913) pp. 253-254

return crippled the already weakened economy. On the 7th of November in 1901, nearly two months after he had ensured peace, Li Hongzhang died.

This time, it was Li's death that represented China's demise to global onlookers. Though it re-established itself for a few years afterward, the Manchurian-established Qing dynasty had lost much of its moral authority and nearly its entire former international splendor, and without leaders like Li Hongzhang, the older gentry began to lose even more ground against the undercurrent of change. Younger intellectuals had already begun a program of translating liberal tracts from the West, which only gained steam in the years following his death. Between 1898 and 1909, one such scholar, by the name of Yan Fu, introduced Darwinism to China and translated several major liberal treatises, including Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, J.S. Mill's *On Liberty and Logic*, Herbert Spencer's *A Study of Sociology*, and Baron de Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*.¹² Educated revolutionaries, including the well-known Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen), rallied at home and traveled abroad to garner support for an uprising. Eventually, in 1912, the Sun-led Revolutionary Alliance, which espoused democratic-socialist ideals, capitalized on a small, unrelated revolt by negotiating the abdication of the Qing emperor. Sun drew up an interim constitution and elections were scheduled. It appeared as though democracy was nearly within China's grasp.

Unfortunately, the fledgling government was quickly overthrown by the military action of Yuan Shikai, the former Qing general and one time Revolutionary Alliance collaborator, who disputed the legitimacy of the election (his party had lost)

¹² cf. Ebrey. Patricia B. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 262

and declared himself the next emperor. Oddly, Yuan died the following year (1915) and China was once again thrown into a tumultuous power struggle. The Revolutionary Alliance, which had by then renamed itself the “Nationalist Party” still held significant influence, but spent much of the next ten years stamping out various warlords who had gained power in the disorder. The intellectual elite also stayed very busy during this time. Along with the continued support of liberal ideals, Marxist theory had also begun to gain popularity, particularly after the witnessed success of Bolshevism in the Russian revolution.

This was clearly a time ripe for reform, and Dewey’s arrival occurred directly in the middle of the thirteen-year period between Yuan Shikai’s death and the eventual realization of a Nationalist government toward the end of 1928, by Sun’s successor Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek). Upon Dewey’s entrance, the country had settled into pockets of influence, ruled either by warlords who were remnants of the Qing-established Beiyang army, or else by foreign merchants and ambassadors. This raised resentment of foreign interference to a fevered pitch, and the Chinese youth began to question traditional values, particularly Confucian ones, in ever more poignant ways. The campaign that resulted from this public outcry was called the ‘New Culture Movement’ and was spearheaded by several of Dewey’s former students at Columbia, including Menglin Jiang, the Chancellor of Beijing University; P.W. Guo, the founder of Nanjing Teachers College; and Hu Shih, who was probably the most influential intellectual in China during the first half of the 20th-century. Hu and Menglin collaborated on a scholarly/cultural journal, called ‘The New Youth,’ that was aimed at political reform.

When the Beiyang warlords agreed to enter World War I on the side of the allies, the Chinese public expected to recover the lands that Germany had occupied for several decades. However, the decision of the allies in Versailles was to award those territories to Japan, which had sent troops to the war effort, whereas China's contribution had been 100,000 unskilled workers. On May fourth, just three days after Dewey's arrival, over three thousand students took to the streets of Beijing in protest. It was clear that change was immanent, and Dewey was looked upon by the Chinese youth as the symbolic, if not the factual, leader of that change.

There have been three books that focused of this period in Dewey's life. The first appeared in 1973 and was little more than a collection of addresses Dewey gave while in China, edited by Robert Clopton and Tsuien-chen Ou and published under the title *Lectures in China, 1919-1920*. Clopton and Ou added an introduction, but this addition was primarily informative, not philosophical. The second book to treat Dewey's encounter with China was Barry Keenan's *The Dewey Experiment in China*, which appeared in 1977. These early works advanced the claim that Dewey's influence in China was singularly in the realm of education. However, a more recent volume written by a Chinese scholar, Jessica Ching-Sze Wang disagrees. In her work, which is titled *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn* (2007), she states, "Dewey's response to the May Fourth movement was more than enthusiastic; the social energies being released galvanized him...Indeed, the May Fourth movement was China's gift to Dewey."¹³ Wang claims that the idea that Dewey was so well received because he was seen as a "Second Confucius" – as one who

¹³ Wang, Jessica Ching-Sze. *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn* (SUNY Press, 2007) p. 5

emphasized family and community loyalty – is a misconception. Although he did hold these similarities with Confucianism, she writes, “In fact, Dewey was well received because he was thought to represent an alternative to Confucianism.”¹⁴ Of course, this is a role that Daoism, and specifically Zhuangzi, had occupied for centuries. Dewey seemed aware of this relationship between Confucianism and Daoism when he wrote to his family:

Laotze over here in China was another one, “Be a useful citizen and somebody will use you; be worthless and useless, and you’ll do something, because you will be let alone and have a chance.” This isn’t advice, merely a net quotation from Mr. Laotze who is the real philosopher of China as Confucius is of the ruling class.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 7

¹⁵ Dewey to Dewey Children, 1920.02.20 in *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 2*. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005)

Chapter One: What is Naturalism?

“Just as children plunged into darkness tremble and fear every little thing, so we sometimes dread in the light things that are not one jot more to be feared than the imaginings of children shuddering in the blackness. This terror, this darkness of the mind, must be scattered, not by the rays of the sun and glistening shafts of daylight, but by a dispassionate view of the inner laws of nature.” [Lucretius¹⁶]

In 1944, Columbia University Press published a collection of essays edited by Yervant Krikorian entitled *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*. Most of the contributors in that volume were associated with the department of philosophy at Columbia, which, by then, was led by Herbert Schneider, J.H. Randall, Jr. and Ernest Nagel. The first essay of the volume was authored by John Dewey, who was semi-retired, but had taught most of the other contributors of the volume alongside F.J.E. Woodbridge. Woodbridge and Dewey were mainstays at Columbia from the time Dewey arrived in 1905 until Woodbridge’s death in 1940. *Naturalism and the Human Spirit* represented the culmination of nearly forty years of work at Columbia and was a clear expression of their brand of naturalistic philosophy. Though Woodbridge had died four years before its publication, his influence was made clear through the number of references to his thought found throughout the work. One of the things that Woodbridge had been most fond of telling his students was that he – like the ancient Greeks – preferred to speak the “language of being,” while his colleague Dewey preferred to speak the “language of experience.” The Columbia school of naturalism might best be described as a marriage of these two ways of

¹⁶ *De Rerum Natura* Book II

speaking – a combination many have summed up as “pragmatic naturalism” – though this designation may not be as informative as Dewey’s own “humanistic naturalism.” It is important to note that the Columbia school was not the only naturalism vying for the American consciousness during the twentieth century. Thus, if a comparison of naturalism in the philosophies of Dewey and of Zhuangzi is to be achieved, it is essential at the outset of this investigation that the features which set apart this brand of naturalism be distinguished from those of its rivals – for it is this brand of naturalism which resonates most distinctly with Zhuangzi’s version of Daoism. In what follows, I will offer a sort of taxonomy of theories that have been associated with various strains of naturalism.

Naturalism and the Organic Point of View

The word naturalism has popped up again and again throughout the history of ideas. The style of the Pre-Raphaelites in the arts, the literary themes of the novelists Émile Zola and Charles Dickens, and even the school of sociology inspired by Auguste Comte have all donned the moniker. It seems the ambiguity of such a term renders it practically meaningless. Of course, this project is aimed at explicating the *philosophical* position known as naturalism. Yet, even this designation sheds little light on the issue since ambiguous jargon is often the hallmark of academia, and particularly in professional philosophy, “naturalism” is one of the most ambiguous terms of all. Before an adequate account of philosophical naturalism can be given, it will be helpful to first determine what it is not. But, even this negative approach to defining philosophical naturalism requires a few caveats.

The first is to note that various thinkers treat the concept of nature differently. For some, nature is completely synonymous with reality, for others it is only a subcategory of reality. Consequently, it is essential to bear in mind that, whilst naturalism is a philosophical position about reality, not all philosophical positions about reality are naturalistic. The second is to remember that philosophical naturalism is not coterminous with a “philosophy of nature”, either. For, the history of philosophy is rife with speculations about nature, many of which fall outside of the scope of what should properly be considered “naturalistic.” In fact, it was simply philosophy at large that commenced when human beings began to look for explanations of the natural world around them. As Wilfrid Sellars once put it, “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.”¹⁷ The third caveat I should offer is to be attentive to how the word naturalism is applied to traditions and thinkers that did not explicitly regard themselves as such. It is one thing for a thinker to present “naturalistic themes” in his or her work, but it is quite another to be a self-proclaimed naturalist.

This last point is perhaps the most salient for distinguishing philosophical naturalism. Simply put, it is the glossing over of differences between various kinds of naturalism to such an extent that it appears as if one term fits them all. This has sometimes been a stumbling block for even the most careful of thinkers. For instance, Barry Stroud once remarked in a presidential address to the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association that,

¹⁷ Sellars, Wilfrid. “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Science, Perception and Reality* (Ridgeview Pub Co.,1991) p. 1

The idea of “nature,” or “natural” objects or relations, or modes of investigation that are “naturalistic,” has been applied more widely, at more different times and places, and for more different purposes, than probably any other notion in the whole history of human thought. The earliest turns towards naturalism that I have heard of was in the fifth century B.C. And they seem to have been happening every so often ever since.¹⁸

By the end of that address, Stroud concluded naturalism, “by now is little more than a slogan on a banner raised to attract the admiration of those who agree that no supernatural agents are at work in the world.”¹⁹ Three weeks later, Michael Friedman began *his* presidential address to the members of the Central Division of the same group thusly,

I want to discuss a tendency of thought which has been extremely widespread within Anglo-American philosophy during the last twenty years or so - but which now, if I am not mistaken, has reached the end of its useful life. This tendency of thought... I will call “philosophical naturalism.”²⁰

Both Stroud and Friedman were calling for the eclipsing of what they took to be “philosophical naturalism” by a more precise and useful phrase. However, the ambiguity of naturalism seems to come from just this kind of blanket use of the term. This shows that even in such narrow philosophical circles as these, naturalism is in dire need of disambiguation, as it has been used to refer to any number of epistemological, metaphysical, or ethical positions throughout the annals of philosophy.

As Stroud implied, some of the earliest positions to which the term naturalism has been applied sprung up during the fifth century B.C.E. around Greece and Asia

¹⁸ Stroud, Barry. “The Charm of Naturalism.” Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. 70, No. 2. (Nov., 1996), p. 43.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 54.

²⁰ Friedman, Michael. “Philosophical Naturalism.” Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. 71, No. 2. (Nov., 1997), pp. 7-21.

Minor. This was the cradle of Western philosophy, where thinkers like Thales, Pythagoras and Heraclitus began to speculate about what constituted *φύσις*. At first glance, such a concept may appear to correspond completely with our notion of nature, and it is often translated as such. However, as we shall see, what this concept entailed for the Greeks puts it sharply at odds with a contemporary understanding of nature, and hence the speculations of these early philosophers should not be considered coextensive with philosophical naturalism. Instead, the view that they shared, which did not sharply distinguish between the human and natural realms, could be called – following Werner Jaeger – an “organic point of view.” As he put it, the ancient Greeks in general, always had “an innate sense of the natural,” wherein,

The concept of ‘nature,’ [...] was without doubt produced by their peculiar mentality. Long before they conceived it, they had looked at the world with the steady gaze that did not see any part of it as separate and cut off from the rest, but always as an element in a living whole, from which it derived its position and meaning.²¹

According to Jaeger, this point of view filtered into every aspect of Greek life. Even philosophers who held a dualistic view of reality did not make their distinctions along the lines of the organic versus the human.

That the default understanding for the Greeks was an organic one is an important insight for two reasons. The first is that the Greek conception of nature, or *φύσις*, implies organic growth – obviated by its role as the root concept of contemporary words such as “physics,” “physiology” and “physique.” Because of this dynamic, growth-oriented view, one of the main philosophical dilemmas for the early Greeks concerned primacy between the notions of change and permanence.

²¹ Jaeger, Werner. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture Volume I: Archaic Greece: The Mind of Athens*. (Oxford University Press, 1986) p. xx

Some, like Thales, argued that all change could be reduced to the motion of one all-pervasive element, such as water. For the Pythagoreans, permanence was found in the principles of mathematics. Heraclitus simply denied permanence altogether, while Parmenides denied change. The atomists Democritus and Empedocles claimed that both change and permanence were occurring simultaneously through the movement of unchanging particles in motion. Regardless of how the question was worked out, the underlying assumption was always that human understanding was part and parcel of this larger picture, not separated from it.

Plato was the first to formulate a systematic reconciliation of these ideas, and many later self-proclaimed naturalists would blame his distinction – between the “apparent” reality of change and the “true” reality of permanent forms – for the contemporary dualisms that have prevented a thoroughgoing naturalism from being realized. Friedrich Nietzsche once called this legacy, “Plato’s embarrassed blush.”²² But, it may be a bit unfair to lay the burden of this “error” (as Nietzsche called it) solely on the shoulders of Plato. After all, if Alfred North Whitehead’s claim that Western philosophy is just “a series of footnotes to Plato” carries any truth, then it is worth questioning how much responsibility should be placed on these footnotes for rendering reality, as Whitehead would put it elsewhere, into “two natures, [where] one is the conjecture and the other is the dream.”²³

The second reason to remember that the Greeks saw things organically is that it demonstrates how different their view of experience was from our own. The word

²² cf. Nietzsche, F. “How the True World At Last Became a Myth. The History of an Error.” *In Twilight of the Idols*. (1889)

²³ Whitehead, A.N. *Process and Reality*. (Free Press: NY, 1979) p. 63 & *The Concept of Nature*. University of Cambridge Press: London, 1920. p. 30

the Greeks used to indicate the function that organized the yields of sensory perception was “*εμπειρία*,” which is a combination of a prefix that meant “in” or “on” and a root that meant “to try” or “to attempt,” and is also where we derive our word “empirical.” This etymology also lays bare the sea-faring culture of the Greeks, as it employs the same root as the one used in our words “peril” and “pirate.” In this sense, “experience” for the Greeks was the way that the trials of the sea could be read on the faces of the sailors who had survived them. Thus, it could be said that the Greeks’ way of thinking hung on a fairly prosaic understanding of the world around them, one that took things at “face value.”²⁴ They would not have spoken of erroneous “experiences,” in the sense of that which is abstracted “out of” *πειρία*, taking place within a mind cut off from its surroundings. Instead, they spoke in terms of existences. Though Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle may have disagreed about the make-up of the world around them, the one element common to their thought was that experience was a natural event, generated by that world. In this way, it could be said that the Greeks spoke a “language of Being.”

While this organic point of view certainly draws upon naturalistic themes, as we shall see in more detail later, it too should not be conflated with philosophical naturalism – in spite of the tendency among contemporary scholars to do so. Perhaps Max Weber’s way of describing the world as “disenchanted” would be closer to what these early Greeks had in mind. Certainly these thinkers would not have referred to themselves as “naturalists” in the same sense as the audience members addressed by Stroud and Friedman would use the term. This is especially noteworthy

²⁴ For instance, Thales’ belief that water produced all other substances can be attributed to the fact that Miletus was located in the floodplain of a river that deposited large amounts of silt. Thales literally witnessed the growth of nearby islands out of the sea during his lifetime.

in light of the fact that the use of the term “naturalism” to apply to such schools of thought did not occur prior to the seventeenth century.²⁵

Nature and the Language of Experience

Now that it is more apparent how the organic point of view held by the early Greeks is not synonymous with the philosophical position known as naturalism, we must seek an historical account of how it came to be that contemporary naturalists do not speak in the same terms as their philosophical forbears. It has already been noted how one might say that the early Greeks spoke a language of Being, in which human beings were seen as part of an organic whole. By contrast, many of their successors during the Medieval and Modern periods rejected the presuppositions of the Ancients and moved toward an account of the human-world relationship that turned on epistemological, rather than ontological, notions. This is most obvious in the philosophy of René Descartes, who claimed that the non-intelligent aspects of reality were simply dead matter and that human perception was too unreliable to offer a ground for knowledge of that world. He thus posited “innate ideas” as the basis for most of what we know. These innate ideas were similar to Plato’s forms insofar as they allegedly transcended ordinary, mundane appearance; they differed in that they were seen as wholly subjective and thus outside of the organic world. In Descartes’ words, “[W]hat should be noticed is that perceiving is not a case of seeing, touching or imagining, nor was it ever such although it seemed that way earlier, but it is an

²⁵ In his “A Note on Smith’s Term ‘Naturalism.’” (*Hume Studies*, XII: 1, 1986. pp. 92-96) Joseph Agassi argues that Pierre Bayle probably coined this usage. [cf. p. 93]

inspection of the mind alone...”²⁶ This marked a complete shift from the language of Being to what may be called a “language of experience,” a conceptual revolution that led to the interpretation of *εμπειρία* as “ex-”perience – *i.e.* as that which is distilled out of everyday life.

This shift from being to experience was a gradual one, however, which merely reached its critical mass with Descartes. One of the first major contributing factors can be traced back to the way Roman thinkers interpreted the Greek notion of *φύσις*. As stated, this was a primarily growth-oriented concept for the Greeks, but the Romans used the word *natura* to translate it and their terminology has since been handed down to the European traditions. *Natura* is problematic, however, because it replaces connotations of growth with that of birth, as it comes from *natus*, the past participle of *nasci* (to be born). So, for the pagan Romans, nature was what had already been birthed; it was “Mother” nature. This picture of nature as a genesis principle antecedent to the human realm was later amplified by the medieval dispersion of Christianity.

Another major ingredient in the formulating the language of experience was Aristotelianism. While Aristotle was, by many accounts, the most “organic” of the early Greek philosophers, it is worth restating that even *his* system should not be confused with philosophical naturalism as it will be defined in what follows. Aristotle upheld the views of the pre-Socratics, and like Plato hoped “to set forth what they should have been doing” in their accounts of *φύσις*. But, he was forced to walk a tightrope between the prevailing ideas of his day – *viz.* the idealism of Plato

²⁶ Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Ed. by Roger Ariew (Hackett, 2000) p. 107

and the atomism of Democritus – and his thoughts on nature offered a middle path between these competing theses. If it is true that the Greeks in general spoke a language of Being, then it could be said that Aristotle perhaps more than any other ancient thinker, spoke a language of “Becoming” that married permanence and change in the notion of an unfolding *ovσία*. But, his balancing act led to the appropriation of his work in two opposite directions, and today scientific and religious institutions simultaneously hail him as a patriarch. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the most salient is simply the practical limitation on empirical investigation during Aristotle’s day. Because such inquiries were limited to what could be gleaned by the unaided senses, Aristotle’s philosophy was vulnerable when it came to questions of genesis. These limitations led him to the conjecture of an “unmoved mover,” a concept pilfered by Catholicism in support of a divine, supernatural creator.

These legacies were handed down to the moderns in a way that made the philosophical treatment of nature a daunting task, even to those who were sympathetic to a more organic view. For instance, gifted thinkers like Spinoza and Leibniz made valiant attempts at reconciling a growth-oriented view with the Christian versions of Aristotelian thought, the result of which were two of the most abstruse systems in the Western canon. Spinoza saw through the Roman concept of nature to posit a distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*.²⁷ Leibniz offered a hylozoistic harmony between “Nature and Grace” through concepts like

²⁷ Cf. Spinoza, B. *Ethics*. Translated by Shirley (Hackett, 1992)

pre-established harmony and plenitude.²⁸ Moreover, the scientific gains met after the Renaissance had done much to render many of Aristotle's ideas all but useless. Astronomers had revolutionized the understanding of our solar system, chemists had begun to work out contamination and sterilization, and physicists had discovered the laws that governed gravity and the motion of bodies. With these advances, Aristotelian notions such as cosmological spheres and spontaneous generation had been rendered utterly useless and it seemed quite plausible that his views on nature should be jettisoned as well. Once again, the only viable alternatives seemed to be Neo-Platonic idealism or an updated form of Democritean atomism. Nature was viewed either as an empty dream or a dead machine. Philosophers were left floundering for a description of reality within this new epistemological framework. The success that Newton had in grounding science in abstract laws, allegedly derived from reason alone, seemed very attractive to these philosophers, and they quickly adopted a similar method for their inquiries. Thus, the Moderns turned the tables on the Aristotelian project of first philosophy, and it was their notion of "metaphysics" – *i.e.* the Cartesian quest to ground understanding in abstract, unchanging reason and recast nature as a system of mechanistic presence, devoid of purpose – that has become a major cornerstone of Western thought since.²⁹

Not until the advent of Darwinism would the Greek view of permanence through change finally be relevant again in Anglo-American thought. By suggesting that a species need not be viewed as an antecedent "Form" or "potentiality"

²⁸ Cf. Leibniz, G.W. "The Principles of Nature and Grace." in *Philosophical Essays*. Trans. by Ariew and Garber (Hackett, 1989)

²⁹ Both Dewey's assault on the "quest for certainty" and Derrida's on the "metaphysics of presence" are responses to this legacy – albeit toward different ends.

(something that had stymied Platonists and Aristotelians for ages) but rather as a dynamic, emergent, and transient, organic structure, Darwin seemingly provided the groundwork for a new naturalistic philosophy to take root, one that could forego grand teleological explanations and provide an organic point of view without re-instituting the old language of Being. However, the language of experience had by then become pervasive and too deeply entrenched in the halls of academia. Rather than resuscitate Greek notions, most philosophers sought to work out ways of giving accounts of knowledge couched in the language of experience.

Naturalism, most generally and in its most recent instantiations, could be understood as just one of the various attempts for Western thought to make its way back to an organic point of view in light of the language of experience produced by Modernity. One of the biggest stumbling blocks to such a project was always the way in which religious institutions twisted the concept of nature. But, this is really only half the story. What of naturalism as a thoroughgoing philosophy? In what follows we shall see how the legacy of the language of experience has been as much of a hindrance to the development of *philosophical* naturalism since the scientific revolution as religion was before it. This hindrance is what has led to the multifarious use of “naturalism” among contemporary philosophers.

Naturalistic Strategies in Philosophy

As we have seen, naturalism is a common term in contemporary philosophical parlance, but the problem is that it “means many different things to many different

people.”³⁰ For some, naturalism is just the attempt to offer an account of reality that does not make reference to a supernatural or divine realm. Others see it as nothing more than an adoption of the scientific method as the only legitimate method for gaining knowledge. While a few argue it is primarily an endeavor to make normativity seem less “queer.”³¹ These are the general themes motivating contemporary philosophical references to naturalism. Simply stated, they are:

- A) Ontological – an omission of supernatural, transcendent or mystical existents
- B) Methodological – assertion of scientific method as the only means of gaining knowledge
- C) Ethical – normative concepts can be wholly expressed in non-normative terms.

While most allusions to naturalism will maintain one or two of these themes, very few adopt all three. The organic point of view would be one example of how one could hold an A)-type view without accepting something like B). In this way, one could call the conjectures of Thales regarding water, or those of Democritus regarding atoms, “natural” explanations in the sense of A) but not B) because they were not the result of any empirical observation. Perhaps less obvious, though, is how one could hold a B)-type view without subscribing to something like A). Such a position would inevitably have to take an epistemological turn, wherein it is asserted that science is the only means of knowing the supernaturally created universe – *à la* the Cartesian assertion that the Divine must be the foundation for science, lest human belief be nothing but deception. This is the move that gave rise to what I’ve been calling the language of experience. Yet, when the implications of such a

³⁰ Sklar, Lawrence. “Naturalism and the Interpretation of Theories,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 75 (2001): p. 1

³¹ This was the way J. L. Mackie often referred to objective moral values.

position are drawn out, it seems inevitably to foster either a radical skepticism or an arrant idealism. On one side is the argument that nature is permanently out of reach and therefore all we have to rely on are the habits of experience. On the other side is the notion that the furniture of the world actually subsists in mind only. Thus, when we look at the history of Anglo-American philosophy, which has largely operated on the assumptions of the modern era, we should not be surprised to discover numerous forays into each of these extremes.³²

If it is true that the one thing these views have in common is the desire to “discover a new balance between the philosophy of being of the Greeks and the philosophy of experience of the moderns,” then the multiplicity of allusions to naturalism should not be surprising.³³ For, there are many ancient concepts that the moderns misunderstood or rejected, just as there are modern concepts about which the ancients were ignorant. One of the stickiest of sticking points between the two is the notion of a Cartesian mind and its contents. Philosophers with a naturalistic bent have tried to ease these tensions in various ways. One of the easiest ways to determine the difference between various strains of naturalism within philosophy is to first look at the method each uses in “naturalizing” such contentious concepts, *i.e.* how they redefine supposedly transcendent, supernatural, or divine concepts in natural terms.

In their recent collection of essays on contemporary naturalism Mario De Caro and David Macarthur have identified four major naturalization strategies employed in philosophy. They claim,

³² E.g. the transcendentalism of Emerson *et al.*, the Neo-Hegelians of St. Louis, or the Humean-cum-Moorean skepticism of American ethicists.

³³ Anton, John. *American Naturalism and Greek Philosophy*. (Prometheus, 2005) p. 9

Projects of naturalization have typically been conceived as substantive semantic projects in which the concepts of apparently nonnatural discourses must be: 1) reduced or reconstructed in terms of naturalistically respectable posits, i.e. the posits of the natural sciences; or 2) treated as useful fictions; or 3) construed as playing a non-referential or non-factual linguistic role; or 4) eliminated altogether as illusory manifestations of "pre-scientific" thinking.³⁴

The differences between these four methods of naturalization are perhaps more subtle than De Caro and Macarthur let on, and often two or more are applied simultaneously. For our purposes, then, it will be best to treat the first and fourth approaches prior to looking at the second and third. Furthermore, De Caro and Macarthur's list should not be seen as comprehensive, as there at least two other ways that non-natural concepts may be redefined in natural terms.

The first strategy mentioned by De Caro and Macarthur could be called reductionism. It is a method has been around for quite some time. The Greek atomists were reductionists concerning the cosmos, as was Descartes when it came to lower, non-thinking animals, or "automata." Simply stated, reductionism is the attempt to show that complex hypotheses not readily apprehensible can be broken into smaller components. Of course, this is not really a philosophical invention at all but, rather, a common practice. Harry Ruja and Monroe Shapiro once put it this way...

When the layman... reports that what he thought was a bear turns out sometimes to be only a stump, he is performing just like a metaphysician... Here are two "experiences" –the stump experience and the bear experience. We can refuse to distinguish appearance from reality and say simply that it is a bear from a distance and it is a stump close by. If that does not make sense (and to the layman it does not), then we can "reduce" one experience to the other by

³⁴ De Caro, M. and Macarthur, D. "Introduction – The Nature of Naturalism." *Naturalism in Question*, eds. De Caro, M. and Macarthur, D. (Harvard University Press, 2004) p. 7

saying either that it is a bear, but only looks like a stump close by, or that it is a stump but looks like a bear from a distance.³⁵

The reductionist believes that philosophers who seek reconciliation between the language of experience and an organic point of view have similar options. They can either reject outright one model for the other or else they can say one is “truer” and reduce everything to that position. In the example of the Cartesian mind, many philosophers simply claim that sensations, ideas, and the like are nothing more than the manifestation of electro-chemical reactions among the neurons of the brain. In other words, they appeared to be mental states then, but now upon closer inspection, it is revealed that they were really brain states all along. In this way, reductionists argue that what is needed to understand human mental life is a full classification of the structures of the brain.

When it is extended to ontology and the concept of nature, reductionism follows a similar path. An ontological reductionist would claim, given the great successes of reductive approaches in physics and chemistry that all modes of inquiry should follow a similar model. This amounts to a form of physical monism – or physicalism – which holds to the assumptions that only physical things exist and that nature is such that it can be carved at its joints by scientific inquiry. Simply stated, this position holds that, physical “science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not.”³⁶ Of course, there are many obstacles to following such a line of thought. For one, it is often a daunting task to show that one

³⁵ Ruja, Harry & Shapiro, Monroe. “The Problem of Pluralism in Contemporary Naturalism.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 10, No. 1. (Sep., 1949), p. 67-68

³⁶ Sellars, Wilfrid. “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” in *Science Perception and Reality* (Routledge, 1963), p. 173

type of thing is reducible to some other type of thing, and despite many advances in neuroscience, the link between mental states and brain states is still not an obvious one. Likewise, in studies of nature, notions such as ecosystem stability have proven resistant to reductive analyses. Subjects of inquiry like nature and the mind may yet prove to be too complex to fall easily into the conceptual pigeonholes of the reductionist. Moreover, if it turns out that operations in nature, or in the brain, do not follow strictly linear causal pathways, or that mapping out the structures of reality and consciousness continue to leave us with impoverished predictive models, then reductionism must be ruled out as the best means for achieving a full-bodied naturalism.

A more hard-line form of this kind of strategy is known as eliminativism. Like reductionism, this has been a popular strategy among philosophers of mind. But, where a reductionist claims that a complex field of study can be reduced to more basic claims, or that complex properties and functions of any entity are nothing more than a careful ordering of the sum total of its parts, the eliminativist claims that such notions are not only untrue but harmful insofar as they impede full scientific understanding. Thus, it is argued that such ideas need to be eliminated from intelligent discourse. While reductionist approaches at least entertain the *use* of non-natural concepts, eliminativist ones reject such notions outright. While each approach hangs on a form of ontological materialism (wherein anything not solely comprised of matter is ruled out of court) as well as an unshakable confidence in the reach of scientific inquiry, it seems eliminativism is even more open to criticism because it has no internal mechanism for accommodating new evidence in unsettled

areas. Where reductionism has at least a potential for inclusiveness and self-corrective inquiry, eliminativism does not.

Another alternative for the would-be naturalist might be to claim the illusory concepts that seem resistant to reductive approaches are simply useful fictions. This approach (which may be termed *semanticism*) suggests that there is a certain meaning derived from non-natural terminology that cannot be achieved through adherence to strictly physical statements. This was the tack taken by George Santayana regarding religious terminology, which he proclaimed to be “certainly significant...but not literally true.”³⁷ He argued that religion was a vital institution for any society because of its role as a purveyor of cultural symbols. On this approach, the significance of such symbols is not reducible to physical terms but these symbols are nonetheless “natural” because they come from human institutions. This was Santayana’s nod to the Jamesian notion of “the will to believe,” and although he disagreed with James about the veracity of religious statements, he agreed that religious iconography was essential to a fully human existence due to its uniquely mythological, poetic elements. The problem in employing this method of naturalization instead of another is that one is forced to show that these non-reducible ways of speaking are the only avenue for attaining the meaning in question. Simply put, the burden of proof is on she who deems the fiction useful. For example, in Santayana’s case, it seems true that if the meaning he prizes can be supplied from some other, non-religious institution, then his strategy for naturalization is at best superfluous and at worst fawning.

³⁷ cf. Santayana, George. *The Life of Reason*. (Prometheus, 1998) p. 179

A more extreme version of this method, which holds that what we take to be true is what works best within whichever language game we happen to find ourselves immersed, may be regarded as the strategy of *constructivism*. Like the semantic approach, this form of naturalization does not require one to find a means for reducing mental states to brain states, nor for reducing nature to the laws of physics. Instead, it simply posits that concepts are social creations; facts are made, not found. In this way, there are no non-natural entities because there are no purely objective facts, and thus there is only one realm, the realm of subjectivity. When employed toward questions of knowledge this position leads to a form of “epistemological behaviorism,” wherein science is seen as the method of choice for acquiring knowledge about the world, not because it provides the best access to some underlying reality, but because it yields the most successful behavior. Unlike semanticism, constructivism need not appeal to some essential meaning or value (like the purveyance of culture) to accommodate the use of non-natural language, but can simply grant that these non-reducible ways of speaking are requisite for a robust theory, and though not literally true, provide us with a means of filling in the gaps in our conceptual scheme. This is a line of reasoning embodied by Richard Rorty’s dictum that everything is “interpretation all the way down.” As Rorty has put it, the difference between the constructivist and the reductionist is “between those who think our culture, or purpose, or intuitions cannot be supported except conversationally, and people who still hope for other sorts of support.”³⁸ However, when taken to this extreme, constructivism leans toward a form of idealism in which

³⁸ Rorty, Richard. “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism.” In *Consequences of Pragmatism*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1982) p. 167

“there is nothing outside the text” becomes the battle cry.³⁹ Such a position obviously undermines the naturalist sentiments from which it arises.

Each of these strategies has its strengths and weaknesses, but all of them suffer from a need to work within the parameters of the language of experience because each implicitly accepts the subject/object distinction. Whether one adopts a reductive/eliminative approach or a semantic/constructivist approach, the result is a selective emphasis of one side of the distinction. Those in the former camp reject subjectivity, but rest confident that there is a purely objective perspective from which to make such a rejection – just as the layman in the above example would confidently select the experience of the stump as the “true” one. And, when it comes to bears and stumps, this is not a problem. For more complex concepts, however, those in the opposite camp rightly point out that such an Archimedean point of inquiry is not actually attainable. Yet, they tend to slide directly into an idealistic rejection of objectivity. What we learn by looking at these approaches side by side is that, although the language of experience cut the subject away from the object, it borrowed the knife from society. Simply put, we learn that when giving a full account of anything (including nature), context, culture, and community matter.

This point about context is illustrated nicely by an anecdote told by G.E.M.

Anscombe in *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. As she recounts the story,

He [Wittgenstein] once greeted me with the question: ‘Why do people say that it was natural to think that the sun went round the earth rather than the earth turned on its axis?’ I replied: ‘I suppose, because it looked as if the sun went round the earth.’ ‘Well,’ he asked, ‘what

³⁹ cf. Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism.” In *Consequences of Pragmatism*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1982)

would it have looked like if it had *looked* as if the earth turned on its axis?⁴⁰

What is different in the two points of view is not the way things appear, but the assumptions that underwrite them – assumptions that come from a greater understanding of the context. This pulls the rug out from under the subject-object distinction. What changes with such a gestalt shift is the *situation* – itself a combination of the environing conditions and the way they are acted upon. It would thus be incorrect to say that it just *is* the case that the Earth orbits the Sun. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that, given our current data, it is *likely* that the Earth orbits the Sun. But then, this is just what science says. This is an upshot of the language of experience worth salvaging – *viz.* that we sometimes make poor judgments about the world around us. In this sense, philosophy would do well to emulate science in seeing its theories as on permanent probation. This is especially true regarding its treatment of nature. The insight that we are sometimes wrong about the world around should lead us to fallibilism, not skepticism.

None of the above strategies seem equipped to foster a philosophical naturalism that steers clear of the subject-object distinction. There are two that may be able to do so, however. The first may be called emergentism. “Emergence is a process of complex patterns forming from simpler rules.”⁴¹ On an emergentist strategy, non-physical entities emerge out of various combinations of physical entities and are novel to, but not separate from, the material realm. Nature, according to the emergentist, is layered. The upshot of this strategy is that it allows for the type

⁴⁰ Anscombe, G.E.M. *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. (Hutchinson & Co, 1959) p. 151

⁴¹ I am indebted to Professor Robin Wang of Loyola Marymount University for this succinct description of emergence.

of fallibilism found in the best scientific inquires. However, unless an account is given of how emergent properties do not occupy their own distinct realm of existence, emergentism runs the risk of falling into a type of dualism, which could be antithetical to its naturalistic goals. There are two ways of addressing this concern. The first is to claim that emergent properties are supervenient upon physical properties, *i.e.* a change in any set of physical properties will result in a change in any set of properties that emerges from it. This avoids the problems of simple reductionism by suggesting that while non-physical entities are not identical or reducible to physical ones they are still dependent upon them – just as the reflection in a mirror is dependent on the object being reflected but not simply reducible to the object. Consequently, it is claimed that these properties neither have causal efficacy on physical properties, nor on each other. The downside to this position, then, is that it does not allow for the possibility of emergent properties causally changing physical properties – a phenomenon for which there seems to be at least some evidence, *e.g.* the arguable claim that positive thinking can heal the body, or the less controversial idea of behavioral feedback loops.⁴² The alternative is to simply claim that emergent properties do have causal efficacy over the set of physical properties from which they derive. An elegant example of this is the flocking behavior of birds. The flight pattern of the flock emerges from the flight of each individual, which in turn changes (or feeds back into) the flight of each individual. The flock itself is an ongoing transaction between the whole and its parts. In this way, emergence can accommodate the language of experience without falling prey to the subject-object

⁴² Stock markets are an excellent example of a feedback loop wherein the emergent property (market value) can effect the physical properties (investor behavior) of the system.

distinction since experience, on such a view, would not be a passive, receptive state, but would instead be considered “transactional,” insofar as it is emergent from, but not reducible to, a matrix of psychophysical combinations.

Another naturalist strategy, related to emergentism, is what has come to be known as functionalism. Though employed in many disciplines, functionalism is perhaps most familiar in the context of psychology, wherein it is the claim that every mental process is to be understood only in terms of its usefulness in helping an organism adapt. In this vein, functionalism was the strategy of choice for William James’ work on psychology and the mind, but as Darwinian evolution gained a more mainstream acceptance during that era, functionalism became a more broadly applied strategy. As the renowned American neurologist C. Judson Herrick once put it, any phenomenon...

...may be looked at in various ways, of which two require more special treatment. (1) It may be viewed in longitudinal section, *i.e.*, as taking place in time. Here the running sequence, the fluidity, brings into strong relief the dynamic elements, and we see the process as *function*. (2) It may be viewed in cross section, *i.e.*, as extended in space. Eliminating the temporal factor, as in an instantaneous photograph, the static elements more clearly appear and we term it an *object*, a *structure*. It must be noted that the thing under consideration is neither the structure nor the function, though it is both. This distinction does not exist in reality; it is artificially produced in our attempt at analysis. But the artifact is a necessity by reason of the limitations of thought and of language.⁴³

Here, Herrick describes the difference between a functionalist and reductionist strategy. The functionalist strategy pays certain dividends that reductionism cannot.

The most obvious of these would be the way a functionalist method is able to

⁴³ Herrick, C. Judson, “A Functional View of Nature as Seen by a Biologist,” *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. 2, No. 16. (Aug. 3, 1905), p. 431 [Herrick was a regular correspondent of many well-known American philosophers, including John Dewey.]

incorporate the growth-oriented view of nature. Since it defines things in terms of the way they work, it is more inherently fallibilistic and avoids the type of selective emphasis that can lead to dualistic and foundationalist philosophies.

When functionalism is coupled with the type of emergentism that allows for causal efficacy among emergent properties and the physical world, the resultant strategy leads to a unique kind of philosophical naturalism. One where,

Every finite existence may be said to involve a polarizing of being into a focal point or center (which is not fixed, but progressively changing its character and trend) and a *relatively* more fixed field throughout which the energy involved plays (and which to this extent at least must be active). The thing existing is not the focus nor the field, but the total situation.⁴⁴

This brand of naturalism places a premium on the continuity between an object and its surroundings. Stated more precisely, it emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between a functioning “focus” and an emerging “field.” On such a view, the field is understood as partially constitutive of the way a particular focus functions, while at the same time, the sum total of all functioning foci constitutes that field. This is illustrated in the way that a change in one bird’s flight pattern can have a ripple effect on the entire flock.

Just as physiology differs from anatomy in medicine, an emergent/functional philosophical naturalism differs from reductive/eliminativist models insofar as it asks why-questions rather than what-questions. And, just as expertise in anatomy without physiological understanding prevents the proper care for an organism’s health, so does reductionism without understanding of emergence and functionality

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 430

prevent a synoptic philosophical naturalism from being fully realized. Instead, we are left with a fragmented collection of theories. A full-bodied philosophical naturalism may very well prove to be the best therapy for the ills of humanity. In the following chapter, I will further examine the upshots of this type of philosophical naturalism, how it is preferable to the brands of naturalism recurrent in contemporary philosophy, and why it is the only form deserving of the name. As J.H. Randall, Jr. put it in his epilogue to *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*,

Whatever the label, however, the major fact stands out: the “new” or “contemporary” naturalism these writers are exploring stands in fundamental opposition not only to the all forms of supernaturalism, but also to all types of reductionist thinking which up to this generation often arrogated to itself the adjective “naturalistic,” and still is suggested by it to the popular mind... the richness and variety of natural phenomena and human experience cannot be explained away and reduced to something else.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Randall, Jr., John Herman. “Epilogue: The Nature of Naturalism.” In *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*. Edited by Yervant Krikorian. (Columbia University Press, 1944) p. 361

Chapter Two: Scientific vs. Humanistic Naturalism

“Old ideas give way slowly; for they are more than abstract logical forms and categories. They are habits, predispositions, deeply ingrained attitudes of diversion and preference.”
[John Dewey⁴⁶]

In the preceding chapter hope was expressed for the realization of a more synoptic naturalism that could offer an account of human life fully integrated in the natural world. Toward this end, it was suggested that a naturalism that adopts a strategy attentive to emergence and functionality within the natural realm would be most preferable. However, such claims run the risk of cutting too far in the other direction, wherein reductionism becomes “a dirty word, and a kind of ‘holistier [sic] than thou’ self-righteousness has become fashionable.”⁴⁷ But, just as a physician who did not have an understanding of both anatomy and physiology would be an ineffective one, a naturalism that did not include both reductive and holistic strategies would be entirely useless. It may be helpful, then, to consider a distinction between a reasonable kind of reductionism that seeks to eliminate conceptual lacuna and theoretical appeals to mystery with the kind that rejects outright the Aristotelian notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts – a kind which Daniel Dennett calls “greedy reductionism.”⁴⁸ As he puts it,

⁴⁶ Dewey, “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” [MW, vol. 4]

⁴⁷ Dawkins, Richard. *The Extended Phenotype: The Gene as the Unit of Selection*. (Freeman, 1982)
[Quoted in Dennett, Daniel. *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*. (Simon & Schuster, 1995) p. 80]

⁴⁸ Dennett, p. 82

In their eagerness for a bargain, in their zeal to explain too much too fast, scientists and philosophers often underestimate the complexities, trying to skip whole layers or levels of theory in their rush to fasten everything securely and neatly to the foundation. That is the sin of greedy reductionism, but notice that it is only when overzealousness leads to falsification of the phenomena that we should condemn it.⁴⁹

This line of reasoning often leads to the assertion that the methods of physics, chemistry and biology – or the classifications and objects recognized in these fields – form the only appropriate elements in understanding nature. The result is a naturalism that is too scientific.

The best example of a theory that is reductionist in a non-greedy way is Darwinian evolution, which reduced the complexity of life to an elegantly recursive process of genetic drift and natural selection. A particular species, on Darwin's view, *emerges* from its journey through that process, rather than from some antecedent creative intelligence or principle. In this way, a creature's form is shaped by its *function*; it is what it does. But, his idea does not stop there, for the form and function of any creature depends on the forms and functions of surrounding species. Darwin understood this type of interdependence early on, an instance of which is his prediction of the night-flying hawk moth (*xanthopan morgani praedicta*). As the now famous story goes, Darwin was studying the orchids of Madagascar when he surmised that there must be a moth endemic to the island that had a proboscis long enough to reach the nectar at the bottom of the spur of a type of comet orchid. This prediction was met with skepticism among his peers until 1903, twenty-one years after his death, when the hawk moth was discovered.⁵⁰ This illustrates that a full

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cf. Stamos, David. *Darwin and the Nature of Species*. (SUNY, 2006) p. 246

understanding of evolution must include notions of functionality and emergence. As Dennett states, a “realistic fear is that the greedy abuse of Darwinian reasoning might lead us to deny the existence of real levels, real complexities, real phenomena.”⁵¹ In what follows I will trace the development of two major forms of naturalism in the United States, one that followed Darwinian reasoning and one that greedily abused it.

The Development of Naturalism in the United States

The elusiveness of the term naturalism in contemporary philosophy is a byproduct of several philosophical responses to the intellectual revolution of which *On the Origin of Species* was the climax. Prior to this, philosophy had been, in some way or another, conceived of as providing a foundation to the natural sciences. That both Aristotle and Descartes used the phrase “first philosophy” (albeit toward vastly different ends) to describe their work, speaks to the longevity of this idea. Of course, this notion had already begun to be challenged in English speaking countries even before Darwin, by the likes of David Hume, and on the continent in the work of Immanuel Kant. By the first half of the nineteenth century, nearly every American philosopher worked within a Humean, Kantian, or Hegelian framework. Even thinkers like Emerson and Thoreau, who were interested in studies of nature and who fancied themselves representatives of American intellectual independence, were largely beholden to European idealism and romanticism, and thus failed to realize a true naturalistic philosophy. Yet, after Darwin demystified the ascent of Aristotle’s rational animal from the primordial soup, philosophy’s “inquiry after absolute

⁵¹ Dennett, p. 83

origins and absolute finalities” seemed untenable and its relationship to science appeared irrevocably reversed.⁵²

In the United States, naturalism developed in three major waves. The first occurred just after the release of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. The theoretical shift presented by Darwin was sharpened by an event in American history which provided ostensible proof that abstract ideas, if unchecked by practical implications, could wreak havoc on the real world, *viz.* the American Civil War. This led to two trends among young American intellectuals, of which the first was a greater push toward a suspicion of metaphysical speculation. The second was a renewed confidence in scientific method. The former marked the inception of American naturalism while the latter was the beginning of a school of thought known as pragmatism. Many of the leading thinkers in these two movements were involved in some way or another with a series of informal meetings that took place among young scholars in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1872. The group facetiously named itself “The Metaphysical Club” as a jab at American Hegelianism.

For most of the thinkers who identified themselves with either or both of these camps, naturalism was viewed as a metaphysical position underwritten by a suspicion of dualistic ontology, whereas pragmatism was most often understood, though its main proponents sometimes disagreed about the specifics, as a method for making philosophical thinking relevant to concrete practice.⁵³ In these ways, each line of reasoning was a reaction to products of enlightenment philosophy. Naturalism

⁵² Dewey, John. “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy.” [MW, vol. 4]

⁵³ The general understanding mentioned here is intended to include C.S. Peirce’s employment of the method for clarifying meaning, James’ for establishing a conception of truth, and Dewey’s for discovering both moral and logical principles.

aimed at meliorating the ontological questions that arose out of the impasse between rationalism and empiricism. On a naturalist's view, rationalism failed because it could not account for how innate ideas and the *a priori* were knowable without making an appeal to some notion of perception. On the other hand, empiricism failed because it could not account for how a stream of sense datum provides intelligibility without positing some sort of mind. American naturalists of this period, influenced by Darwin, sought a way out of this dilemma by positing a more dynamic view of reality that emphasized the temporal aspects of the universe over the spatial ones. In this respect, it could be argued that Aristotelian and, to a lesser extent Kantian, themes were instrumental in the development of early American naturalism.

Pragmatism shared a similar debt, although it was perhaps informed more by Kant than Aristotle. Of particular interest to the early pragmatists was Kant's rejection of philosophy as the "queen of the sciences." It is now a commonplace that C.S. Peirce (b. 1839), the recognized founder of pragmatism, expressly attributed the pragmatic method to Kant's critical work. In an unpublished paper Peirce remarked, "Kant (whom I *more* than admire) is nothing but a somewhat confused pragmatist."⁵⁴ An eminent scientist in his own right, Peirce's primary concern was finding a scientific means of streamlining the acquisition of knowledge, and so for him pragmatism was first and foremost an epistemological method, but one always directed towards clarifying ontology. In a passage reminiscent of Aristotle's claim in the *Metaphysics* that to know something truly is to know the "why" of it, Peirce advised:

⁵⁴ Peirce, C.S. "Consequences of Critical Common-Sensism." *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce Vols. I-VI*. Ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935) Vol. 5 p. 525

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.⁵⁵

This statement became known as “the pragmatic maxim” and illustrated how Peirce’s version of pragmatism was primarily a criterion for rigorously clarifying concepts.

Neither Peirce nor William James, who helped bring Peirce’s thought to a more general audience, could properly be called a naturalist, however. It was not until the work of their successors – John Dewey and George Herbert Mead – that the ontological upshots of naturalism would be wedded to the epistemological insights of pragmatism.⁵⁶ Dewey and Mead taught together at the Universities of Michigan and Chicago from 1891 to 1904 and helped found what is now known as the “Chicago school” of pragmatism, but, it was their shared interest in naturalistic explanations that really brought the two of them together. Dewey came to his naturalism through the neo-Hegelianism of George Sylvester Morris, his teacher at Johns Hopkins. Morris’ brand of Hegelianism was unique in that it rejected the dialectic of *Geist* in favor of a more biological description of the dynamism of nature. In other words, the traditional “subject” in epistemology became redefined as an organism fully immersed in and interacting with a dynamic, organic environment – *i.e.* one that incorporates the organism. This move, which was vital to Dewey’s later thought, came to Morris from his University of Berlin mentor F. A.

Trendelenburg, who had been sharply influenced by Aristotle’s notion of *εντελέχεια*

⁵⁵ Peirce, C.S. “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.”

⁵⁶ Though Dewey only took one logic class with Peirce at Johns Hopkins, he became involved in the Metaphysical Club meetings that Peirce renewed there. Mead attended Harvard, but studied primarily with Josiah Royce not James, though he did live in James’ home for some time as the family tutor.

and Darwin's theory of evolution. Trendelenburg synthesized these two ideas into what he called "constructive motion" which he saw as the common link between thought and being. On one hand, thought moves from potentiality to actuality, per Aristotle, as it *becomes* the object that is thought, on the other hand, being moves from potentiality to actuality, per Darwin, through natural selection. This reading renders the notion of *telos* a type of biological end in both organisms and nature at large.⁵⁷ Dewey's teacher, Morris, in turn, appropriated these ideas in his own work as he aimed at detailing the *meaning* of existence and the undermining of dualisms.

Mead's naturalism was crafted during his time abroad at the University of Leipzig, where he studied primarily under the psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. From Wundt, Mead learned that psychology should be approached as a science of "actuality and potentiality acting upon the organism from within itself."⁵⁸ This is what Mead called having and "inside." The outside, on the other hand, is contingent upon the social and environmental matrices in which the organism finds itself immersed. Mind, on such an account, arises from the interaction of an organism with its surroundings; hence, Mead claimed that consciousness was a social matter.

Dewey and Mead eventually dropped the term pragmatism in reference to their own work, Dewey preferring to call his thought instrumentalism, while Mead called his interactionism. When Dewey left Chicago for Columbia in 1904, both thinkers were emphasizing the naturalistic elements of their systems over and above the pragmatic ones. It was at Columbia that this form of naturalism seemed to take hold.

There, Dewey joined Frederick J. E. Woodbridge, who had studied at Berlin after

⁵⁷ For a more detailed description of Trendelenburg's "constructive motion" see Boisvert, Raymond. *Dewey's Metaphysics*. (Fordham University Press, 1988) pp. 22-24

⁵⁸ Mead, G.H. *The Philosophy of the Present*, ed. Arthur Murphy (Open Court, 1959) p. 137

Trendelenburg's death but shared a similar affinity for Aristotelian thought. He described his naturalism as "a synthesis of Aristotle and Spinoza, tempered by Locke's empiricism."⁵⁹ Together, Dewey and Woodbridge helped solidify naturalism as a school of thought and influenced several generations of self-proclaimed naturalists, including John Herman Randall, Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel, Herbert Schneider and Justus Buchler. Though it would be inaccurate to suggest that these thinkers shared a completely unified vision, what held them together was: 1) a shared acceptance of non-reductive realism, 2) a confidence in scientific method for yielding reliable knowledge and 3) an assertion of continuities among all realities. When taken together, these premises amount to a form of naturalism that could be called pragmatic naturalism (though only a handful of its proponents would assent to both) because it holds that genuine concepts are those that yield scientific gains for the improvement of human life. As such, the naturalism shared by these thinkers operated simultaneously as an ontological, epistemological and ethical position.

The next wave of naturalism came to America from the British revolt against idealism exemplified in the "new realism" of Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore. Russell's realism, which held that only scientific entities were genuine, was more reductive than that of many American naturalists of the period. He claimed that all statements about the world, including mathematical ones, were reducible to formal logic. This was the inception of a new analytic style of philosophy and was one of the corner stones of the "linguistic turn" that occurred in Anglo-American philosophy during the middle of the twentieth century. Similarly, Moore held that

⁵⁹ cf. Runes, D. *Pictorial History of Philosophy*. (Bramhall Press, 1959) p. 391

complex concepts could best be understood by breaking them into simpler parts. As he wrote, “A thing becomes intelligible first when it is analysed [sic] into its constituent concepts.”⁶⁰

This led Moore to claim in his *Principia Ethica* that value was not open to analysis. According to him, the concept of good is an indefinable, non-natural one, and any attempt to reduce it to naturalistic terms committed what he called the “naturalistic fallacy.” In his words,

Good, then, if we mean by it that quality which we assert to belong to a thing, when we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of that word. The most important sense of definition is that in which a definition states what are the parts which invariably compose a certain whole; and in this sense good has no definition because it is simple and has no parts... And it is a fact, that Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not other, but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the naturalistic fallacy and of it I shall now endeavour to dispose.⁶¹

Moore’s ethical non-naturalism, coupled with Russell’s logical realism, undercut many of the presuppositions of the earlier pragmatic naturalism and led many to reject the notions of morality and continuity ascribed to it. Many took Moore’s thought to be a more precise expression of Hume’s is-ought distinction in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which is often called “the guillotine.” Prima facie, the similarities seems obvious, as one of Hume’s passages reads,

⁶⁰ Moore, G.E. “The Nature of Judgment.” *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 8, No. 30 (Apr., 1899), p. 182

⁶¹ Moore, G.E. *Principia Ethica*. (Prometheus, 1988.) §10

In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprized to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.⁶²

Many Anglo-American thinkers took the combination of these views to be incontrovertible evidence for a real distinction between facts and values. But, in actuality these positions are incommensurable. On the one hand, Moore's Open Question argument takes a foundationalist approach because he believed "good" was a simple concept that could not be further analyzed. On the other hand, Hume's approach was anti-foundational insofar as he believed any foundations for ought statements would be ultimately unknowable and thus he posited the contingent habits of community approbation and censure as the crux morality.⁶³ Moreover, such comparisons of Moore to Hume fail to take into account Moore's declaration that, "*The value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts.*"⁶⁴ This suggests that Moore understood, at least in principle, the idea that a whole could be more than the sum of its parts, a key component in the notion of emergence. Nevertheless, the influx of British ideas led to a more piecemeal naturalism that depended on reductive analysis.

⁶² Hume, David. T 3.1.1.28 SBN 469 [Hume's emphasis] NOTE: All references to Hume's work will be cited from *The Complete Works and Correspondence of David Hume*. (InteLex, 2002)

⁶³ However, as will be shown in the fifth chapter, the naturalism of Dewey and Zhuangzi undermines the fact/value gap by eliminating the assumptions on which it is based.

⁶⁴ Moore, G.E. *Principia Ethica*. (Prometheus, 1988.) §18 [his emphasis]

The stage was set, and when the United States became the new home for European academics seeking refuge from Nazi internment camps, Anglo-American thought received its third wave of naturalism. This brand of naturalism was closely tied to the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle and the young Wittgenstein. This school of thought, like Hume before them, argued that metaphysical statements were meaningless and thus sought to eliminate from philosophical discourse any statement that was not “verifiable” through empirical inquiry. When added to Moore’s work, this view led to the idea that human behavior could be studied scientifically as a system of mechanical impulses and responses. The behaviorism of Skinner, which sought to exclude subjective introspection as unjustifiable and focus on physically mechanistic explanations, is one result. Although later American thinkers like W.V.O. Quine and Thomas Kuhn would make assaults on the assumptions of this form of naturalism, what was retained even in their criticisms was the view that philosophy was reducible or subservient – like a “handmaiden” – to the natural sciences.

While each wave of naturalism discussed above successfully navigated between the Charybdis of skepticism and the Scylla of idealism in its own way, the two later versions tended to trade one set of problems for another. On the one hand, the logical atomism of Russell *et al* does indeed overcome the denaturalization of experience brought on by the language of experience of Modernity, but it does little or nothing to disabuse philosophy from the mechanistic view of reality that the language of experience created. On the other hand, the verification principle of the positivists lays out a rigorous litmus test for what counts as evidence for any claim,

but when taken to its conclusion, it appears as though the only unassailable statements are those of physics, chemistry, and biology. What is left when one takes either or both of these lines of thought seriously is the belief that the methods of natural science, or the classifications and objects recognized in natural science form the only appropriate elements of any philosophical inquiry. Again, Daniel Dennett has bemoaned the scientism that resulted from this kind of “greedy reductionism,” which he sees has consequence of a rush to fasten everything to foundations.⁶⁵

Avoiding the short shrift of theoretical complexity was a primary concern under the more traditional vintage of naturalism. On their account, nature is a broader philosophical concept than existence and is therefore not the exclusive dominion of natural science. As Roy Wood Sellars wrote in 1927,

Materialism is distinctly an ontological theory, a theory of the stuff of reality. Its polar opposite is usually taken to be mentalism of some kind. Naturalism, on the other hand, is a cosmological position; its opposite is supernaturalism in the larger meaning of that term. I mean that naturalism takes nature in a definite way as identical with reality, as self-sufficient and as the whole of reality. And by nature is meant the space-time-causal system which is studied by science and in which our lives are passed. The whole nature of nature may not be exhaustively known, but its location and general characteristics come under the above categories.⁶⁶

Rather than taking nature to be comprised exclusively of matter or merely of that which can be perceived, it would be preferable here to think of nature as a closed *system*, *i.e.* a complex, of interrelated elements comprising a unified whole, within which the totality of causal relations must be restricted to the natural realm. Of course, it *could* be the case that there are *non-natural* entities, and on such a topic the

⁶⁵ Dennett, p. 82

⁶⁶ Sellars, Roy Wood. “Why Naturalism and Not Materialism,” *Philosophical Review* 36 (1927), 216–225.

naturalist would have to remain silent, but on such a view there can be no *super-natural* entities in the sense of a non-natural subject or object with causal efficacy over that which is natural.

The difference, then, between the scientific, epistemically-centered naturalism *en vogue* today and the naturalism advanced by that first wave of thinkers can be understood as turning on four central theses. They are:

- 1 Natural phenomena have objectively determinable traits.
- 2 The traits of natural phenomena are knowable.
- 3 The process of inquiry is necessarily conditioned and perspectival.
- 4 Human interaction with the rest of nature, cognitive or otherwise, is active and creative.⁶⁷

The American naturalists of old subscribed to all four of these statements, whereas newer forms of naturalism hold only to the first two. Many public intellectuals in the sciences (figures like Steven Weinberg, Alan Sokal, and Richard Dawkins) have publicly denounced defenders of the latter two statements and philosophical naturalists of the more recent stripe have embraced this condemnation. Conversely, post-modern theorists in the humanities and literary criticism (*e.g.* Bruno Latour, Alan Bloom, and Steve Fuller) have publicly rejected the former two theses. This division often leads to the kind of mistrust and “speaking past one another” among scientists and humanities professors of which the “Science Wars” of the nineteen-nineties is a prime example. The naturalism of the first wave variety would not have run up against such a problem because it saw scientific inquiry as occurring from within the complex of nature. While this older naturalism employed science, it would not have invoked the kind of greedy reductionism that Dennett decries, nor

⁶⁷ Cf. Ryder, John. “Reconciling Pragmatism and Naturalism.” In *Pragmatic Naturalism and Realism*. Ed. by John R. Shook (Prometheus, 2003) p. 64

would it have run in the other direction to propose, as many postmodern thinkers have, that everything must be interpretation, “all the way down.”⁶⁸ As one first wave naturalist, Morris R Cohen, put it: "Science is a flickering light in our darkness, but it is the only one we have and woe to him who would put it out.”

Humanistic Naturalism

Implicit in a view that accepts all four theses is the assumed continuity between intelligence and nature. Nature is intelligible not by virtue of some intelligent creator, or some ghost in the machine, or even because of some primordial set of principles, but rather because the process of life’s trials and tribulations have rendered it so. Knowledge is redefined under such a view as what satisfies a need and reference to disembodied reason is supplanted by embodied intellection. On this view, there is not a sharp delineation between propositional knowledge (episteme), intuitive understanding (noesis) and practical wisdom (phronesis). Inquiry, then, is not a retreat to a “view from nowhere,” but rather an integrated part of experience that seeks to maximize commerce with one’s surroundings. Mentalism and subjectivism vanish under such a view, and consciousness is seen as a function of biological survival in the same sense as digestion or respiration.

The logical extension of such an idea leads to the prospect that human beings are continuous with their surroundings, that they are experiencing fields immersed within an environing field.⁶⁹ In other words, they are always already “in the soup.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ The phrase is Richard Rorty’s and can be found in his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. (Cambridge, 1991) p. 102

⁶⁹ This way of stating the continuity between humans with their environments is employed by Paul Kurtz in his essay, “Naturalism in American Philosophy.” in *Philosophy and the Civilizing Arts*. Ed.

This type of polarity, wherein human experience and the enviroing world are seen as two sides of the same realm, flies in the face of many of the dualisms of the Western philosophical canon – particularly that of mind and body. The main assumption undergirding these dualisms is the notion of “substance.” The classical American naturalists rejected this notion and, in its stead, posited an ontological position hinged upon concepts like process, field, and complex.⁷¹ At the bottom of these is the view that reality has a relational quality, that all things are co-constitutive. But, theirs was an ontology that went beyond the Anaxagoran claim that “everything is in everything,” because it was informed by Darwinian insights and required no appeal to *vóoc* as an organizing principle.

In terms of method, this suggests that the social sciences, arts and humanities fill in our understanding of natural processes in ways that physics, chemistry and biology cannot account for on their own. According to the naturalist, science should be understood as just one more type of human behavior. As such, it is fallible and the truths it renders probabilities, not absolutes. Hypotheses are instrumental insofar as they function in inquiry as a means of overcoming some difficulty, whether practical or theoretical, and are to be judged by their consequences. In this way, science takes on an inter-subjective element, wherein the community of inquirers determine the warrant of hypotheses based on how they match up with repeated observational data. Hypotheses, therefore, remain on permanent probation in the face of the possibility

by Craig Walton and John P. Anton. (Ohio Univ. Press, 1974) Kurtz is expounding on Dewey’s use of the phrase “enviroing field” throughout *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938). Cf. LW 12:152

⁷⁰ Roger Ames and David Hall employ this phrase in regard to the Daodejing but it is equally applicable to the American naturalist’s view of continuity. Cf. Ames and Hall. *A Philosophical Translation of the Dao De Jing: Making This Life Significant*. (Ballantine, 2003) p. 18

⁷¹ Dewey spoke of nature as an enviroing field, Whitehead called it a concrescence of process, and Buchler referred to it as a complex.

of counter-evidence. Yet, in accepting this we need not reject the “central aim of science... to discover laws and causal connections” among natural phenomena.⁷² This nomothetic aspect of science is essential for making accurate predictions and without it the entire practice would break down. However, this function of science should not lead us to the mistaken notion that naming some object or behavior fixes it permanently. Rather, these “laws” serve as guideposts for further inquiry, not unassailable rules closed to possible revision.

Building upon this assertion, this kind of naturalism sees meaning and language as contextual, revisable and intimate. Language is tied to experience and conduct and is therefore continuous with the other biosocial processes that bring us into closer contact with the world around us. This is where the early American naturalists were most significantly influenced by pragmatism. Peirce’s pragmatic maxim had showed them that meaning was inherently instrumental. However, without some kind of anchor in the real world, this maxim treads precariously close to a kind of crass opportunism, wherein something is only meaningful or “true” if it works. The “linguistic turn” of the mid-twentieth century was precipitated by thinkers like Quine, Wilfrid Sellars and Donald Davidson who adopted a view similar to this in their assault on the correspondence pictures of language introduced by Russell and the positivists. Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatism is a direct result, wherein *everything* is regarded as mere metaphor and the task of the philosopher is to create ways of speaking that direct culture toward *their* ends – whatever those may be. The first wave naturalists, and Peirce too, would have balked at a claim that

⁷² Kim, Jaegwon. “The American Origins of Scientific Naturalism.” *Journal of Philosophical Research, Special Supplement: Philosophy in America at the Turn of the Century*, (Aug. 2003) p. 95

subverts ontology in favor of semantics. Under the naturalist view, ontology and semantics are continuous and the crude, contemporary representation of the pragmatic mantra as “truth is what works” would have to be inverted. Rather, a statement “works” if it is meaningful; like a hypothesis, its truth is discovered only after it is tested. But “to work” in the sense that the early naturalists and their pragmatist counterparts understood it was not a minimalist concept. Instead, they claimed that a statement was most meaningful and truest when its result settled a need with as little blowback or collateral damage as possible. Truth, by this account, is something that lies at the end of inquiry, not at its beginning.

Likewise, no action is ever antecedently true. We find its truth only in a fully retrospective act of inquiry grounded in the context of the environment. What this means for ethics, accordingly, is that an agent should be in the practice of building up a repertoire of actions that are repeatable – just as the best experiments are repeatable. In other words, the naturalists believed that if human beings observe, through experimentation, what actions are best, they will be in a position to form “good laboratory habits.” As Dewey explained it, in his *Democracy and Education* (1916), responding to the uncertainty of a problematic situation is brought about by the desire, which all organisms share, to alleviate indeterminacy. This “natural” way of dealing with the facts that arise in a problematic situation is always in terms of value, *i.e.* these facts either have positive or negative value with regard to escaping indeterminacy. According to the naturalist, value *is* a product of this type of inquiry. There is nothing – no fact, object, or entity – that has “intrinsic” value prior to whatever purpose commerce between the experiencing and environing fields has

brought to the table.⁷³ In short, the naturalists saw no need to institute a firm distinction between facts and values; instead, they suggested the difference be viewed as one of degree, not of kind.

In this way, the moral philosophy of the first wave naturalists was unique. For them the most basic units of ethical evaluation were moral characters – understood only as repertoires of good laboratory habits – rather than individual ethical decisions. They rejected the “big moment ethics” of the Moderns in favor of a moral philosophy centered on notions of self-realization and self-fulfillment that harkened back to the Ancients. Moral life, on this view, consists in the *cultivation* of both public and private virtues toward the mutual flourishing of an individual, her community, and the natural world. It is simply life, in general – wherein ethical decisions do not occur in series, but in chorus. In other words, morality reflects ontology insofar as it is digital, not analog; many inputs can often lead to only one output, and vice versa.⁷⁴ In this way, these thinkers turned their backs on the theoretical discreteness in much of the Western ethical tradition, a tradition wherein self-realization was reinterpreted as avoidance of sin, and ethics was believed to have *little or nothing to say about life between ethical dilemmas*. The trouble is, when this traditional approach is followed to its conclusion, it seems these theoretical lacuna leave us with “an ethical free-play zone, in which one can do whatever one likes.”⁷⁵

⁷³ This move avoids the Open Question argument of Moore and does not fall prey to any fallacy.

⁷⁴ Digital insofar as it is multiply, rather than singularly, realizable. Cf. Haugeland, John. *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press) 1985.

⁷⁵ Kupperman, Joel J. “Naturalness Revisited: Why Western Philosophers Should Study Confucius.” *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 40

In summary, the general features of naturalism as it was expressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by figures like Dewey, Mead, Woodbridge, and their cohorts could be expressed in terms of five continuities:

1. Noetic Continuity (no rift between intelligence and the intelligibility of nature)
2. Ontological Continuity (commitment to mobility of being through process)
3. Theoretical Continuity (science seen as fallible and progressive)
4. Semantic Continuity (language and meaning continuous with biosocial processes)
5. Axiological Continuity (no sharp division between facts and values)⁷⁶

Together, these five theses point toward a view of experience as a product of interaction with the world, not as perception. Experiences are “had” only in the same sense as scars or habits. Simply put, experience is wholly organic and contiguous with nature. In this respect, human beings are responsible for shaping their own experiences – *i.e.* it is up to them to make the types of inquiries which yield the most successful and universally applicable habits. The first wave naturalists would likely have assented to Kant’s claim that:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] "Have courage to use your own understanding!"--that is the motto of enlightenment.⁷⁷

This type of philosophical outlook, which posits the ability, dignity and worth of all people, is often referred to as “humanism.” One further distinction may be of service here, however, *viz.* that between the *saeculum* and the *aeternum*. The former

⁷⁶ I.e. a rejection of dualisms regarding knowledge (reason vs. perception), being (subject vs. object), method (change vs. permanence), meaning (correspondence vs. coherence) and morality (fact vs. value).

⁷⁷ Kant, Immanuel. “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” First published in *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (30 September 1784). [Translation by Martin Schönfeld]

indicates the duration of a lifetime, while the latter indicates eternity. The type of humanism that is relevant to naturalism is of a secular variety insofar as it rejects transcendent, eternal explanations. Thus, the brand of naturalism at the heart of this analysis may, most appropriately, be called “humanistic naturalism.” This philosophy suggests that it is only from beneath the great security blanket of ignorance that the secular view of nature appears so frightening.⁷⁸

Two Examples of Humanistic Naturalism

Humanistic naturalism may generally be defined as the view that “human affairs, associative and personal, are projections, continuations, complications, of the nature which exists in the physical and pre-human world. There is no gulf, no two spheres of existence, no ‘bifurcation’.”⁷⁹ This was the way John Dewey described his naturalism, and according to Hu Shih, a preeminent Chinese philosopher of the 20th century, this outlook was endemic to China as well. As he put it,

Our [China’s] first great philosopher was a founder of naturalism; and our second great philosopher was an agnostic... Lao-tze [sic.] and Confucius were teachers of a naturalistic attitude toward religion. The former taught us to follow the course of nature; the latter, to abide by fate.⁸⁰

Those already familiar with American philosophy during that period may not be surprised to find that Hu Shih earned his philosophy doctorate at Columbia University, under the tutelage of John Dewey.

⁷⁸ The metaphor belongs to Richard Dawkins, cf. *The God Delusion*. (Houghton Mifflin, 2006)

⁷⁹ Dewey, John. “Half-Hearted Naturalism.” *The Collected Works of John Dewey*. Southern Illinois University Press. LW 3:74

⁸⁰ From Shih, Hu. *The Chinese Renaissance: The Haskell Lectures 1933*. (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1934) p. 80

There are a multitude of reasons for making an inquiry into the similarities between Dewey and Chinese thought. Most generally, as Wing-Tsit Chan once noted,

If one word could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophy, that word would be humanism – not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power, but one that professes the unity of man and Heaven. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese thought from the dawn of its history.⁸¹

While Daoism retains the general humanistic tenor of the other three major Chinese schools of thought – Confucianism, Moism, and Legalism – its emphasis on harmonizing with nature is perhaps its most notable contribution to Chinese thought. And, of the major daoist thinkers, Zhuangzi's view is the most radically naturalistic of any Chinese figure.

A comparison between Dewey and Zhuangzi has historical significance insofar as each lived during a time of political turmoil. Dewey's life spanned from just before the American Civil War to just after World War II, while Zhuangzi lived during one of the most war torn epochs in China's long and often bloody history. The writings of each seem geared toward an audience making its way through tumultuous times – *i.e.* each offered a philosophy born out of crisis. This link is even more important in light of the time Dewey spent in China from 1919 to 1921. But, the possibility of practical application is the best reason for choosing these two thinkers. Since each offered a model for how to develop human potential through attunement with one's surroundings that had deep ramifications on their cultural and

⁸¹ Wing-Tsit Chan. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963) p. 3

political milieus, this aspect of their writings might have ramifications for our own tumultuous times.

The view of the world that each thinker advanced was steeped in tradition. By the time Dewey was writing, naturalism – which could trace its ancestry to the time before Socrates – had been torn asunder and repaired so many times that the name was nearly meaningless. And, while Dewey and others, like G. Santayana, F. Woodbridge and J. H. Randall, Jr., attempted to reconnect the philosophical terminology with its roots, it should come as no surprise that today there are so many strains of thought bearing the same name. In the East, Zhuangzi built upon the cosmology of the *Yi jīng* [易經] (the “Book of Changes”), the practical humanism of Confucius, and the mysticism of *dàojiā* [道家] (the school of the Way) to form a philosophy that emphasized being “at ease” with nature. The overarching theme found in both Dewey's and Zhuangzi's philosophy is that human understanding and nature reside on a continuum, actuated in an evolutionary-like process wherein inquiry can break the crust of convention and promote collective flourishing.

Chapter Three: Dewey's Naturalism – The Live Creature

To see the organism in nature, the nervous system in the organism, the brain in the nervous system, the cortex in the brain is the answer to the problems which haunt philosophy. And when thus seen they will be seen to be in, not as marbles are in a box but as events are in history, in a moving, growing never finished process. [John Dewey⁸²]

John Dewey was born in Vermont, to a Burlington grocer and his wife in 1859, the same year that Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published. This is an interesting coincidence insofar as Dewey was the American naturalist to make the most use of Darwinian evolution in his own work. He believed that Darwin, "introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion."⁸³ Dewey saw this as a revolution of Copernican magnitudes – one in which human reason would no longer be seen as the center of gravity in moral and epistemological queries, or the crowning achievement in metaphysics. As he put it,

A philosophy that humbles its pretensions to the work of projecting hypotheses... is thereby subjected to test by the way in which the ideas it propounds work out in practice. In having modesty forced upon it, philosophy also acquires responsibility.⁸⁴

With the publication of nearly 600 articles, 30 original book-length manuscripts and innumerable reviews, syllabi, and encyclopedia entries, Dewey is

⁸² *Experience and Nature* (1925) LW 1:224 [Dewey's emphasis]

⁸³ MW 4:3

⁸⁴ MW 4:13

one of the most fertile minds ever to hail from the United States.⁸⁵ Many regard Dewey as one of the most notable ‘philosophers’ this country has ever produced, though he would have probably rejected that title in favor of being seen as an “intellectual-at-large.” Dewey was a world philosopher – in two senses of that phrase. Unlike most philosophers, his work was internationally heralded even during his lifetime. He also spent a great deal of time and resources lecturing in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and the Far East. He would often assert that it was a philosopher’s responsibility to be just as concerned with public issues as she was with esoteric ones. The most succinct expression of this sentiment can be found in the oft-quoted passage from his “The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy” (1917):

Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.⁸⁶

It is this insistence on practicality that has been a main cause for including Dewey’s work among the philosophical school known as “pragmatism.” This, however, may be a misnomer. Since, as A.O. Lovejoy pointed out in his infamous send up of “The Thirteen Pragmatisms” (1908), nearly *every* philosopher believes, to some degree or another, that philosophy should have practical consequences. And, when most philosophers hold such a belief, we are left to wonder what difference it makes to call someone a “pragmatist.”⁸⁷ Although Dewey identified himself with the likes of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James early in his career, it is perhaps unfortunate that Dewey adopted the designations they made for their thought. In

⁸⁵ Over his 67-year career, Dewey published 587 articles. Upon his death nearly 30 unpublished articles were found among his files.

⁸⁶ MW 10:46

⁸⁷ Ironically, this is a sort of pragmatic objection to using “pragmatism” in this way.

spite of whatever debts his thought owes to pragmatism (which are no doubt substantial) the liberal use of that moniker by Dewey scholars since, has led to the gross mischaracterization and over-simplification of his contribution. Late in life, Dewey himself seemed remorseful of this connection, as he wrote in a letter to Corliss Lamont,

I have come to think of my own position as cultural or humanistic Naturalism – Naturalism, properly interpreted seems to me a more adequate term than Humanism. Of course I have always limited my use of "instrumentalism" t[o] my theory of thinking and knowledge; the word pragmatism I have used very little, and then with reserves.⁸⁸

Regardless of whether or not Dewey's thought should be considered pragmatic, he certainly took the role of public intellectual seriously. In fact, he commented so often on popular issues that, by the end of his career, a public controversy was by and large considered unsettled until Dewey had weighed in on it. His more notable public ventures included: presiding over the Leon Trotsky hearings in Mexico, collaboration on the founding of the NAACP, sponsorship of the ACLU, and serving as president of the national teachers union. Though he was considered the foremost intellectual in the country when he was alive, very few understood his philosophical position, even in academic circles.

With this in mind, it should be noted at the outset that any attempt to summarize such a prodigious body of work would prove extremely difficult. Yet, if one were pressed to give such a concise account, Dewey's emphasis on the continuity of nature with human experience would be the best point of departure. For, there is an unmistakable tendency to offer philosophical explanations rooted in

⁸⁸ Dewey to Lamont, 1940.09.06 in *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 3*. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005)

natural and social patterns, running throughout most of his writings. This lifelong inclination is probably most overt, as Richard Bernstein has pointed out, in compositions from the last thirty years of Dewey's life.⁸⁹ While others have tried to give a unified account of Dewey's thought, it is Bernstein's claim that Dewey's work should be divided into three distinct periods – *viz.* the idealistic, the experimental and the naturalistic – that has been adopted by the rest of the scholarly community at large, as evidenced by the subsequent division of his collected writings into “Early,” “Middle,” and “Late” works. Bernstein has recommended that the appearance of Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1925) be recognized as the beginning of his final, naturalistic period. And, by designating that volume as the first of seventeen in Dewey's “Later Works,” the press at Southern Illinois University, which has gathered and published Dewey's collected writings since 1972, has solidified this view.

However, the antecedents to Dewey's alleged “shift” in emphasis are perceptible in several of Dewey's manuscripts and lectures from the years leading up to the release of *Experience and Nature*. Thus, Bernstein's insight may be as misleading as it has been instructive. After all, it is rare when *any* thinker's work can be so neatly packaged, and often the lines of classification are arbitrarily drawn over an otherwise unbroken series of life events in the name of convenience. In order to avoid the confusions that can arise from this kind of rigid classification, it may be helpful to look at the developments in Dewey's thought before his so-called shift.

⁸⁹ Cf. Bernstein, R. J. *John Dewey: On Experience, Nature and Freedom*. (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1960)

One significant feature of this period is that Dewey spent a great deal of time abroad, particularly in the Far East.

The “Subject-Matter” of Philosophy

Dewey was certainly not the first philosopher to stress the importance of experience to philosophical study; he was not even the first with pragmatist leanings to do so. In fact, both Peirce and James believed experience played a vital role in the application of the pragmatic method. In “The Development of American Pragmatism,” Dewey attributed the origin of pragmatism to a passage in Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*, happened upon by Peirce, wherein,

Kant established a distinction between *pragmatic* and *practical*. The latter term applies to moral laws which Kant regards as *a priori*, whereas the former term applies to the rules of art and technique which are based on experience and are applicable to experience.⁹⁰

As Dewey rightly pointed out, experience was a crucial element in pragmatic thought. But, when Dewey used the word experience in his own writings, he meant something different than the earlier pragmatists. Any analysis of Dewey’s notion of experience, however, must start from an explication of these positions, for it was Peirce’s idea that applicability is crucial to meaning and James’ sentiment that philosophical quandaries are often differences of perspective that were the greatest influences on Dewey’s thought.

On the one hand, Peirce – whose pragmatism was based on realism and a commitment to the clarification of concepts – saw experience as a litmus test for clarity. On his account, if an object or idea can be dealt with in everyday experience,

⁹⁰ LW 2:3

then it has passed muster for some minimal type of clarity. Likewise, if a definition of it can be given in abstraction from *any* particular experience, then it is even clearer. Finally, if its practical effects are understood in such a way that it can be used intelligently to improve everyday experiences, then it has fulfilled the pragmatic maxim and is clearest. These three levels boil down to a tripartite distinction between familiarity, lexical knowledge, and applicability. In this way, Peirce's pragmatic maxim came very close to the verificationism of the positivists, and his notion of experience operated mostly in the sense of empirical observation.⁹¹

Like Peirce, William James hoped to identify philosophical investigation with an "empiricist attitude" that "unstiffens" theories and sets inquiry "at work" within the stream of one's experience.⁹² He dubbed his position "radical empiricism" and wrote, contra Peirce, that for those who would adopt it "the crudity of experience remains an eternal element [of the world] thereof. There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact."⁹³ Simply put, where Peirce was a realist who saw raw sensory input as a starting point for knowledge, James was a nominalist who believed that sense data is something we cannot get behind, *i.e.* experience is all we have and there is nothing real outside of it. And, although James' view of experience was broader in scope than Peirce had originally seen it, it was based on a similar rejection of the Cartesian view that saw experience as the locus of interaction between the objective world and the subjective perceiver – a distinction Dewey also rejected. As Dewey put it,

⁹¹ In later years, Peirce would try to broaden this conception to incorporate what he called "ideal" experience.

⁹² James, William. "What Pragmatism Means." from *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. (Penguin Classics, 2000) p. 28

⁹³ *The Works of William James*. (Harvard University Press, 1975) – *The Will to Believe*, p. 6

What has been completely divided in philosophical discourse into man and world, inner and outer, self and not-self, subject and object, individual and social, private and public, etc. are actually parties in life-transactions. The philosophical ‘problem’ of trying to get them back together is artificial.⁹⁴

But, Dewey went beyond Peirce and James insofar as he saw experience not merely as “the first step toward genuine knowledge,” *à la* Peirce, nor simply a useful tool for “settling metaphysical disputes,” per James, but rather, as the *entire* subject matter of philosophy. He hoped that he could save philosophy from itself by removing the various artifices of dualism and, in this regard, his work on experience could be seen as a type of “prolegomena” to any future epistemology. Thus, what Dewey meant by the term “experience” differed significantly from the various ways his predecessors and contemporaries had used it, *i.e.* as the influx of sensory data.

In several of his early essays, Dewey laid the foundation for the more robust interpretation of experience, exemplified by *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art as Experience* (1934), which he hoped would redeem the term by having it “returned to its idiomatic usages.”⁹⁵ But here, idiom is not tantamount to vulgarity or simplicity. Rather, Dewey sought a return to thinking about experience in less dissected, philosophically abstract terms. Terms that could avoid many of the conceptual eddies that had plagued philosophy for centuries. For him, the progress of philosophy had been obstructed by those eddies, and he hoped to reconstruct it by reminding us “that philosophy must not be a study of philosophy, but a study, by means of philosophy, of life-experience and our beliefs about and in this

⁹⁴ LW 16:248

⁹⁵ cf. LW 1:361-3

experience.”⁹⁶ In short, Dewey returned, through a Darwinian lens, the notion of experience to its Greek roots, conceived of as that which emerged out of the trials of life.

Dewey’s life project was aimed at this goal, and he sought to accomplish it by showing how experience is inextricably linked with the context of nature. By his lights, experience sets the stage for understanding nature, *i.e.* a proper illustration of experience can disclose or “lay bare” natural frameworks. Of course, in order to demonstrate such a thesis, more clarification of Dewey’s account of experience and what he meant by the term nature are needed. I am confident that once these concepts are clear, we will see that experience is best understood as the opening up, or engendering, of contextual transactions with nature. However, first it may be helpful to recount some of the major movements in Dewey’s thought that led to the development of the first measure of his naturalism, *i.e.* the recasting of intelligibility in terms of the interaction between organisms and environments.

Reforming and Transforming Experience

When it came to the notion of experience, Dewey could be seen as a type of reformer, in the fullest sense of the term – someone who wants to return to the original form or to re-form something for the needs of a particular time. While his account of experience could be characterized as a decisive break from previous

⁹⁶ John J. Stuhr, “John Dewey.” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*. Ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.) p. 435

NOTE: “Philosophy,” as it appears in this sentence, refers to three separate human enterprises, each used by Dewey in a specific sense. The first refers to philosophy in its professional capacity; the second refers to the philosophical problems of history; and the third refers to the reconstructed endeavor that Dewey wanted to imbue with experimentalism.

outlooks, as illustrated above, it did not arise in a vacuum. Throughout his lengthy career, Dewey absorbed many different views, including Kantian criticism and Hegelian idealism, German romanticism, and British empiricism. Even in his later years, he would tackle any new idea with great enthusiasm, and proved adept at gleaned much from foreign schools of thought. However, the last twenty-five years of his life, the period in which he most completely conveyed his mature naturalism, moved beyond any single influence. Briefly stated, Dewey's naturalism hinged upon the notion that human beings can best be understood through their relationships with their surroundings. The upshot of this is the belief that thought and action are two parts of a single process and that "mind" and "world" name philosophical abstractions rather than existent entities. As he put it, "The nature of experience is determined by the essential conditions of life. While man is other than bird and beast, he shares basic vital functions with them and has to make the same basal adjustments if he is to continue the process of living."⁹⁷ In what follows, I sketch some of the major developments in Dewey's thinking towards this position.

Dewey first came to naturalism through an epistemological lens. As an undergraduate at the University of Vermont, Dewey had been impressed with Kant's philosophy. His earliest publication, "The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism"(1882), reflected the Kantian tendency to convert metaphysical problems to epistemological ones when he criticized materialists for being logically inconsistent, *viz.* that "They claim to possess a certain kind of *knowledge*, but are

⁹⁷ *AE*, LW 10:19

unable to explain the derivation of that knowledge on a strictly materialistic basis.”⁹⁸

However, Dewey soon began to move beyond this affinity for epistemologically grounded philosophy when he was introduced to Hegel as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the Hegelianism he received there was fused with Darwinism. Dewey would echo this biologized Hegelianism of Trendelenberg-cum-Morris more than forty years later in *Experience and Nature*, with passages such as,

If we consider the *form* or scheme of the situation in which meaning and understanding occur, we find an involved simultaneous presence and cross-reference of immediacy and efficiency, overt actuality and potentiality, the consummatory and instrumental.⁹⁹

During these early stages in his career, Dewey’s move from Kant to Hegel can best be characterized as a shift from epistemology to ontology. The difference is the way he dealt with the relationship between mind and world, *viz.* a shift from a dualistic view to a more holistic one.

In 1903, Dewey published *Studies in Logical Theory*, which is commonly taken to be his definitive break from idealism toward experimentalism. However, the foundations for this volume were worked out gradually over the course of the preceding years teaching at the University of Michigan as Hegelianism less captivated Dewey. The two largest contributing factors in Dewey’s empirical turn were his work at Johns Hopkins with the psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who showed him how scientific analysis could be applied to the humanities, and his later collaboration with J.H. Tufts at Michigan. Dewey left Michigan to join Tufts at the

⁹⁸ Boisvert, Raymond. *Dewey’s Metaphysics*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988) p. 17

⁹⁹ *EN*, LW 1:143

University of Chicago and it was there that he developed a philosophical approach that coalesced a pragmatic psychology with his Darwinian leanings, *viz.* instrumentalism. Over the following ten years, Dewey flourished in this environment as he worked out – alongside his colleague G.H. Mead – the implications of combining Peirce’s pragmatism, James’ radical empiricism and Darwinian evolution with a scientific approach. Briefly stated, the upshot of combining these three schools of thought was *that while nature was in constant change, human beings could still act in their environment by testing their beliefs and adapting them according to environmental needs.*

Dewey’s work is unique insofar as it took these already established ideas, assimilated them with others, and built upon them an outlook that, when understood properly, coalesced the seemingly disparate functions of experience, inquiry, and learning. In other words, Dewey saw no rift between experience and knowledge. As such, it could be argued, his mature view of experience (exemplified by *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*) aimed at giving insight into what it means to be alive. Furthermore, when it came to the intelligibility of nature, Dewey saw no need for antecedent principles, nor for final ends. Instead, he argued that intelligibility was a product of a situation, i.e. a transaction between an organism and its surroundings. As he put,

The *situation* as such in short is taken for granted. *It* is not stated or expressed. It is implicit, not explicit. Yet it supplies meaning to all that is stated, pointed out, named. Its presence makes the difference between sanity and insanity. We may say if we will that it is ignored. But the ignoring is not the ignorance of denial. Ignoring means "understood," assumed as a matter of course as the

background and foreground which gives intelligibility and state-ability to what is explicit, expressly pointed out.¹⁰⁰

Two early essays in particular laid the foundation for the noetic continuity Dewey's view held between intelligence and the intelligibility of nature.

When the first of these essays, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," appeared in 1896, it marked "one of the truly important turning points in the study of human behavior."¹⁰¹ There, Dewey attacked the mechanistic view of stimulus and response that dominated the psychological research of the period. On his view, the reflex arc concept only mimicked an older, and erroneous, mind-body dualism by placing stimulus in opposition to response. He wrote,

...we still incline to interpret the latter [i.e. response] from our preconceived and preformulated ideas of rigid distinctions between sensations, thoughts and acts. The sensory stimulus is one thing, the central activity, standing for the idea, is another thing, and the motor discharge, standing for the act proper, is a third. As a result, the reflex arc is not a comprehensive, or organic unity, but a patchwork of disjointed parts, a mechanical conjunction of unallied processes.¹⁰²

In this regard, Dewey complained, the reflex arc was inaccurate because it placed the parts of an act prior to the whole. It failed to recognize that stimulus, movement, and response only made sense as an interpretation of an event *after* it had occurred.

Moreover, he claimed, that the notions of stimulus and response were non-existent entities that only gain meaning once placed in relation to one another. Simply put,

¹⁰⁰ MW, 13:414-5

¹⁰¹ cf. EW 5:XVIII [William McKenzie's introduction the fifth volume of Dewey's Early Works] where McKenzie continued with, "It remained for decades one of the most influential works in the science of psychology and still retains that position among all students not dogmatically committed to some form, by whatever name, of the same mechanistic view that it attempts to correct."

¹⁰² EW 5:97

Dewey argued that the reflex arc was an instance of the empiricist's fallacy of placing the parts prior to the whole.

Dewey offered a more naturalistic account, one that viewed stimulus and response in less mechanistic terms, *i.e.* as parts of a single process. On such a view, the reflex arc does not run in a linear direction from stimulus, through response, to movement. Rather, multiple stimuli, responses, and movements arise simultaneously and are experienced, in chorus, as a singular, unbroken act, "which is *as experienced* no more mere sensation than it is mere motion," and thus, when analysis dissects the reflex arc into separate states, "we have, only the serial steps in a co-ordination of *acts*."¹⁰³ Simply put, before an act can be divided into parts, its quality as a whole has to be explicated. But, the reflex arc concept offered no such explanation.

It was not until after the appearance of his "Reflex Arc" paper, as he began to embrace pragmatism, that Dewey became enamored with James' radical empiricism and began to formulate his own version, which, by 1905, he had dubbed "immediate empiricism."¹⁰⁴ His essay, "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," which appeared in July of that year, reveals James' early influence on his thinking. Therein, Dewey's postulate was aimed at framing all philosophical debate in terms of experience, on the one hand, and eradicating the notion that experience needs to be grounded in a transcendent reality or a transcendental truth absolutely free from time and contingency, on the other. As he put it, "things – anything, everything, in the ordinary non-technical use of the term "thing" – are what they are experienced

¹⁰³ EW 5:106 [emphasis added]

¹⁰⁴ Although critical of some of its conclusions, Dewey had been particularly impressed with James' *The Will to Believe* [1897], in which James first described his position as radical empiricism.

as.”¹⁰⁵ To illustrate this, Dewey described a situation where a person, sitting in a dark room, might hear a noise that frightens them. When the lights are turned on and the harmless source of the noise identified, rather than saying that the noise *appeared* frightful and was *really* harmless, Dewey suggested that we ought to identify the noise as *truly frightful* when first heard, and later – because more information is available to apply to the gross experience – it is *truly harmless*. Saying the latter would be more useful than positing, as someone who used the former explanation would, a distinction between appearances and reality. Dewey wanted to make it clear that the experienced noise *was* just what it was experienced *as* at that time, namely frightening. On this account, “if one wishes to describe anything truly, his task is to tell what it is experienced as being.”¹⁰⁶ Compare this with a passage from James’ *The Meaning of Truth* (1909):

Radical empiricism consists first of a *postulate*... that the only things debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms of experience.... The generalized conclusion is that therefore the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience.¹⁰⁷

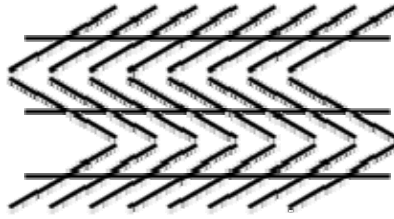
This passage, on the one hand, illustrates the parallel between these two thinker’s views. On the other hand, insofar as James had adopted Dewey’s reference to a postulate, it may suggest the admiration that Dewey felt for James was probably mutual. In any case, what is clear is that by the release of the “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” Dewey’s thought had come into its own.

¹⁰⁵ MW 3:158

¹⁰⁶ MW 3:158

¹⁰⁷ *The Works of William James*. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 17 vol., 1975) *The Meaning of Truth*, pp. 6-7 [emphasis added]

Another example that Dewey used in that article was “Zöllner’s illusion” – an optical illusion displaying lines that appear to be convergent, yet are “truly” parallel.



Opponents of Dewey’s view might use this picture as an example of how describing something in terms of “experiencing as” does not do justice to the reality of the experienced object. To this Dewey responds,

That experience is that two lines with certain cross-hatchings are apprehended as convergent; only by taking that experience as real and as fully real, is there any basis for or way of going to an experienced knowledge that the lines are parallel. It is in the concrete thing *as experienced* that all the grounds and clues to its own intellectual or logical rectification are contained.¹⁰⁸

The last sentence of this passage reveals that Dewey agreed with James that the generalized conclusion of this postulate was that “[t]he directly apprehended universe needs... no extraneous transempirical connective support.”¹⁰⁹ Simply put, it need not appeal to anything beyond the range of experiential knowledge. However, the difference between his view and the one James upheld, is that Dewey meant experience to refer to the change that was a result of transactions between a living organism and its environment. Jim Garrison, for one, has emphasized this unique aspect of Dewey’s thought that bridges the gap between Peirce’s realism and James’ nominalism. In his words,

¹⁰⁸ MW 3:163

¹⁰⁹ *The Works of William James* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 17 vol., 1975) *The Meaning of Truth*, p. 7

For Dewey scientific inquiry (thinking), was a process engaged in by some natural existences, including human beings...As Dewey saw it, we are participants in an unfinished universe rather than spectators of a finished universe. That is why our action, our behaviors, our social constructions, deconstructions, and reconstructions have ontological significance.¹¹⁰

A primary concern for Dewey, then, was the tendency of philosophers of every stripe to break experience into two levels – the immediate experience of perception and the mediated experience of cognition. This concern could still be found in Dewey’s work twenty years later when he wrote, in the first chapter of his *Experience and Nature*, “When objects are isolated from the experience through which they are reached and in which they function, experience itself becomes reduced to the mere process of experiencing, and experiencing is therefore treated as if it were also complete in itself.”¹¹¹

The appearance of the Postulate paper laid the foundation for Dewey to reject the subjective, psychical view of experience and to develop a transactional view of experience that did not divide knower from known. On his mature view, experience is seen to operate in a sort of evolutionary fashion. Singular experiences are not had in the way that classical empiricism would suggest – *i.e.* as bundles of sensory input – but rather can be identified in the changed habits of the organism. Just as evolution is an ongoing process from which biological diversity emerges, so is experience an ongoing process from which behavioral diversity emerges. The avenues for success in each are innumerable, yet any success involves an increase in complexity. Thus, in Dewey’s thought human nature is seen as just an outgrowth of nature itself;

¹¹⁰ Garrison, Jim. “Realism, Deweyan Pragmatism, and Educational Research.” *Educational Researcher* 23 (Jan.-Feb. 1994): 5-14

¹¹¹ *EN*, LW 1:13

perception and cognition are only different in degree. In this way, reason is not something over and above nature, but is immersed within it. Reason is not native, it is achieved, and it is not always operative in human beings. In Dewey's words,

...reason is experimental intelligence, conceived after the pattern of science, and used in the creation of social arts; it has something to do. It liberates man from the bondage of the past, due to ignorance and accident hardened into custom. It projects a better future and assists man in its realization. And its operation is always subject to test in experience.¹¹²

This somewhat deflationary view of reason was advanced by many of the naturalists.¹¹³ However, Dewey came to it from a different direction. Instead of positing reason as the tenant of a reified mind, as naturalists like Santayana seemed to do, Dewey argued that the intellect was a function that emerged from the transaction of experiencing natural events (or "organisms") from within the context of other natural events surrounding them (or "environments") toward working out unstable situations – it was, in a word, instrumental.

Calling the intellect instrumental left Dewey, and pragmatism at large, open to charges of opportunism and relativism. This was particularly true after the second World War and the Holocaust, when instrumentalism was associated with fascist expediencies and largely seen as the enemy of reason, in the traditional sense. This was a line of criticism that is related to the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school, especially Horkheimer and Adorno.¹¹⁴ However, the criticism of pragmatism in their

¹¹² *RP*, MW 12:135

¹¹³ e.g. Santayana wrote in *Persons and Places* (MIT, 1986), "So I believe, compulsorily and satirically, in the existence of this absurd world; but as to the existence of a better world, or of hidden reason in this one, I am incredulous, or rather, I am critically sceptical; because it is not difficult to see the familiar motives that lead men to invent such myths."

¹¹⁴ Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (Continuum, 1976) & Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*. (Continuum, 1974)

work, and later in the work of Marcuse, was aimed largely at a straw man. Horkheimer and Adorno were mostly concerned with the shift from “magical culture” to “scientific culture” and the attendant reductionism that characterized the mechanistic thinking of the Industrial Revolution. But, for reasons already discussed in previous chapters, Dewey himself balked at reductionist models of the world and of socio-political matters. Dewey’s ideas were closer to Critical Theory than those in the Frankfurt school realized. When Marcuse later called Dewey’s work an example of “one-dimensional thought” he was parroting the kind of criticism that had first been leveled against Dewey by Russell and Santayana.¹¹⁵ Dewey tried repeatedly to defend his work from such caricatures, one example of which can be found in the 1932 re-issue of *Ethics*:

To due reflection, things sometimes regarded as “practical” are in truth highly impolitic and shortsighted. But the way to eliminate preference for narrow and shortsighted expediences is not to condemn the practical as low and mercenary in comparison to spiritual ideals, but to cultivate all possible opportunities for the actual enjoyment of the reflective values and to engage in the activity, the practice, which extends their scope.¹¹⁶

It is likely the persistence of these lines of criticism that later led Dewey to distance himself from the monikers pragmatism and instrumentalism. Of course, the Frankfurt schools’ suspicion of technology and the attendant transformation of Reason into the technical form of rationality which they saw as enslaving, presented its own internal difficulties for the New Left. The question regarding the domination of technology that these thinkers failed to address was: Whom or for what political

¹¹⁵ Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man*. (Routledge, 2002) p. 171 NOTE: Marcuse spent more time criticizing Dewey in his earlier work, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*, but the critique offered there was mostly a summary of Soviet criticisms of pragmatism and it is unclear with how much of that line of attack Marcuse actually agreed.

¹¹⁶ *Ethics*, 1932; LW 7:209

end does such domination serve? If one takes technology to be the villain, to be “the political power,” as Marcuse and the New Left did, then those who employ it are, in a sense, let off the hook in terms of moral responsibility.¹¹⁷

By calling the intellect instrumental, Dewey endorsed neither a relativistic thesis that suggests there are no real grounds by which to compare courses of action, nor an opportunism in which the satisfaction of immediate desires is the ultimate objective of rational thought. Instead, he sought to eradicate the association of reason with spiritual ideals, or supernatural ones, and put an evolutionary understanding of such mental faculties on the gold standard. If one accepts Dewey’s account, the classical question of “what separates us from the brutes” is turned on its ear – the answer is nothing more than a complexity which is the result of the contingencies of evolutionary process. As he would put it in *Experience and Nature*,

...thought, intellect, is not pure in man, but restricted by an animal organism that is but one part linked with other parts, of nature... Thought and reason are not specific powers. They consist of the procedures intentionally employed in the application to each other of the unsatisfactorily confused and indeterminate on one side and the regular and stable on the other.¹¹⁸

In short, reason is an adaptation to problematic situations which forms habits out of the plasticity of human capacities. Other philosophers went wrong, according to Dewey, precisely because they failed to realize that, “Man is a creature of habit, not of reason nor yet of instinct.”¹¹⁹ In this way, Dewey’s thought made no appeal to originative principles of intelligibility, nor did it hang on teleological notion of

¹¹⁷ I am deeply indebted to the late Willis Truitt, who knew Marcuse personally, for this insight. At the time of his passing, Truitt was compiling a manuscript aimed at postmodernism’s relation to pragmatism, Marxism, and fascism. It was my great privilege to have witnessed his lectures on these themes.

¹¹⁸ *EN*, LW 1:60-1

¹¹⁹ *HNC*, MW 14:88

intelligibility as a final end, but rather saw intelligibility as contextual, functional, or operational *within* nature and, by extension, experience.

Nature as the “Affair of Affairs”

In the spring of 1918 Dewey gave a series of lectures at Stanford University on a topic suggested to him by the R. F. West Memorial Foundation – Human Conduct and Destiny. However, in the three lectures he delivered Dewey made no mention of destiny, choosing instead to focus on the place of habit, impulse, and intelligence within human conduct. These essays were intended for publication upon Dewey’s return from a short trip to Japan the following year. However, as circumstance would have it, that trip ended up being extended by more than two years when Dewey was invited to visit China by his former Columbia student Hu Shih. As such, the Stanford lectures did not appear in print until 1922, under the title *Human Nature and Conduct*. This is important insofar as the published volume was a much larger project than the lectures as they had been delivered. Upon his return from the far-East Dewey decided to not only add an introductory and concluding chapter, but also to rewrite and expand “considerably” the three Stanford lectures. In the finished work Dewey took great steps toward showing that nature was best understood as a system of relations and that human nature, rather than being essential, was an emergent outgrowth of this system. Dewey believed that understanding the place of habits in the formation of intelligent conduct was the key to understanding nature itself. As he put it,

All that metaphysics has said about the nusus of Being to conserve its essence and all that a mythological psychology has said about a special instinct of self-preservation is a cover for the persistent self-assertion of habit. Habit is energy organized in certain channels. When interfered with, it swells as resentment and as an avenging force. To say that it will be obeyed, that custom makes law, that *nomos* is lord of all, is after all only to say that habit is habit.¹²⁰

Dewey had learned this from Peirce, who handed down two important theses to his student. The first was synechism, the idea that there are real continuities in nature – such as space and time – which cannot be fully understood in terms of constituent parts. Peirce believed that this was an essential heuristic hypothesis to all scientific progress. The second was tychism, which was the thesis that chance was a fundamental aspect of reality, and which Peirce believed directly followed from synechism. As he saw it, “our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy. Now the doctrine of continuity is that *all things* so swim in continua.”¹²¹ In other words, continuity implies fallibilism insofar as precision is impossible when measuring the values of continuous quantities and hence the laws of nature are probabilistic rather than absolute – *i.e.* they express the tendencies or *habits* of things. From this, Peirce proposed an evolutionary cosmology of which the upshot was: from irregularity, regularity emerges. This view, according to Peirce, could account for increasing complexity and diversity insofar as it always allowed for possible deviations and derivations from any established rule.

¹²⁰ HNC, MW 14:54

¹²¹ Peirce, C.S. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vols. I-VI*. ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935) 1:171 [Peirce’s emphasis]

In his later years, Peirce followed this line of thought to objective idealism. Toward the end of his life, he would write, “The one intelligible theory of the universe is that of objective idealism, that matter is effete mind, inveterate habits becoming physical laws.”¹²² While Dewey agreed that the growth and change of the natural realm was exemplified in the growth and change of human intellection, he took this connection to be a bio-social one. This is illustrated in the subtitle of his published Stanford lectures – “An Introduction to Social Psychology.” Years later, Dewey would try to bring Peirce’s idea closer to his own by teasing out the societal implications of Peircean semiotics:

For wherever there is generality, continuity, there is habit. And even a casual reader of Peirce should be aware that habit on his view is first a cosmological matter and then is physiological and biotic--in a definitely existential sense. It, habit, operates in and through the human organism, but that very fact is to him convincing evidence that the organism is an integrated part of the world in which habits form and operate. As to the “sociological” factor, it is easy to quote many passages from Peirce in which whatever is entitled to the names “logical” and “cognitive” is brought specifically and explicitly within the societal. So far is he from penning the sociological, along with the biological, within "phenomena that occur in the functioning of signs," that he sticks to the observed fact that language and linguistic signs are modes or forms of communication, and thus are intrinsically "social." In so many words he says “Logic is rooted in the social principle.”¹²³

Dewey, like Peirce, took Darwinian evolution philosophically, and as such believed that there can be neither absolute natural conditions nor absolute human responses to these conditions (or problematic situations) in which transactions take place. Both also saw the scientific method as an effective way of dealing with this continuous process of reconstruction. But, Dewey believed that there were political and aesthetic

¹²² Ibid. 6:25

¹²³ “Peirce’s Theory of Linguistic Signs, Thought, and Meaning.” LW 15:151

means of doing this as well. Of course, in an evolutionary cosmology, there are only temporary stabilities, not absolute ones. Dewey suggested that social institutions, and *ipso facto* culture, were the stable outcroppings of the co-adjustment between the habits of organisms and the habits of environments. On this view, culture is simply formalized experience and is contiguous with nature. As Dewey would write in *Experience and Nature*,

To insist that nature is an affair of beginnings is to assert that there is no one single and all-at-once beginning of everything. It is but another way of saying that nature is an affair *of* affairs, wherein each one, no matter how linked up it may be with others, has its *own* quality. It does not imply that every beginning marks an advance or improvement; as we sadly know accidents, diseases, wars, lies and errors, begin. Clearly the fact and idea of beginning is neutral, not eulogistic; temporal, not absolute.¹²⁴

When nature is seen as consisting of affairs instead of objects the picture of reality as a machine comprised of dead matter drops away and one is left questioning the Cartesian assumptions drawn from that picture. Though many American naturalists of the era rejected Cartesian substance ontology, what made Dewey unique among them was *how* he rejected it. As he put it,

...what we call matter is that character of natural *events* which is so tied up with changes that are sufficiently rapid to be perceptible as to give the latter a characteristic rhythmic order, the causal sequence. It is no cause or source of events or processes; no absolute monarch; no principle of explanation; no substance behind or underlying changes--save in that sense of substance in which a man well fortified with this world's goods, and hence able to maintain himself through vicissitudes of surroundings, is a man of substance. The name designates a character in operation, not an entity.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ *EN*, LW 1:83

¹²⁵ *EN*, LW 1:65 [emphasis added]

In Dewey's view, "Every existence is an event."¹²⁶ He based this position on the philosophical insights he had drawn from Peirce and Darwin. On the substance-oriented view, Dewey complained,

The conception of *εἶδος*, species, a fixed form and final cause, was the central principle of knowledge as well as of nature. Upon it rested the logic of science. Change as change is mere flux and lapse; it insults intelligence... Since, however, the scene of nature which directly confronts us is in change, nature as directly and practically experienced does not satisfy the conditions of knowledge. Human experience is in flux, and hence the instrumentalities of sense-perception and of inference based upon observation are condemned in advance. Science is compelled to aim at realities lying behind and beyond the processes of nature, and to carry on its search for these realities by means of rational forms transcending ordinary modes of perception and inference.¹²⁷

Dewey saw change as the occasion for intelligence, rather than an offense to it. As such, he believed the rift between sense perception and inference was an imaginary one that could be overcome by seeing how they are interdependent in practical life. Knowledge, on the traditional view, is either something found in the world or else it is in the mind. For Dewey, though, knowledge is the outcome of an inquiry wherein habits transform indeterminate situations into determinate ones. In other words, all knowledge – even that which has been traditionally termed “propositional” – is essentially a skill, one acquired through developing successful habits. Nature is wholly knowable through science only as long as science does not fall prey to the presuppositions of philosophers. As Dewey continued...

¹²⁶ *EN*, LW 1:63

¹²⁷ "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy." MW 4:6

There are, indeed, but two alternative courses. We must either find the appropriate objects and organs of knowledge in the mutual interactions of changing things; or else, to escape the infection of change, we *must* seek them in some transcendent and supernal region. The human mind, deliberately as it were, exhausted the logic of the changeless, the final and the transcendent, before it essayed adventure on the pathless wastes of generation and transformation.¹²⁸

Just as Darwin had shown that a species was not a static *εἶδος*, pre-ordained by some unmoved mover, Dewey sought to prove that what we take to be individual objects are actually confluences of significance and what we take to be an individual intelligence is merely a concrecence of habit – both cultural and experiential. In other words, experience is how we “in-habit” nature; nature is our “habit-at.”

Experience and Nature

Dewey meant for the 1925 publication of *Experience and Nature* to be the fullest expression of his “metaphysical” view that the relationship between nature and humanity “was the standing if not always the outstanding problem” of philosophy.¹²⁹ This, however, warrants a caveat, as it was, on the eve of his 90th birthday, that Dewey vowed never again to use the word ‘metaphysics’ with regard to his own position because of its association with the classical tradition. We may be better served, then, to look to the first paragraph of that text, which reads, “the philosophy here presented may be termed either empirical naturalism or naturalistic

¹²⁸ “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy.” MW 4:6

¹²⁹ *EN*, LW 1:VIII

empiricism, or, taking ‘experience’ in its usual signification, naturalistic humanism.”¹³⁰

That statement is one of the most controversial in Deweyan scholarship. Some have interpreted Dewey’s use of ‘empirical’ as revealing an underlying commitment to the British tradition tracing back to Mill and Locke. However, Dewey’s utilization of experience throughout the text reveals that he had something other than sensory impressions in mind for his philosophy. Many scholars, even those sympathetic to Dewey’s overall view, have bemoaned his choice of words. For instance, Richard Rorty’s reading dismisses Dewey’s positive account of experience, especially as it is found in *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Art As Experience* (1934), in favor of his “therapeutic” analysis of philosophy’s problems. As Rorty put it,

Throughout his life, [Dewey] wavered between a therapeutic stance toward philosophy and another, quite different, stance – one in which philosophy was to become “scientific” and “empirical” and to do something serious, systematic, important, and constructive. Dewey sometimes described philosophy as the criticism of culture, but he was never quite content to think of himself as a kibitzer or a therapist or an intellectual historian. *He wanted to have things both ways.*¹³¹

It is true that Dewey often spoke about philosophy in various senses. This led to a peculiar sort of ambiguity in *Experience and Nature*, particularly in the first chapter, “Experience and Philosophic Method.” But, it is precisely the centrality of experience – understood in the specialized sense that Dewey used it – to his project of reconstructing philosophy that is crucial to understanding his variety of

¹³⁰ Ibid. p. 10 Cf. Dewey’s correspondence with Corliss Lamont in September of 1940, where he wrote, “I have come to think of my own position as cultural or humanistic Naturalism – Naturalism, properly interpreted seems to me a more adequate term than Humanism.” 1940.09.06 in *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 3.* (SIU Press, 2005)

¹³¹ Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism.* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982) p. 73 [emphasis added]

naturalism. In Dewey's words, "the assumption that nature in itself is all of the same kind, all distinct, explicit and evident, having no hidden possibilities, no novelties or obscurities, is possible only on the basis of a philosophy which at some point draws an arbitrary line between nature and experience."

Unfortunately, many have failed to grasp the sense in which Dewey employed the term experience. This misunderstanding hounded Dewey throughout his life. He was never fully satisfied with the way he had conveyed his ideas in that all-important first chapter and re-drafted it on three separate occasions (only one of which was published during his lifetime). Towards the end of his career he had apparently given up trying to save his notion of experience from the assault of his critics when he wrote, in 1949,

Were I to write (or rewrite) *Experience and Nature* today I would entitle the book *Culture and Nature*...because of my growing realization that the historical obstacles which prevented understanding of my use of "experience" are, for all practical purposes, insurmountable.¹³²

The central aim of the text was to map out the "generic traits" of the connection between experience and nature. Doing this, Dewey believed, would render a coherent account of nature without spinning off into metaphysical abstractions. This is precisely where Dewey has most often been misunderstood. In mapping out the generic traits of experience, Dewey has been accused of either 1) hypostatizing perception, or 2) idealizing ontology. Those who read Dewey in light of the former (which includes many of his most vocal advocates) typically regard his

¹³² LW 1:361

position as a “metaphysics of experience.”¹³³ This type of reading was first put forward by George Santayana who charged Dewey with being a “half-hearted” naturalist because of his alleged enchantment with the “foreground of experience” at the cost of the “background of nature.”¹³⁴ Stated differently, Santayana believed that Dewey fell into a naïve-realism, wherein memories, reflection, and abstract reason were trampled under a tyranny of the present.

Those who read Dewey in light of the latter, as Bertrand Russell did, claim that Dewey had “no place for quales, primitives, or objects that lie outside of an experience. Everything that is must be said to already be a part of an experience.”¹³⁵ Furthermore, Russell was concerned that Dewey’s pragmatic and instrumentalist tendencies revealed a pernicious relativism that hinged on subjectivity. Russell was a hard-nosed realist, in the metaphysical sense. Though he never expressed it in plain terms, his worry about Dewey’s philosophy centered on his suspicion that it led directly to a full-blown idealism that undermined the analytical status of rational principles and logic.¹³⁶ In his words, “The pragmatist’s position, if I am not mistaken, is a product of limited skepticism supplemented by a surprising dogmatism... in spite of his skepticism, he is confident that he can know whether the

¹³³ The phrase “metaphysics of experience” was used only once by Dewey, and not in reference to his own view. However, a number of Dewey scholars have adopted it to characterize the naturalism Dewey advocated. Most notably among these are Richard Bernstein, John McDermott and Richard Rorty.

¹³⁴ Santayana, George. “Dewey’s Naturalistic Metaphysics.” *The Journal of Philosophy*. (Vol. XXII, No. 25, 1925)

¹³⁵ Johnston, James Scott. *Inquiry and Education: John Dewey and the Quest for Democracy*. (SUNY, 2006) p. 66

¹³⁶ Cf. Johnston, Chpt. 3 (passim)

consequences of a belief are such to satisfy desire.”¹³⁷ The criticisms that Russell and Santayana leveled against Dewey helped define the philosophical landscape in the English-speaking world for nearly half a century and made Dewey a more careful thinker. They certainly warrant a fuller treatment than is possible here. However, before we turn our attention to how Dewey responded to these lines of criticism, a closer look at the “generic traits” Dewey posited would be appropriate.

One thing that might strike the casual observer as odd is that Dewey never offered an exhaustive list of the generic traits. In fact, he would sometimes seemingly create new ones, ad hoc, in order to make a point in various lines of argumentation. However, this curiosity may be explained when considered in light of the goal Dewey had in mind in introducing these traits. To attempt a comprehensive list would undermine the naturalistic conception of experience that Dewey hoped to put on the gold standard. After all, if experience is a natural affair, then it *must* adapt to changes in the environment, which would amount to most of its generic traits being wholly contingent. With this in mind, I will briefly list only those traits that Dewey deemed most central to his notion of experience.

As we have already seen, the two most important traits of experience and nature for Dewey would be change and continuity. He characterized the first as being “eventful,” “precarious,” and “hazardous.” I have chosen “*change*” as a catchall for these descriptions. This, of course, calls to mind the doctrine of universal flux attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. However, it is important to

¹³⁷ Russell, Bertrand. “Dewey’s New Logic” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey: The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 1*. Schilpp, Paul & Hahn, Lewis. (eds.) (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 3rd edition, 1989)

note that the mantra “One cannot step into the same river twice,” so often associated with this doctrine, only partially represents the Heraclitean view. This version of the statement lends itself to the interpretation that all things are changing at all times and that even those things which appear stable are merely in a slower process of flux, one that escapes observation. But, on such an interpretation, since a river is constantly changing, one could not even step into the same river *once*. As recent scholarship has suggested, what Heraclitus may have meant when he wrote, “On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow,” (Diels-Kranz B22) was that although different water flows through a river, the river itself stays the same. And, more importantly, it is only by virtue of the flow that there is even a river at all instead of a pond or lake.¹³⁸ There is a governing form, in this case that of a river, that bounds the moments of change and connects them. When understood this way, the doctrine of universal flux jibes well with Dewey’s notion of change within experience and nature. It is only by virtue of the hazards and uncertainties that colorize life, that an organism has any experience at all. As Dewey put it,

The doctrine of [Heraclitus], while it held that all things flow like a river and that change is so continuous that a man cannot step into the same river even once (since it changes as he steps), nevertheless also held that there is a fixed order which controls the ebb and flow of the universal tide.¹³⁹

This “fixed order” is what led Dewey to posit *continuity* as a generic trait of experience and nature. On such a view, nature is not at all atomistic, but rather is

¹³⁸ cf. Wheelwright, Philip Ellis. *Heraclitus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968. pp. 29-36. and "Heraclitus," by Daniel W. Graham, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/, February 4th 2005.

¹³⁹ LW 14:101

“pregnant with connections,” *i.e.* it continuously flows from one part to the next – it is not simply a succession of events. This continuity, or “stability,” is of vital importance to experience, since without it the moments of change would spill over into chaos. As Dewey wrote in *Art as Experience*, “To overpass the limits that are set is destruction and death... In a world of mere flux, change would not be cumulative; it would not move toward a close. Stability and rest would have no being.”¹⁴⁰ But, this order is not fixed in the sense of being static; it is dynamic and rhythmic and is “fixed” in the sense of being directed and connective. Again, Dewey wrote, “All interactions that effect stability and order in the whirling flux of change are rhythms. There is ebb and flow, systole and diastole: ordered change. The latter moves within bounds.”¹⁴¹ Elsewhere, Dewey likened the notion of continuity to a variable that remains constant in a mathematical equation, and as it is in math, he claimed, “so it is in nature and life.”¹⁴²

However, it is important to note that the movement “toward a close” to which Dewey alluded does not signify a move toward some ultimate end. Rather, for Dewey, it is a move toward an intermediate “end-in-view” which is itself, along with the means to attain it, still a part of nature. In this way, according to Dewey, experience is also *historical*, *i.e.* it has narrative characteristics which seem to raise particular events above the otherwise continuous flow of moments. An averted catastrophe, a meal enjoyed in Paris, and a storm passed through on an oversea voyage all exemplify the type of event which Dewey called, “*an* experience.” Such an event is historical insofar as, “the points of its incidence shift in successive

¹⁴⁰ *AE*, LW 10:22

¹⁴¹ *AE*, LW 10:22

¹⁴² *EN*, LW 1:64

observations of it... It carries on and is, therefore, instrumental as well as final.”¹⁴³

Each of these events has a unique quality that defies communication, some attribute that is wholly immediate and therefore not strictly an object of knowledge. Compare this with the postulate of immediate empiricism that “things are what they are experienced as” and it becomes clear that these qualities are not at all subjective, they belong, as Dewey asserted, both to the event experienced and the one experiencing them. Dewey claimed that,

In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogenous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something.¹⁴⁴

Accordingly, nature consists of innumerably intertwined beginnings and endings in which these types of affairs may arise. Selective interest allows us to pick out which moments we will bundle up together out of the continuous flow to call *an* experience. When this happens, meaning is imparted to the event and it becomes *communicative* insofar as it directs us back to something beyond itself, namely the background of surrounding moments. Thus, another generic trait of experience is communication, or expression. The immediacy of the event is unified and heightened by the stable order of expression. Dewey tells us this is life in its most robust form.

Experience in the degree in which it *is* experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender

¹⁴³ *AE*, LW 10:144

¹⁴⁴ *AE*, LW 10:43

to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing.¹⁴⁵

Dewey refers to these heightened moments as “consummatory experiences.” But, the ambiguous verb “to consummate” and its noun derivative “consummation” can be misleading. On one hand, these can mean closure in the sense of completion or culmination as in “the consummation of marriage.” On the other hand, the verb can become an adjective that refers to something that is complete in the sense of needing no qualification, as in (pejoratively) “the consummate fool,” and it is this latter meaning, *i.e.* “without qualification,” that Dewey wished to evoke. Elsewhere, Dewey referred to this type of experience as a “religious one” but, as he would go on to say, a religious experience need not be tied to any god-conception at all. He sought to redefine the term “god” to denote “a unifying of the ideal and the actual” in human development, which he argued should not be imbued with any of the traditional, supernatural qualities.¹⁴⁶ A consummatory experience, on his view, is a grouping of moments that stand out from the rest of experience, like a great meal, a terrible storm, or a beautiful sculpture. Dewey called such a grouping “*an* experience” because it needs no further qualification. It stands alone as a representative of the rest of the moments surrounding it. These consummatory experiences serve as exemplars that structure our experience into manageable components, and since reflecting upon *every* moment in experience would prove impossible, we could not reflect upon anything at all without this ordered structure. That is not to say, however, that once an experience reaches consummation, that it

¹⁴⁵ *AE*, LW 10:25

¹⁴⁶ *cf. ACF*, LW 9

has come to an end, but rather, as Dewey claimed, “The time of consummation is also one of beginning anew.”¹⁴⁷ Consummatory experiences, then, are pauses, not breaks, in the continuity of nature. This is how a rhythmic order is established.

In rhythmic ordering, every close and pause, like the rest in music, connects as well as delimits and individualizes. A pause in music is not a blank, but is a rhythmic silence that punctuates what is done while at the same time it conveys an impulsion forward, instead of arresting at the point which it defines.¹⁴⁸

But, this rhythmic order is not merely established temporally, “The proportionate interception of changes establishes an order that is spatially... patterned,” as well.¹⁴⁹

If musical rhythm is the temporal analog to consummatory experience, then the spatial analog might be the rhythm of ocean waves. Each trough delimits each wave crest, but to say that waves are separated by troughs would belie fluid dynamics. On the micro level, water molecules are all connected in a processional, circular movement, on the macro level, troughs flow into waves and call attention to them, giving significance to each. If we understand this connection and are able to internalize it, we will operate with our surroundings more harmoniously. As Dewey put it,

Contrast of lack and fullness, of struggle and achievement, of adjustment after consummated irregularity, form the drama in which action, feeling, and meaning are one... Inner harmony is made only when, by some means, terms are made with the environment.¹⁵⁰

Because these consummatory experiences are dynamic, *i.e.* they move through experience with us, they can always be re-evaluated. The consummatory phase,

¹⁴⁷ *AE*, LW 10:23

¹⁴⁸ *AE*, LW 10:177

¹⁴⁹ *AE*, LW 10:22

¹⁵⁰ *AE*, LW 10:22-3

therefore, is an ongoing process, it has duration and recurrence, and it can rise and subside in relation to the flow of experience. This feature of experience, that it can be consummatory, illustrates the formation of a context. As Dewey wrote in “Context and Thought,” an essay that sits in his career roughly halfway between *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*, “Context includes at least those matters which for brevity I shall call background and selective interest... *Background is both temporal and spatial.*”¹⁵¹ In this way, Dewey believed that nature was a general background that had increasingly specific levels of emergent context.

This was one of the biggest bones of contention between Dewey and other thinkers of his day. It led Santayana, in a review of *Experience and Nature*, to call Dewey’s position “half-hearted naturalism.” He believed that anyone claiming to be a naturalist could make no appeal to what he called “foregrounds,” i.e. “positions relative to some point of view,” because nature had no point of view – it simply was. This prompted Santayana to make two related charges against Dewey’s work. The first was that Dewey’s account of experience was tantamount to a tyranny of the present that reflected an American affinity for “philosophy of enterprise.”¹⁵² On Dewey’s view, he complained,

Past experience is accordingly real by virtue of its vital inclusion in some present undertaking, and yesterday is really but a term perhaps useful in the preparation of tomorrow. The past, too, must work if it would live, and we may speak without irony of the ‘futurity of yesterday’ insofar as yesterday has any pragmatic reality.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ LW 6:11 [emphasis added]

¹⁵² Santayana, George. “Dewey’s Naturalistic Metaphysics.” *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. XXII No. 25 p. 676

¹⁵³ Ibid 686

This tendency, Santayana claimed, “flows from [Dewey’s] choice of ‘events’ to be his metaphysical elements.”¹⁵⁴ Santayana was a staunch advocate of essences in nature. He argued, contra Dewey, “If events are to be successive, and fragments of the flux of nature, they must be changes in an abiding medium. In other words, an event in its natural being, is a mode of substance, the transit of an essence.”¹⁵⁵ As such, Santayana held on to the presuppositions of a primordial, ordered beginning that gave rise to the very Cartesian ontology he deemed so dubious.¹⁵⁶ Dewey’s event ontology, on the other hand, not only rejected the conception of Cartesian substance, but also the Greek notion that there are originative principles of intelligibility and organization on which such a conception depended – from which ideas such as *νοῦς* and *λόγος* were derived – and thus avoided the need for the “language of transcendence” to which Santayana’s philosophy often fell prey. Simply put, Santayana believed intelligibility was essential, categorical, or prior to experience; Dewey saw it as emergent *within* experience. By Santayana’s account, experience is passive and consciousness is derivative; by Dewey’s, experience is spontaneous and consciousness is emergent.¹⁵⁷ In response to Santayana’s review, Dewey dubbed Santayana’s position “broken-backed,” because he believed it indirectly re-instated the various dualisms it sought to destroy.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 677

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 682

¹⁵⁶ Santayana’s 4 Realms of Being reveal an affinity for Greek conceptions of a primal world order. Cf. *The Realms of Being* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1942)

¹⁵⁷ The difference between derivative and emergent consciousness boils down to the issue of causal efficacy, where the former is seen as having none.

¹⁵⁸ Dewey, John. “Half-Hearted Naturalism.” – *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. 37 volumes. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987)

On the other hand, Dewey never quite understood what Russell found so objectionable about his position and made repeated attempts to show that his view of logic was not antithetical to Russell's. Russell, like Santayana, accused Dewey of underwriting American predispositions to commercialism. Dewey responded to Russell's claim in a 1922 essay called "Pragmatic America,"

It is of that order of interpretation which would say that English neo-realism is a reflection of the aristocratic snobbery of the English; the tendency of French thought to dualism an expression of an alleged Gallic disposition to keep a mistress in addition to a wife; and the idealism of Germany a manifestation of an ability to elevate beer and sausage into a higher synthesis with the spiritual values of Beethoven and Wagner.¹⁵⁹

The most substantive of Russell's criticisms, and the one that Dewey seemed to take most seriously, was the charge that the latter's appeal to situations resulted in a Hegelian idealism. Dewey responded to this charge as follows,

Mr. Russell, however, finds that what I write about situations as the units of experience springs from and leads directly to the Hegelian variety of absolutism. One indirect reason he presents for this belief, when it is put in the form of an argument, runs somewhat as follows: Mr. Dewey admits not only that he was once an Hegelian but that Hegel left a permanent deposit in his thought; Hegel was a thoroughgoing holist; therefore, Dewey uses "situation" in a holistic sense. I leave it to Mr. Russell as a formal logician to decide what he would say to anyone who presented this argument in any other context.¹⁶⁰

Dewey went on to say in that essay that, while he does hold that the continuity of life-process should be taken holistically, he does not lay claim to the idea that there is nothing outside of experience. On his view, situations are unique and variegated,

¹⁵⁹ MW 13:307

¹⁶⁰ "Experience, Knowledge and Value: A Rejoinder." LW 14:29

but whatever their features, they are the locus of experience and are thus changed by that experience.

The Live Creature

Where Santayana (and Russell), because of ontological commitments to a primal order, needed a split-level notion of experience where reason could mediate dumb sensory inputs, Dewey sidestepped this proto-dualism by seeing ontology and experience as equi-primordial. The generic traits of an experience are not foundations or primitives on Dewey's view, but rather arise from the commerce of organisms and environments; *i.e.* they arise from the "situation." As Dewey would put it in his response to Santayana,

Experience, thus conceived, constitutes, in Santayana's happy phrase, a foreground. But it is the foreground *of nature*... Apparently he conceives of the foreground as lying between human intuition and experience and the background; to me human experiencing is the foreground, nature's own. He also may think that the background alone is nature to the exclusion of the foreground; I am not sure. But I am sure that the foreground is itself a portion of nature, an integral portion... So I repeat that while "consciousness" is foreground in a preeminent sense, experience is much more than consciousness and reaches down into the background as that reaches up into experience.¹⁶¹

This view of experience as a foreground *of nature* can be summed up in Dewey's phrase – "the live creature" – which he made use of in many of his writings. For Dewey, the live creature was a designation for organisms that could emphasize the relational link to an enviroing bio-social context while at the same time account for cognition. Again, in response to Santayana, Dewey explained this connection thusly,

¹⁶¹ Dewey, John. "Half-Hearted Naturalism" – *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. 37 volumes. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987) LW 3:76-8

But since I find in human life, from its biological roots to its ideal flowers and fruits, things both individual and associational – each word being adjectival – I hold that nature has both an irreducible brute unique “itselfness” in everything which exists and also a connection of each thing (which is just what *it* is) with other things such that without them it "can neither be nor be conceived." And as far as I can follow the findings of physics, that conclusion is confirmed by the results of the examination of physical existence itself. Since experience is both individualized and associational and since experience is continuous with nature as background, as a naturalist I find nature is also both. In citing Mr. Santayana's denial that nature has here, now, and perspective, I found myself in stating my own view compelled to use the plural form: heres, nows, perspectives. I would not draw an inference from the mere use of a word, but Santayana's use of the singular form is suggestive that he thinks experience is something sole and private, and so thinking attributes a similar view to others who use the term. It *is* absurd to confer upon nature a single here, now, and perspective, and if that were the only alternative, I should agree with Mr. Santayana in his denial. But there are an indefinite multitude of heres, nows, and perspectives.¹⁶²

The “multitude of heres, nows, and perspectives” Dewey described is the philosophical offspring of a Darwinian insight regarding co-evolution which tells us consciousness is nothing special. It is merely one evolutionary path among many. Various species of plants and insects have co-adapted a complex bio-chemical relationship to maintain their niches. It would be an intellectual conceit to insist that human understanding is somehow off-limits to such a relationship. Stated differently, our preference for roses says as much or more about that species as it does our own. Dewey’s concept of the live-creature does not view consciousness as the pinnacle of evolutionary achievement, and thus relegates anthropocentric perspectives back among the ranks of nature. It leads us to see things from the rose’s point of view. It leads us to understand that we are what we are by virtue of that rose.

¹⁶² Ibid. p. 80

This is a position which might be called biocentrism in contemporary discourse, and is a cornerstone of theories such as deep-ecology, land-ethic, and earth jurisprudence. As the founder of deep-ecology, Arne Næss, described it as the “rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour [sic.] of the *relational, total-field image*. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations.”¹⁶³ This is the sentiment Dewey hoped to capture by dropping the concept of man and replacing with the live creature. Through such a conception, experience becomes a singular, holistic affair precisely “because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very *process* of living.”¹⁶⁴ J. E. Tiles sums up Dewey’s view as a sort of “aesthetic ecology,” wherein the live creature and its environment “metabolize” each other through a type of continuity that is “never cut off from the human being’s moorings in flesh and nature.”¹⁶⁵ As Dewey would tell us, the outcome of this relationship is a type of harmony, not static or mechanical, but instead a process of balance and counterbalance measured through overcoming resistance.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Næss, Arne. “The Shallow and the Deep, Ecological Movements. A List on Contrasts.” *Inquire* 16 (Spring 1973) [original emphasis]

¹⁶⁴ *AE*, LW 10:42 [emphasis added]

¹⁶⁵ Tiles, J.E. *John Dewey: Critical Assessments*. (Taylor and Francis, 1992) p. 239

¹⁶⁶ cf. *AE*, LW 10:22

Chapter Four: Zhuangzi's Naturalism – The Crooked Tree

Whoever knows the patterns of nature, and also knows the patterns of humans, is fulfilled indeed. [Zhuangzi¹⁶⁷]

The Background of Chinese Philosophy

It is traditionally held that philosophy developed in China during the Zhou Dynasty, which began in 1111 BCE with the overthrow of the Shang Dynasty. The Zhou period marked an advance in Chinese culture insofar as it witnessed the rise of written record-keeping and a political system built around feudal farming. The latter especially helped shape the way the Chinese would come to philosophize. As Feng Youlan has put it,

To the ancient Chinese *their land was their world*. There are two expressions in the Chinese language which can both be translated as the world. One is “all beneath the sky” [天下] and the other is “all within the four seas.” [四海] To the people of a maritime country such as the Greeks, it would be inconceivable that expressions such as these could be synonymous.¹⁶⁸

Zhou feudalism differed from western serfdom in that it was based on a land grant system, or *fēngjiàn* [封建]. Under the *fēngjiàn*, a landlord would allot a small plot of land to a single family in exchange for their labor on a community field. The most common arrangement in this system was the well-field, or *jǐngtián* [井田].¹⁶⁹ In this arrangement, an area of land (usually equivalent to 1000 square paces) would be

¹⁶⁷ This is the opening line of “*Dà Zōng Shī*,” the sixth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. (My translation, using “Nature” for 天 [sky, heavens, nature] and “pattern” for 所為 [that which does, governs, acts].)

¹⁶⁸ Feng Youlan. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. (Free Press, 1976) p. 16 [emphasis added]

¹⁶⁹ cf. Joseph Needham, Ping-Yü Ho, Ling Wang. *Science and Civilisation in China: Apparatus, Theories and Gifts*. (Cambridge University Press, 1980) §F-5

divided into nine equal sections among eight families. From a bird's eye view, this arrangement would resemble the Chinese character for well [井], or a modern tic-tac-toe board – and is how it earned its name. The central “square” of the well-field would be worked by all of the families together and its yield would belong solely to the landlord. In a stable, well-fortified state, one family could work a single farm for many generations. This lent a strong sense of connection with the land among the early Chinese. It also gave rise to a leisure class of landowners who had time to devote to study. Of the four traditional classes in Chinese society (scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants), the two most revered were scholars and farmers, as it was these classes that dealt with “the root” of society – the land – while the other classes were concerned with “the branches” of commerce.

As such, the Zhou Chinese held an organic view of the universe, but one that differed from that of the Greeks because it did not hang on a primordial conception of Being. Instead, they viewed Being [*yǒu* 有] as subordinate to non-Being [*wú* 無]: “The myriad things in the world are born from Being, and Being from non-Being.”¹⁷⁰ But, as Feng Youlan explained, the relationship of *wú* and *yǒu* “has nothing to do with time and actuality. For in time and actuality, there is no Being; there are only beings.”¹⁷¹ Simply put, the Chinese notion of Being was logical rather than cosmological, and was meant to show that existence itself is a broader notion than an individual existence, and non-existence is broader than existence. For them, it would be logically impossible to have something without nothing. Where the Greeks witnessed quick and violent changes in their maritime environment, the

¹⁷⁰ Laozi *Daodejing*. Chapter 40 [my translation]

¹⁷¹ Feng, p. 96

Chinese witnessed change on a much slower, geological scale; this is perhaps why the Greeks sought ontological stability while the Chinese looked for more holistic answers.

Several pre-philosophical notions grew out of this agrarian world-view that would become mainstays of Chinese culture. The first of these was the idea of *tiān mìng* [天命], a principle of ruling legitimacy invoked by the early Zhou leaders to justify the overthrow of their Shang predecessors. While this principle is often translated as “The Mandate of Heaven,” it should not be equated with the western notion of the divine right of kings. *Tiān mìng* was not a birthright, but instead a moral currency built up through wise leadership, which for the Chinese meant acting in accordance with a natural destiny. The Shang, according to the Zhou proponents of *tiān mìng*, had worked against nature and had thus lost their right to rule – which may have been evidenced by natural or political calamities. The other important idea, *yīnyáng* [陰陽], was an outgrowth of Shang divination practices. These concepts, which originally referred to sunshine and shadow, came to represent feminine and masculine respectively and are the primary principles of polarity in Chinese ontology. They are stand-ins for every binary relation and connote a dynamic, holistic unity of opposites rather than sharp, static duality.

Because of this, a dialectical approach proliferated early Chinese philosophy from its outset. One of the first things the new student of Chinese thought learns is that it is less historically stratified than its western counterpart. Together, the “Spring and Autumn” (722-481 BCE) and “Warring States” (480-221 BCE) periods of the Zhou comprise the philosophical era known to Chinese scholars as *zhū zǐ bǎi jiā* (the

Hundred Schools of Thought), due to the great number of ideas that developed during those years. However, the Chinese term *jiā* [家] does not imply the same intellectual atomism that the phrase “school of thought” connotes in the West, but rather implies a specialization in one aspect of a whole. This presupposition has led to an amalgamation of doctrines in China, with older ideas often absorbing newer ones. Perhaps the oldest, and certainly the most dominant school in Chinese thought is Confucianism. In fact, many scholars accept the birth of Confucius (ca. 551 B.C.E.) as the birth of Chinese philosophy itself. Of the four major “schools” that comprise the majority of traditional Chinese thought, the ideas of Confucius have, with very few exceptions, been the main philosophical backdrop since their inception. This is clearly seen in the name given to Confucian thought by the Chinese – *rújiā* [儒家] – which literally means scholasticism.

Of the other three, the naturalistic/mystical doctrine of Daoism – or *dàojiā* [道家] – would be the second most important. Although Daoism was originally born from opposition to Confucianism, the two were often married in various degrees by later scholars. The remaining two major schools of thought are Moism, or *mòjiā* [墨家], named for the thinker Mozi, and Legalism, or *fǎjiā* [法家], of which the most prominent thinker was probably Hanfeizi. These doctrines, for the most part, rounded out Chinese thought by taking up positions that Confucianism and Daoism had not touched upon, and I mention them here solely to demonstrate the traditional Chinese view that philosophical diversity is beneficial to the state. This conciliatory spirit was again evidenced by the arrival of Buddhism from India in the 4th century C.E. The Chinese accepted the Indian import and added it to their philosophical

canon. This was especially true of Daoism, which, when combined with the tenets of Buddhism, produced *chán* [禪], the brand of Buddhism that was exported to Japan and is now known as Zen.¹⁷²

Philosophical Daoism

While Confucius is commonly considered to be the most influential figure in Chinese society and thought, and was a humanist *par excellence*, the widespread appeal of Daoism, which placed an emphasis on harmonizing with nature, was just as important to Chinese culture. As Confucianism was the school adopted by the Chinese elite, Daoism was the philosophy of the people. This calls to attention the need for an important distinction between philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism. The latter, which the Chinese call *dàojiào* [道教], was the byproduct of a combination of philosophical daoism with various local superstitions and folklore. The conflation of philosophical daoism with religious Daoism has been one of the most egregious mistakes in western scholarship and has only very recently begun to be rectified.

The two main tracts of philosophical Daoism are the *Dàodéjīng* [道德經] and the *Nánhuá Zhēnjīng* [南華真經].¹⁷³ According to legend, the first of these – whose title could be translated as “The Classic of Way and Virtue” – was penned by an imperial record-keeper by the name of *Lao Dan* when he was asked to put his ideas on paper by a border official in exchange for passage. Whether there actually was an historical figure by that name is shrouded in uncertainty, nevertheless, *Laozi* (or,

¹⁷² For a more detailed account of the development of the schools, see Feng Youlan’s third chapter.

¹⁷³ These texts are often called by the name of their purported author. I will follow this custom.

Master Lao, as he is now known) has become the *de facto* father of philosophical Daoism. His work was a collection of 81 chapters in verse form and is now considered the most important book in the daoist canon. The main topics of the text are the characteristics of *dào* [道], or “way,” and how these can be applied in moral life to attain “virtue” *i.e. dé* [德].¹⁷⁴ Commentators have disagreed about which of these two components is the main focus of the text. Those who give primacy to the former, typically interpret the *Dàodéjīng* as a mystical document, whereas their opponents usually view it as a moral treatise. The origin of the second work, whose title might be translated as “True Classic of Southern Flowering,” is only slightly less mysterious. The reputed author was a hermit by the name of *Zhuang Zhou* (referred now to as *Zhuangzi*, or Master Zhuang). While such a person almost certainly existed, it is unlikely that he penned all thirty-three chapters of the text that now bears his name. It is fairly well established that the first seven chapters (Inner Chapters) are attributable to him, but beyond that scholars are at odds. Attributing even these first chapters to Master Zhuang is not a certainty, but seems to be the growing consensus. Nevertheless, as Victor Mair has pointed out, the remaining chapters (Outer and Miscellaneous) were almost undoubtedly written by later daoist scholars of various sects.¹⁷⁵

Competing theories surround the dating of the works of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. On the one hand is the traditional account that the *Dàodéjīng* is the older of the two texts. On the other is recent scholarship that contends this order should be reversed.

¹⁷⁴ As will be seen below, these two key terms cannot be easily rendered into English without some loss of information.

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Mair, Victor. *Wandering on the Way: Early Daoist Tales and Parable of Chuang Tzu*. (University of Hawaii Press, 1998)

An example of the former can be found in *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy* (1963) where Wing-Tsit Chan reiterated the traditional view of *Laozi* as an older contemporary of Confucius, roughly placing him in the latter part of the sixth-century BCE. One example of the latter can be found in Mair's introduction to his translation of *Zhuangzi* where he claims that the Inner Chapters were probably composed in the latter half of the fourth-century BCE, and the *Laozi* approximately 100 years later during with the rise of religious Daoism. Mair cites several reasons for this dating. First, he argues that there is no record of a book by "*Laozi*", a book of 5000 characters, or a "*Dàodéjīng*" to be found in the earliest catalogs of Chinese books from the Qin period (221-206 BCE). This is a controversial claim since the *Zhuangzi* seems to quote (or at least paraphrase) the *Dàodéjīng* in many places, although most often inexactly. Mair believes that the explanation for this is that the *Dàodéjīng* was the oral work of sages passed down from the Warring States period. In fact, the name "*Laozi*" is roughly translatable to "old master," which Mair embraces as support for his claim. Another basis for believing Mair's dating of the text would be its length (as the *Laozi* is also known as the 5000-character classic). Mair argues that a relatively low and round number like this points to the oral history of the work, since a shorter and precise number of words would be more conducive to memorization. Moreover, Mair points to the literary nature of the text – poetic, with various tones – as further evidence that the work was passed down from the sayings of many sages. While most western scholars tend toward this alternative view, contemporary Chinese writers have mostly rejected it, stating that it cannot be considered seriously because it is too subjective. Mair is confident, though, that the

Zhuangzi was at least partially composed in the late fourth century BCE and did not appear in its present form (33 chapters) until the end of the second century BCE. Based on a short excerpt from Sima Qian's historical work, *The Grand Scribe's Records* (ca. 104 BCE), Mair believes that Master Zhuang lived from 369 to 286 BCE. Wing-Tsit Chan placed Master Zhuang as living between 399 and 295 BCE, a date that could still support Mair's view. One thing *is* clear: the ancient Chinese did not write treatises intended to be the final word on a topic, neither did they feel compelled to aim at such absolutes. For them, great literary works were "living documents" of wisdom gleaned over many years and transcribed by many hands. We need not be too concerned regarding these discrepancies, since they have little philosophical bearing on the text as it has been received. As the noted twentieth-century sinologist Angus Charles Graham has noted, the *Zhuangzi* disclosed ideas that had been circulating in Chinese philosophical discourse for quite some time – regardless of whether they came from, or gave rise to, the figure known as Master Lao and the *Dàodéjīng*.¹⁷⁶

The *Zhuangzi* is vital to a philosophical study of Daoism. One reason for this is its overt concern with the universe and what can be known about it. Where the *Laozi* offers an orphic praxiology within its verses, the *Zhuangzi* focuses on the ontological and epistemological aspects of Daoism more fully. The author(s) of the *Zhuangzi* were first and foremost concerned with questions like, "Does heaven revolve? Does earth stand still? Do the sun and moon jockey for position? Who controls all of

¹⁷⁶ cf. Graham, Angus. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Open Court, 1989)

this?”¹⁷⁷ The *Zhuangzi* attempts an in depth description of human life in relation to the universe. It concisely articulates the reverence that Daoism places on harmonizing with nature. This holistic theme is also seen in the *Laozi*, albeit in a more terse and ambiguous tone. For example, a description of *dào* in the fourteenth chapter of the *Dàodéjīng* reads,

Look, it cannot be seen – it is beyond form.
Listen, it cannot be heard – it is beyond sound.
Grasp, it cannot be held – it is intangible.
These three are indefinable;
Therefore they are joined in one.¹⁷⁸

Although the *Laozi* holds that *dào* is ineffable, and often avoids mentioning it directly, the *Zhuangzi* alludes to its qualities in a more direct manner. For example,

So [the person of far reaching vision] has no use [for categories],
but relegates all to the constant. The constant is the useful; the
useful is the passable; the passable is the successful; and with
success, all is accomplished. She relies upon this alone, relies upon
it and does not know she is doing so. This is called the Way.¹⁷⁹

One need not accept this passages as the only instance of defining *dào* within the *Zhuangzi*. Abundant with analogies and extended metaphors, it describes the *dào* on the grandest of scales, “above the Zenith,” and the smallest, “It is in excrement and urine.” That is not to say that the *Zhuangzi* does not contain its own ambiguities, which are instrumental in daoist teaching. The major difference between the *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi* is that the latter contains more prescriptive, normative elements. As the sixty-sixth chapter states, “If the sage would guide the people, he

¹⁷⁷ Mair, p. 130-131

¹⁷⁸ Translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. *Tao Te Ching, 25th Anniversary Edition*. (Vintage, 1997) Chap. 14.

¹⁷⁹ Watson, Burton. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. (Columbia, 1968) p. 81

must serve with humility. If he would lead them, he must follow behind.”¹⁸⁰ Most of the chapters in the Laozi combine metaphysical and moral philosophy in such a manner as to direct the actions of a leader. This is where the Zhuangzi is unique. It advocates staying out of affairs of state. In fact, a traditional story told of Master Zhuang recounts what he said when offered an advisory position in the court of Qu. He stated that he would rather be a pig in the mud than a prize ox – because it is the ox that would be led to slaughter. Instead of providing advice for the ruler, the Zhuangzi addresses how the individual can improve his/her own life. As Feng Youlan wrote of the “amusing stories” in the Zhuangzi,

Their underlying purpose is that there are varying degrees in the achievement of happiness. A free development of our natures may lead us to a relative kind of happiness; absolute happiness is achieved through higher understanding of the nature of things.¹⁸¹

A Note on Translations

The Zhuangzi, perhaps more than any other Chinese classic, is notoriously difficult to translate. Part of the reason for this is its unique use of the Chinese language. Where other philosophical works of the period were written in the forms of sagely sayings (e.g. the works of Confucius and Mencius), topical essays (e.g. the work of Xunzi) or poetic verse (the Laozi), the Zhuangzi incorporates prose and verse, history and fiction. Because of this unique style Victor Mair has suggested the Zhuangzi “is, first and foremost, a literary work and consequently should not be subjected to excessive philosophical analysis.”¹⁸² This belief clearly guides Mair in

¹⁸⁰ Gia-Fu Feng & English, Chap. 66

¹⁸¹ Feng, p. 105

¹⁸² Mair, p. xlv

how he translates the text, as he chooses to maintain the verse structures of many sections. However, Mair's translation (1994) is only one of the more recent translations of the full text, and most others would probably disagree with his literary affinities. The earliest scholarly translations, by Frederic Balfour (1881) and James Legge (1891), demonstrate the difficulty western thinkers – particularly those with a Christian frame of reference – had in grasping some alien daoist concepts. These translations, and to a lesser extent Herbert Giles version in 1926, view the text through a largely religious lens. A handful of translations cropped up in the 1960s, among which Burton Watson's complete version in 1968 is most notable. These tended to move away from a fully religious reading and aimed more at a philosophical interpretation. A.C. Graham's translation of the Inner Chapters and other selected passages in 1981 is still considered by many to be the most philosophical of extant versions. The Legge, Watson and Graham translations are the versions most often referenced in philosophical treatment of the Zhuangzi. In what follows, I will highlight some of the shortcomings of these translations and, where possible, offer alternate readings that illustrate the importance of nature in Zhuangzi's philosophy.

On Zhuangzi's Naturalism

One of the most difficult concepts in classical Chinese thought for the uninitiated reader to grasp is the ostensible daoist insistence on the ineffable nature of *dào* [道]. This puzzle has led many, especially in the West, to the conclusion that Daoism is either a system of loose superstitions and religious folklore underwritten by a fundamental supernaturalism, or else it is an arrant rejection of the rational,

devoid of any philosophical content. This is particularly true of the daoist classic known as the *Zhuangzi*, which even among Chinese literati, has mostly been viewed with suspicion as nothing but “empty talk not based on facts.”¹⁸³

Scholarly interest in the collected writings of Zhuang Zhou (c. 4th-century BCE) and his followers has arrived relatively late on the western philosophical scene as well. The ideas of Confucius, Mencius and the *Dàodéjīng* have been familiar to the West for hundreds of years,¹⁸⁴ whereas prior to the mid-twentieth century, the *Zhuangzi* was merely a curiosity to a handful of thinkers who, like Buber and Heidegger, viewed the poetic and mythological elements of *Zhuangzi*'s prose as the musings of a religious mystic.¹⁸⁵ On such a view, passages in the text which tend to question the limitations of perspective appear to advocate communion with an unearthly *dào*. This transcendently mystical interpretation of *Zhuangzi* has become a mainstay in daoist scholarship, particularly since Wing-Tsit Chan first published his acclaimed *Source Book* in 1963. There, Chan made reference to “The Mystical Way of Chuang-tzu,” and claimed that the text offers a “broadness of vision” which “seems to *transcend* the mundane world... *equalizing* all things and all opinions.”¹⁸⁶ Chan's interpretation has led to a debate, which boils down to one question, *viz.* “Was *Zhuangzi* simply rejecting the privilege of one perspective over any other or did he advocate ascension toward one, all-encompassing perspective?” As most

¹⁸³ This was the assessment of the great historian, Sima Qian. Cf. Chan, Wing-Tsit. *The Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*. 4th edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) p. 178

¹⁸⁴ Confucius and Mencius were introduced to a Western audience in the 1600s and had gained minimal notoriety by the 1680s. An early Latin translation of the *Daodejing* was first presented verbally to the Royal Asiatic Society in 1778.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Herman, Jonathan. *I and Tao: Martin Buber's Encounter With Chuang Tzu*. (SUNY, 1996); Parkes, Graham. *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. (Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1987); and May, Reinhard. *Heidegger's Hidden Sources*. trans. G. Parkes (Routledge, 1996)

¹⁸⁶ Watson, p. 177 [emphasis added]

scholars see it, the former leads to skepticism and relativism and the latter, to a supernatural brand of mysticism.

Yet, while the stories found in the *Zhuangzi* are clearly fantastical, they need not lead us, necessarily, to a mystical outlook tantamount to supernaturalism, nor should they require a skeptical or relativistic reading of the text. First, it is not clear that *dào*, on Zhuangzi's view, occupies some higher plane of existence, nor does Zhuangzi seem to advocate sloughing off of the physical realm in favor of some other – two notions that are typical of mysticism. Instead, Zhuangzi's tone tends to be one of awe in the face of nature's wonders and his characterization of *dào* is one of immanence, of a "world hidden within the world," rather than one of transcendence. For example, when Zhuangzi is asked in his twenty-second chapter where *dào* exists, he replies, "There is nowhere that it doesn't exist... It is in the tiles and shards... It is in the urine and excrement."¹⁸⁷ In what follows I will offer an alternative reading of Zhuangzi as a type of naturalist that, I believe, accounts for and improves upon other interpretations by taking heed of the prominence nature held within Zhuangzi's scheme. I contend that Zhuangzi's mystical inclinations involve a process of coalescence rather than dissipation and that his alleged skeptical relativism might be better understood as a contextual perspectivism.

Before we turn our attention to Zhuangzi's notion of nature, it will be helpful to briefly sketch the brand of naturalism I have in mind with regard to him. As we have seen in previous chapters, the term 'naturalism' has become notoriously ambiguous within philosophical circles, and at least since Quine co-opted it for his

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 241

epistemology, it has been associated with the belief that philosophy is contiguous with or subservient to the natural sciences. For obvious reasons, this type of scientific naturalism cannot be associated with an ancient Chinese thinker like Zhuangzi. Instead, his views can be connected to the underlying beliefs of the type of naturalism that I have been calling non-reductive humanistic naturalism – which turns on a rejection (or in Zhuangzi’s case, an absence) of dualistic ontology, a dynamic view of reality that emphasizes temporality and change, and a commingling of ontology with human experience. As we have seen elsewhere, the difference between the scientific, epistemically-centered naturalism advanced in analytic circles and the naturalistic themes in Zhuangzi can be seen as hanging on four central theses. To reiterate, they are:

1. Natural phenomena have objectively determinable traits.
2. The traits of natural phenomena are knowable.
3. The process of inquiry is necessarily conditioned and perspectival.
4. Human interaction with the rest of nature, cognitive or otherwise, is active and creative.¹⁸⁸

As argued previously, the logical extension of such a line of reasoning leads to the prospect that human beings are continuous with their surroundings, that they are points of focus within an enviroing field of nature. It seems that the misunderstanding of *dào* among many of Zhuangzi’s contemporary sympathizers is directly related to the ways they overlook nature’s place within his philosophy. Even those writers who look for alternatives to the widely accepted skeptical and mystical interpretations of Zhuangzi generally draw from a mostly western philosophical framework that, in the very least, hangs on assumptions rooted in some sort of

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Ryder, John. “Reconciling Pragmatism and Naturalism.” In *Pragmatic Naturalism and Realism*. Ed. by John R. Shook (Prometheus, 2003) p. 64

dualism. Such characterizations often lead to arbitrary interpretive assumptions, and these undermine Zhuangzi's depiction of *dào* as a continuity that arises *out* of the flux of nature. In other words, on Zhuangzi's view, the *dào* is "an emergent, 'bottom-up' order rather than something imposed, [and] any interpretation of *dào* that would reduce it to preexisting laws or principles that discipline the natural world in some necessary way would be problematic."¹⁸⁹

Likewise, Zhuangzi's "person of the *dào*" (which he called the *zhēnrén* or "true person") would not have her head in the clouds, nor would she doubt everything. Rather, she would be so attuned to the natural world around her that life itself would be viewed as a reflection of natural change, and as such, she would neither be frightened by death nor posit a supernatural afterlife. As Zhuangzi put it,

The True [person] of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged [from nature] without delight; he went back in without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He didn't forget where he began; he didn't try to find out where he would end. He received something and took pleasure in it; he forgot about it and handed it back again. This is what I call not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven [*tiān*]. This is what I call the True [Person].¹⁹⁰

The translator of this passage, Burton Watson, chose to render the Chinese *tiān* [天] as "Heaven," although the meaning in ancient China was more ambiguous than this, and operated for the Chinese in a manner akin to the German *himmel*, the Latin *cælum* or even the Greek *σπερέωμα*. Two of the leading American sinologists, David Hall and Roger Ames have noted that there is a "strong association between *tian* and

¹⁸⁹ Ames, Roger. (ed.) *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi* (SUNY, 1998) p. 7

¹⁹⁰ Watson, p. 78

the natural environment.”¹⁹¹ Likewise, Chan acknowledged in his *Source Book* that the “concept of Nature” held significance in Zhuangzi’s thought and translated *tiān* in light of it, although his choice to capitalize the word throughout his work undermined his efforts.¹⁹²

Much of the argument for understanding Zhuangzi as a naturalist draws upon a reading of Daoism, which could be called the focus-field model, established by Hall and Ames in their translation of the writings of Laozi titled *Dao De Jing: Making This Life Significant* (2003). According to this model, daoist cosmology is best understood as *correlative* insofar as it expresses a reciprocal and complementary matrix of relations between existent things. They call this framework of significance relations a “field,” and the way the field shapes how we interact with the world around us they refer to as its “focus.” For the daoist, as they put it, “there is ontological parity among the things and events that constitute our lives.”¹⁹³ Experience, then, is considered as continuous with the concrete world and a human being is seen as a “quantum of unique experience.”¹⁹⁴

Using the term cosmology to describe the daoist position is somewhat misleading, however. The daoist would not agree with Parmenides that, “all is Being.” Instead she might posit something like, “all are *becomings*.” Hall and Ames identify in Chinese thought a discernible absence of what they call a “one behind the many metaphysics,” and, as such, they argue that there is no Chinese counterpart to

¹⁹¹ Ames, Roger T. & Hall, David. *A Philosophical Translation of the Dao De Jing: Making This Life Significant*. (Ballantine, 2003)

¹⁹² Chan, p. 177

¹⁹³ Hall & Ames, p. 13

¹⁹⁴ Hall & Ames, p. 11

the Greek term *κόσμος*.¹⁹⁵ When the daoist wanted to denote the totality of existence in their writings, they used the phrase *wànwù* [萬物] or “the myriad things,” which demonstrates how deeply pluralistic Chinese thought must have been.¹⁹⁶ Hall and Ames call this daoist position “*acosmotic* thinking.”

Hall and Ames also identify the Chinese *yǔzhòu* [宇宙] as the term that is most often translated into the English “cosmos.” The etymology of this term is interesting insofar as it a compound of the characters for “room” and “time” and is somewhat related in meaning to the post-Newtonian term “space-time.” For the Chinese, to exist was to exist *in time*. There was an ontology of events and processes, not “objects” in the sense of objectified substances, and this sentiment is succinctly expressed in the classical Chinese phrase *wùhuà* [物化] or “things transform.” In this way, “things” (now understood as temporal and changing entities) are inextricably tied to their surroundings. Simply put, their context is constitutive.

The field, then, could be understood as a sort of fabric, rewoven constantly, of which the pattern is not some prescribed *telos*, but rather an emergent property, and in which the various threads are *relations* among its constituents. As Ames put it in his *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi* (1998), “the myriad things are perturbations of hylozoistic energies that coordinate themselves to constitute the harmonious regularity that is *dào*.”¹⁹⁷ Simply stated, the order found in such a system is bottom-up, not top-down. Focus, on such an account, would be the way in which the fabric gets bunched up in experience. The locus of experience for the daoist, however,

¹⁹⁵ The connotations of which entail other Greek concepts such as *ἀρχή*, *λόγος*, *θεωρία*, *νόμος*, *θιός*, and *νόος*.

¹⁹⁶ Although *wànwù* denotes the number ten-thousand, its use in daoist literature is with the sentiment of an indefinitely large amount.

¹⁹⁷ Ames, p. 5

would not be some disembodied mind, cut off from the rest of existence. Rather, the Chinese believed that the center of understanding was *xīn* [心] – a character that represented the heart. This is important because a daoist would not have spoken of knowledge as involving the “coolness of reason” – because she had no conception of the dualism to which such a statement attends; for her, all understanding always already comes with contextual strings. Since individuals within the field are “mutually implicating,” as Hall and Ames put it, then experience always points back to the field. Understood in these terms, experience is not something that passively “*happens to*” but instead is something that is actively “*done*.” The daoist has moments of *life*-experience, not *perceptions*. Thus, experience, for the daoist, insofar as it *is* experience, is simply life, *intensified*. Rather than standing for the imprisonment of one’s own inner sensations, it means a lively interaction within the field; at its sharpest, it indicates total interpenetration of self and surroundings. In lieu of a total yielding to the flux and flow of transformation [*wùhuà*], it provides the only presentation of an order that is neither antecedent nor stagnant but is pulsating and evolving, an order that is called *dào*. In this way, Daoism incorporated insights regarding the flux of nature from the ancient text known as the *Yijīng*, or “Book of Changes.” According to the *Yijīng*, the order manifested in the changes of nature shows up as a unity of opposites, as interplay between *yīn* [陰] and *yáng* [陽]. The daoist believed that everything in nature could be broken down into its respective *yīn* and *yáng* states, and since these states were understood as being in movement rather than held in absolute stasis – anything could be seen as its opposite when viewed from an alternate perspective.

In light of all this, it seems the supernatural and the relativistic interpretations of Zhuangzi's *dào* involve difficulties. Passages in the *Zhuangzi* like the one in his second chapter, which states, "Heaven [*tiān*] and earth were born at the same time I was, the ten thousand things are one with me" need not be seen as irrationally paradoxical nor as advocating a transcendent mysticism – as many scholars take it to represent.¹⁹⁸ Instead, it can be understood as an assertion of the type of interpenetration of self and surroundings which takes heed of the unity of opposites.¹⁹⁹ Likewise, statements such as, "A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so,"²⁰⁰ as well as the story of the beauties Mao-Ch'iang and Lady Li (considered attractive by men but frightening to fish, birds and deer) need not be taken as endorsements of an insipid, skeptical relativism.²⁰¹ This is particularly true when read in conjunction with other passages, such as,

If you want to nourish a bird with what nourishes a bird, then you should let it roost in the deep forest... *Names should stop when they have expressed reality*, concepts of right should be founded on what is suitable. This is what it means to have command of reason...²⁰²

Here, it seems that Zhuangzi is not advocating relativism but rather reminding us to look for principles that are appropriate to the enviroing conditions. This signifies the tie to context that all understanding entails within a daoist framework. It seems western readers have a tendency to confuse the sound idea that it is often difficult to

¹⁹⁸ Watson, p. 43

¹⁹⁹ Contra thinkers like Wing-Tsit Chan and Harold Roth, A.C. Graham and Chad Hansen agree that Zhuangzi does not assent to the notion that all things are one. Brook Ziporyn, for one, argues that Zhuangzi is not necessarily a mystic, but is a special kind of holist.

²⁰⁰ Watson, p. 40

²⁰¹ Paul Kjellberg and Lisa Raphals are two who advance the skeptical interpretation of Zhuangzi.

²⁰² Watson, pp. 194-195

distinguish right from wrong unless one looks at the surrounding circumstances with the mistaken notion that both points of view are equally valid and universally applicable. Zhuangzi would have assented to the former, not the latter.

Perhaps the most recognizable passage from Zhuangzi's work is also the one that most commentators cite as evidence of Zhuangzi's skepticism. It recounts the story of when Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly. In all of East Asia, this parable has come to be recognized as *the* Zhuangzi story. From Singapore to Japan, it is taught to Asian school children at the earliest of ages and is as deeply rooted in the Asian psyche as the story of George Washington and the cherry tree is in ours. It goes as follows...

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakably Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.²⁰³

Many western commentators see this as an Eastern analog to Cartesian doubt. Yet, the passage continues with, "Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things [*wùhuà*]." ²⁰⁴ This last line shows that the point of the story is not to advance skepticism about the limits of knowledge, but rather to illustrate the dynamic holism of the *dào*. The fleeting distinctions between "myriad things," such as people and butterflies, indicate fluidity in the field of nature and in the focus of experience through a shifting of perspective.

²⁰³ Ibid. p. 49

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

Because experience is active, and nature, dynamic, then it might seem that, for the daoist, socio-ethical actions should require a rigorous and disciplined moral training in order to navigate the precarious and changing world around us. This was certainly the belief of Confucius – the most prominent of all Chinese thinkers. In his collected sayings, Confucius advocated formal study, strict family values, and adherence to ritual as means for developing a noble character in the youth. Zhuangzi, on the other hand, rejected the Confucian system on the grounds that it was little more than a manual for attaining the virtues of a court minister, or a bureaucratic official. The coldness of ritual posturing, which Confucianism had fallen into by Zhuangzi’s time, was one of his main philosophical targets. Simply put, where Confucius sought rigor, Zhuangzi advocated vigor.

For instance, in chapter thirty-one of the *Zhuangzi* there is a story about a fisherman who confronts Confucius about his teachings. After hearing that Confucius prized benevolence and ritual propriety, the fisherman laughed and said,

As far as benevolence goes, he [Confucius] is benevolent all right. But I am afraid he will not escape unharmed. To weary the mind and wear out the body, putting Truth [*zhēn*] in peril like this – alas, I’m afraid he is separated from the Great Way by a vast distance indeed!²⁰⁵

After a lengthy disputation, an exasperated Confucius finally asks, “Please, may I ask what you mean by ‘the Truth.’”²⁰⁶ In his response, the fisherman explains that *zhēn* consists in sincerity, but a sincerity toward one’s self, out of which filiality, kindness, appropriateness, loyalty and honesty all grow. The fisherman goes on to explain that,

²⁰⁵ Watson, p. 345

²⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 349

Rites are something created by the vulgar men of the world; the Truth is what is received from Heaven [*tīan*]. By nature it is the way it is and cannot be changed. Therefore the sage patterns himself on Heaven [*tīan*], and prizes the Truth, and does not allow himself to be cramped by the vulgar.²⁰⁷

The daoist concept of *zhēn*, therefore, is a direct challenge to the Confucian ethical system. The author(s) of the *Zhuangzi* viewed the Confucian emphasis on ritual propriety and benevolence as officious and too easily corruptible, thus the comment in one passage that these terms seem to be praised most often at the gates of oppressive rulers.

The *Zhuangzi*, in a Nietzschean fashion, calls for a re-evaluation of all moral conventions. The best way for one to attain virtue, we are told, is,

To be unsnared by vulgar ways, to make no vain show of material things, to bring no hardship on others, to avoid offending the mob, to seek peace and security for the world, preservation of the people's lives, full provender for others as well as oneself, and to rest content when these aims are fulfilled, in this way bringing purity to the heart - there were those in ancient times who believed that the "art of the Way" lay in these things.²⁰⁸

The individual who could achieve this is Zhuangzi's "person of the dao," and would be called the *zhēnrén* [真人], or "true person." This figure is Zhuangzi's moral exemplar and is likely instituted as a foil to the Confucian "noble person," or *jūnzi*. It is best to understand the genuineness of the *zhēnrén* as a type of authenticity, or as William Callahan has stated it, an "untrammelled" quality.²⁰⁹

Zhuangzi first introduced his *zhēnrén* in the sixth of his "Inner Chapters." As he put it,

²⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 350

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 367

²⁰⁹ Cf. "Cook Ding's Life of the Whetstone: Contingency, Action, and Inertia in the *Zhuangzi*." in Ames, Roger. *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1998)

What do I mean by a True [Person]? The True [Person] of ancient times did not rebel against want, did not grow proud in plenty, and did not plan his affairs. A man like this could commit an error and not regret it, could meet with success and not make a show. A man like this could climb the high places and not be frightened, could enter the water and not get wet, could enter the fire and not get burned. His knowledge was able to climb all the way up to the Way like this.²¹⁰

For *Zhuangzi*, the *zhēnrén* reflects the native vitality of the myriad things [*wànwù*].

“[The] goal,” as Chan explained, “is absolute spiritual emancipation and peace, to be achieved through knowing the capacity and limitations of one’s own nature,

nourishing it, and adapting it to the universal process of transformation.”²¹¹ In other

words, the *zhēnrén* is able to act in a manner that mirrors the constant transformation

[*wùhuà*] of the things of the universe – a manner that *Zhuangzi* referred to as *wúwéi*

[無為]. *Wúwéi*, which is often mistranslated as “non-action,” is a type of effortless

doing that requires “spontaneity,” or *zìrán* [自然]. *Zhuangzi* tells us that in order to

avoid the confusion that can arise when “this” and “that” dissolve into one, the

zhēnrén must seek “clarity,” or *míng* [明]. As A.C. Graham has stated, the person

who acts from *wúwéi* in this manner,

[...] can do so only at one moment and in one way; by attending to the situation until it moves him, he discovers the move which is ‘inevitable’ (*pu te yi*, the one in which he ‘has no alternative’) like a physical reflex. But he hits on it only if he perceives with perfect clarity, as though in a mirror.²¹²

Zhuangzi believed that this type of clarity and spontaneity had been leveled down in

society at large by the conventions of Confucian ethics. The best way to recover that

verve, according to the *Zhuangzi*, would be through attunement with nature. By this,

²¹⁰ Watson, p. 77

²¹¹ Chan, p. 177

²¹² Graham, Angus C. “Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of ‘Is’ and ‘Ought.’” In *Experimental Essays on Chuang-Tzu*. edited by Victor Mair (University of Hawaii Press, 1983) p. 9

he did not mean for us merely to become more conscientious of our natural environment, though this was certainly a key element in his thought, but rather he hoped that a respect for the nature of all the myriad things could be fostered. This is best illustrated in the beginning of the second chapter, wherein it is explained that the pipings of earth, man, and nature (*tīan*) resonate from the blowing of the same wind. As the last remark of that passage reads, “When blown, all of these openings sound differently, and each shows attunement in its own way; in each case the tune chooses itself, but who does the blowing?”²¹³

One might wonder how we might foster social harmony without a Confucian system of ritual propriety. Zhuangzi addressed this in his typical fashion,

A beam or pillar can be used to batter down a city wall, but it is no good for stopping up a little hole - this refers to a difference in function. Thoroughbreds like Ch'i-chi and Hua-liu could gallop a thousand li in one day, but when it came to catching rats they were no match for the wildcat or the weasel - this refers to a difference in skill. The horned owl catches fleas at night and can spot the tip of a hair, but when daylight comes, no matter how wide it opens its eyes, it cannot see a mound or a hill - this refers to a difference in nature [*xìng*].²¹⁴

The point Zhuangzi wishes to make here is that an understanding of the unique character, or *xìng* [性], of other entities fosters a type of respect, a respect that allows them to exercise their own autonomy in becoming what they are. This is a practical application of that unity of opposites, put forth by the *Yijing*, which emerges from the flux of nature. Zhuangzi continues by claiming,

²¹³ *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 2 [my translation]

²¹⁴ Watson, p. 180

Now do you say, that you are going to make Right your master and do away with Wrong, or make Order your master and do away with Disorder? If you do, then you have not understood the principle of heaven and earth or the nature of the ten thousand things. This is like saying that you are going to make Heaven your master and do away with Earth, or make Yin your master and do away with Yang. Obviously it is impossible.²¹⁵

Accomplishing this kind of harmony with nature, according to Zhuangzi, is to occupy the “hinge of the Way,” or *daòshū* [道樞], a place “in which ‘this’ and ‘that’ no longer find their opposites. When the hinge is fitted into the socket, it can respond endlessly.”²¹⁶ The hinge is the central position from which one can witness distinctions dissolving into an alternating wax and wane of a singular *dào*. Only from this position is the kind of effortless action of *wúwéi* really possible. Among a number of appropriate responses to any problematic situation the *míngmíng zhēnrén* (or truly enlightened person) would respond in the *most* appropriate way, and do so without any deliberation.

But, as *Zhuangzi* would tell us, such deftness often requires innovation, not convention. Throughout his text, there are stories of physically deformed figures, particularly crippled men and crooked trees, that exhibit the highest virtue because they rest at ease within their own nature. For example, at the end of Zhuangzi’s first chapter, we find a thinker from the “Logician School” by the name of Hui Shi complaining about the worthlessness of a gourd given to him by the king of Wei. Zhuangzi explains to his friend that the problem lies not in the gourd, but rather in the uses to which Hui Shih has put it, by relating it to a story of a floss-washer who sold an ointment for chapped hands to a stranger. Once the stranger had obtained it,

²¹⁵ Ibid. p. 181

²¹⁶ Ibid. p. 40

he used the ointment to win the favor of the emperor and gain an estate for himself.

Zhuangzi states,

The capacity to protect hands was one and the same. In one instance it could not save someone from having to bleach silk, yet, when used differently... Now you have a fifty-peck gourd; why not use it as a big tub and float around on the rivers and lakes instead of being worried about its inability to hold things? Conventional bookworm, it's as if you have brambles for brains!²¹⁷

To this Hui Shi replies,

I have a big tree. People call it useless. Its roots and trunk are such a gnarled mess that no ink line could be drawn on its surface, its smaller branches are swept up and crooked and no ruler could be applied to it. Stand it upon the roadside and paint it and still no carpenter would give heed to it. It is just like your words, big and of no use, and should likewise be discarded by everyone.²¹⁸

Zhuangzi responds,

Now you, sir, have a big tree and you worry because it's useless. Why don't you plant it in Never-Never Land, or the field of the Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? Axes will never shorten its life; the affairs of the world will never harm it. If there's no office suited for its use, it may rest comfortably in that office far from distress and hardship!²¹⁹

Similarly, in the fourth chapter, a woodsman has a large holy-tree appear to him in a dream (after earlier rejecting it as useless). The tree says to him, "If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large?" The woodsman awakes and admits to his disciples that by judging this tree by *conventional* standards he was "way off."²²⁰ Later in the same chapter another large, useless tree is likened to the sage insofar as neither can be exploited. And in the fifth chapter, the story is told of a

²¹⁷ Zhuangzi. Chapter 1 [my translation]

²¹⁸ Ibid. [my translation]

²¹⁹ Ibid. [my translation]

²²⁰ Ibid. pp. 64-65

crippled man by the name of *Shu* who pays a visit to Confucius, but because of his awkward appearance, receives an unkind welcome. Later, when *Laozi* asks him if Confucius can be freed from the shackles of his doctrines, the crippled man responds, “When Heaven [*tiān*] has punished him, how can you set him free?”²²¹

Of course, *Zhuangzi* did not advocate unqualified innovation. For impetuous innovation can often be more dangerous than the most stifling conventionality. This is where his emphasis on self-transformation must be noted. On his view, the creative vitality of spontaneity must always reflect back upon itself. This is the key element in being a “genuine” person. As Chan put it, the *zhēnrén*...

...[h]aving attained enlightenment through the light of Nature... moves in the realm of ‘great knowledge’ and ‘profound virtue.’ [...] In his response to change and his understanding of things, his principle is inexhaustible, traceless, dark and obscure, and unfathomable.²²²

The point is to transform oneself toward ever-broader perspectives. To illustrate, let us turn now to the opening story of *Zhuangzi*’s first chapter. This chapter, known as “Carefree Wandering Afar” [or *Xiāo yáo yóu*], begins with the story of a giant fish, Kun, which transforms into a bird called Peng and travels “ninety thousand li to the south.”²²³ The smaller creatures like the turtle dove and cicada mock him for his efforts and ask, “What’s the use of going ninety thousand li to the south?”²²⁴ *Zhuangzi*’s answer is a cryptic one,

²²¹ Ibid. p. 72

²²² Chan, p. 177

²²³ A *li* is an ancient Chinese unit of measure, believed to be equivalent to three-hundred paces. Of the cardinal directions, South is associated with power, royalty, and virtue in Chinese folklore.

²²⁴ Literally, 奚以之九萬里而南為?

If you go off to the green woods nearby, you can take along food for three meals and come back with your stomach as full as ever. If you are going a hundred li, you must grind your grain the night before; and if you are going a thousand li, you must start getting the provisions together three months in advance. What do these two creatures understand? Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived. *How do I know this is so?*²²⁵

It is of course difficult to decipher the full meaning of such a metaphorical passage, however, what seems clear here is Zhuangzi's belief that the small creatures are limited by small perspective. This, by itself, would be a rather mundane philosophical point, yet it becomes more intriguing when taken in conjunction with what Zhuangzi says about the view of the giant bird:

He beats the whirlwind and rises ninety thousand li, setting off on the sixth month gale. Wavering heat, bits of dust, living things blowing each other about – the sky looks very blue. *Is that its real color, or is it because it is so far away and has no end? When the bird looks down, all he sees is blue too.*²²⁶

By taking a broad perspective, it seems, the giant bird loses some detail in his view. Just as a mountain top view provides a good lay of the land but cannot help you navigate through a deep thicket, broader perspectives appear useless to those who occupy themselves with the day-to-day. Zhuangzi acknowledges this,

Therefore a man who has wisdom enough to fill one office effectively, good conduct enough to impress one community, virtue enough to please one ruler, or talent enough to be called into service in one state, has the same kind of self-pride as these little creatures.²²⁷

But the *zhēnrén* who occupies the “hinge of the way” would not be helpless in a situation that called for one of these more narrow views. Just as the transformation of

²²⁵ Watson, p. 30 [emphasis added]

²²⁶ Ibid. 29 [emphasis added]

²²⁷ Ibid. p. 31

the giant fish into a bird should be viewed as cyclical insofar as it is said to give rise to the seasons, great understanding would always be reflexive. For Zhuangzi, great knowledge does not come to an end, does not stagnate, but rather, care-freely wanders afar in a realm not constrained by dogmatic parameters, where any situation can be evaluated on its own terms.

According to *Zhuangzi*, it is better to have a crippled form than to have a spirit crippled by convention. When individuals are allowed to develop their native vitality, and become *zhēnrén*, a type of freedom is produced that implements the best aspects of individuality and community. As *Zhuangzi* put it,

I have heard of letting the world be, of leaving it alone; I have never heard of governing the world. You let it be for fear of corrupting the inborn nature of the world; you leave it alone for fear of distracting the Virtue of the world. If the nature of the world is not corrupted, if the Virtue of the world is not distracted, why should there be any governing of the world?²²⁸

Thus, on Zhuangzi's view, the *zhēnrén* does not try to govern the world – which includes other people in her community – precisely because its growth is her own. By understanding that her environment constitutes who *she* is, she can achieve attunement. Yet, this kind of attunement is only meaningful if such an environment is both immanent *and* knowable. As such, the most important aspect of being a *zhēnrén*, and what Zhuangzi believed led to the realization of the sage, is the insight that knowledge does not stagnate, that growth is a life-long process toward ever-broadening understanding. As long as the myriad things continue to transform, this endeavor has no final end or “ultimate” perspective. As long as we continue to transform ourselves, there is no limit to what we can know.

²²⁸ Ibid. p. 114

Chapter Five: Transformation and Democracy as a Way of Life

You dare to be pleased in your human form. But that human form of yours has countless changes that never reach a final end, so joys are really incalculable! [Zhuangzi²²⁹]

Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself... The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy. [Dewey²³⁰]

What Dewey and Zhuangzi Share

The suggestion of a valuable comparison between minds from what are, seemingly, quite dissimilar philosophical milieus is sometimes met with incredulity. Perhaps ideas can be found in Dewey that also appear in Zhuangzi and which bring him into closer proximity with Chinese thought in general, but why should we regard the mere fact of such a similarity as anything more than philosophical curiosity? Before such a question can be answered, it should be noted, however, that the problems facing both men were more alike than one might expect. Most notably, each of their philosophies was motivated by crisis. For Zhuangzi, the crisis was more immediate and concrete because of the political and social turmoil of the Warring States period in which he lived. For Dewey, the crisis was more a matter of value and principle, as he lived during a period wherein traditional ways of thinking increasingly failed to meet the complexities of practical life. Yet, in spite of these bleak beginnings, each thinker offered a surprisingly optimistic outlook rife

²²⁹ 特犯人之形而猶喜之，若人之形者，萬化而未始有極也，其為樂可勝計邪！ Chapter 6 “*Dà Zōng Shī*,” [My translation.]

²³⁰ *PP*, LW 2:328

with practical applications. For Dewey, life itself was a series of problematic situations that required clever strategies for survival, while for Zhuangzi, becoming a sage entailed being able to wander carefree amidst the tumultuous times of ancient China. That each man had a pioneering tone to his thought is a consequence of the moral frontier that each found himself facing. As pioneers in this sense, Dewey and Zhuangzi each sought an account of his milieu that need not rely on speculative flights of fancy or on systematic categoricals. In this sense, Zhuangzi and Dewey were not so much metaphysicians as they were cataloguers of nature, not so much ethicists as they were moralists, not so much political theorists as they were political commentators. In this vein, the worth of such a comparison is not the mere pointing out of philosophical convergence, but rather the new light that can be shed on the issues at hand by casting them in relief of one another. Such a comparison can also have value insofar as it can be used to advance a particular philosophical position. To utter Dewey's name in the same breath as *any* Chinese thinker already suggests a contrast to the typical "American" account of his philosophy. Likewise, discussing Zhuangzi alongside a thinker as motivated by practicality as Dewey should be suggestive of a take which runs contra the (rather common) hermitic interpretations of his thought. Finally, whenever two disparate philosophies encounter one another, there is always the potential for philosophical innovation. In this case, Dewey and Zhuangzi may, together, provide philosophical naturalism with the shot in the arm for which it has such a desperate need. Simply put, precisely because both Dewey and Zhuangzi can be characterized as social therapists who sought to break the crust

of convention and promote human flourishing, philosophers in our age might do well to learn from them.

The twenty-first century is shaping up to be the most decisive in human history as we are faced with ecological, political, and social challenges on the scope and severity the likes of which the modern world has never seen. The next one hundred years may be humanity's great intelligence test, in which nothing short of our very survival hangs in the balance.²³¹ What we are witnessing is a convergence of problems once deemed isolated from one another – a convergence wherein environmental, political and social programs become intertwined. As climate change speeds up, globalization continues to spread and the exhaustion of key resources (*e.g.* oil) draws near, the possibility of a global crisis looms ever larger on the horizon. These are the problems our species faces on a new moral and political frontier. That philosophy has, by and large, turned its back on them illustrates just how detached from concrete affairs the discipline has become. But, Dewey believed that there was an opportunity for philosophy to “recover” in such times – a sentiment reflected in the Chinese etymology of their word for crisis, *wēi jī* [危機], which combines the character for danger with the character for opportunity – but the key to such recovery, Dewey would argue, is an earnest concern for concrete problems, not their philosophical abstractions.

Dewey's political philosophy, which might be identified as a type of “progressive liberalism,” is often attacked from both sides of the political spectrum. To communitarians, Dewey seems to fall among the ranks of classical liberal

²³¹ cf. Schönfeld, Martin. “America's Darwin Awards and a Philosophy Assignment.” *Common Dreams News Center*, Friday, September 9th, 2005. www.commondreams.org

theorists like Hobbes, Locke and Mill. To those who identify themselves with that liberal tradition, Dewey appears to over-emphasize the social aspects of political life. Part of the reason for this is that Dewey sought to bring these two poles together under an evolutionary conception of political life. As such, Dewey redefined traditionally liberal concepts like autonomy, individuality, and democracy in terms of process. On the other hand, Zhuangzi's political musings are often superficially interpreted either as a form of quietism or as an endorsement of anarchism. The latter interpretation has been particularly fashionable of late, especially among those who draw comparisons between Zhuangzi's alleged skepticism and playfulness with the ironic tolerance of Richard Rorty's liberalism.²³² One suggestion is that the anarchist and quietist themes found in the Zhuangzi feed into one another and support a political theory that might be called "libertarian" by contemporary standards. This, however, is a mischaracterization. As will be shown, if any anarchist theme can be associated with Zhuangzi, it would have to be of the utopian, agrarian kind – an anarchism which advocates social cooperation and attunement with the land, not free-market competition. I will suggest that, given their naturalistic ontologies, the labels "liberal" and "anarchist" only apply to Dewey and Zhuangzi in very specific ways.

In what follows, I will argue that the focus-field view of nature and human life shared by Dewey and Zhuangzi leads to a single socio-political end – *viz. developing a harmonious community of mutually reinforcing autonomous individuals* – out of

²³² cf. Hansen, Chad. "Guru or Skeptic? Relativistic Skepticism in the Zhuangzi," in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*. Ed. Scott Cook (SUNY, 2003) and Kwang-Sae Lee. "Rorty and Chuang Tzu: Anti-representationalism, Pluralism and Conversation." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*. (1996) 23: 175-192.

which a praxis based on ecological wisdom and social justice emerges. This value could be summed up in Dewey's notion of democracy as "a way of life" or the daoist concepts known as the "wu-forms" (e.g. *wúwéi* 無為, *wújǐ* 無己, *wúzhī* 無知, and *wúyù* 無欲). The common theoretical element in the notion of democracy as a way of life and the wu-forms is the dynamic character of socio-political life. As we have already seen, Dewey and Zhuangzi agreed that neither antecedent principles nor final ends were applicable in the operations of nature. Here, I should like to suggest that each believed that, as it was in the natural realm, so it was in the political. In order to flesh this out completely, however, some attention must be paid to the special meaning of the key terms in the foregoing description: development, community, autonomy and individual.

Development and Harmony

As we have seen, both Dewey and Zhuangzi held a view of the universe as both "precarious and stable" precisely because it is a hodgepodge of intertwined *events*. The order that we do happen to find in our world, according to them, is a byproduct of transactions among events and is not to be taken as universal or enduring, but rather, as habit or tendency – taken in a sense over and above the typical, behavioral one. For them, it made no sense to talk of reality as fixed – given the dynamism of nature as a process. Simply put, their view of reality turned on a conception of development, and this idea informed their political thinking, as well.

Due to Darwin's influence, development took on a decidedly evolutionary flavor in Dewey's work. As shown in chapter three, Dewey believed that evolutionary principles should be used to explicate experience and the process of

intelligent inquiry. Where experience could be equated with nature in his thought, *viz.* as its “foreground,” inquiry was equivalent to adjustment – *i.e.* adjustment understood as a combination of organismic accommodation, on the one hand, and environmental adaptation, on the other.²³³ Accommodation occurs when an organism submits to the conditioning environment, adaptation when it changes the conditions to meet its needs, and adjustment when, “There is a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being such that, in spite of changes in the special conditions that surround us, these conditions are also arranged, settled, in relation to us.”²³⁴ Yet, when it came to the outcome of this process, Dewey did not distinguish between the organismic and environmental, but instead used one simple, catchall term – “growth.” On his view, growth applied to the organism insofar as it indicated the outcome of habit reconstruction within the field of nature. As it applied to the environment, growth meant both the natural processes of change within an environment and the changes introduced to it by the organisms that lived within it. Because of this duality in usage, growth is another important and highly misunderstood aspect of Dewey’s thought, one which ties his philosophy and psychology to his politics and pedagogy.

Dewey believed that the world could be changed for the better, both politically and physically. That is one reason why he deemed elementary education so important – for what better way is there to build human habits than to start very early? This is also why he saw democracy as intimately tied up with this type of

²³³ *ACF*, LW 9:1-20

²³⁴ *Ibid.* LW 9:12-13

education, one that could instill the habits of critical inquiry into a whole generation of human beings. As Dewey put it in a letter to Clara Mitchell in 1895,

... the primary end of 'education' might be said to be (negatively) to hinder the growing-up of those obstacles, those mental barriers of imagery & feeling, which now shut off more or less almost every adult from nature and his fellows; or, positively, *to facilitate the greatest freedom (continuity, unity) of growth of nature through individual action into social action.*²³⁵

Many of Dewey's critics, particularly Russell and Santayana, misunderstood his use of growth as a philosophical underwriting of American commerce, but Dewey's view was more fine-grained than many have realized, and while it included growth in this industrial sense, it went well beyond it, too.

James Scott Johnston has identified at least three different ways in which Dewey discussed growth in his writings.²³⁶ The first, which could be called "organismic growth," has to do with the mutual interaction between an organism and its environment. This is the sense of growth humans share with all species, which stands for the way one fills an ecological/environmental role (or perhaps fills one's function well) that is called biological maturity and is the sense often employed by developmental psychology. But it is the second and third ways in which Dewey employed growth that highlight development as a socio-political end. The growth that comes from the fund of experience and habits that have been built up through inquiry, what Johnston identifies as "the growth of judgments," offers a way of accommodating the conventions of a tradition without loss of practical efficacy.

²³⁵ Dewey, John.

"John Dewey to Clara I. Mitchell." *The Correspondence of John Dewey, Volume 1: 1871-1918*. (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2005) 1895.11.29 (00272) [my emphasis]

²³⁶ cf. Johnston, James Scott. *Inquiry and Education: John Dewey and the Quest for Democracy*. (SUNY, 2006.)

After all, if one makes use of the outcomes of one's own past inquiries in order to resolve new indeterminate situations, then it follows that using the outcome of the inquiries of one's forbears can only supplement this fund of experience. Newton's dictum about standing on the shoulders of giants comes to mind here, as does Dewey's own musings about being a link in the ongoing chain of human existence. Most importantly, though, is the sense of growth which Johnston calls "experiential."

To grow experientially is the byproduct of "judgmental growth" insofar as the use of this fund of experience allows for deeper and more robust future experiences. To illustrate, one could imagine a child, a university student, and a distinguished professor of art history standing in the Sistine Chapel, and while each has the same sensory perception, it seems evident that the latter's experience would be the richest one, given the wealth of intellectual *and* experiential habits she has accumulated. As Johnston has put it,

To construct meaningful facts about the world is to expand the fund of meaning one has. To expand the fund of meaning one has is to enrich present and future experiences. Inquiry is the primary means by which growth is occasioned, and inquiry is a habit that is (and must be) developed, brought to bear on environmental and social situations. To develop this habit is precisely what is meant by education.²³⁷

According to Dewey, inquiry, and *ipso facto* the growth that arises out of it, always already takes place in the *having* of an experience.

So, it would seem that the crux of Dewey's view – nicely summed up in the last line of that letter to Clara Mitchell – is that when education is at its best, it does

²³⁷ Ibid. p. 111

not drive a wedge between the human and the non-human, but rather fosters our native talent for coping with the precariousness of nature through imagination. Understanding education in this way leads one to conclude that there is no terminus to the process of educational growth, but rather it is a continual pursuit whose only *telos* is more growth. Simply put, Dewey believed that growth was an inevitable aspect of life, one that could be nourished and directed, or untended and chaotic. The latter form stems from a classically liberal, laissez-faire approach and can lead to overgrowth and morbidity. Dewey rejected this approach and instead sought a growing together of individuals within a community. Consequently, his view of liberty was not a negative one – *i.e.* “freedom from” – but rather a positive one – *i.e.* “freedom to.” The kind of carefully self-directed growth espoused by Dewey has been called by Daniel Savage “the will to harmony” and he characterizes it in terms of “the generic inclination of all life toward development and adaptation,” of which, “natural selection shows that the law of all life is not bare survival but the optimization of each species’ capacities as these capacities are called out by their environment.”²³⁸ In this way, Dewey believed that our species’ knack for imaginative responses to problematic situations could be trusted to foster social progress as long as institutions were not allowed to impede its natural development.

The idea that harmony was possible whenever natural capacities were allowed to develop was an idea to which Zhuangzi would have assented. Though it is obvious that the ancient Chinese did not have the benefit of reading Darwin, growth operated for Dewey in a manner similar to transformation, or *wùhuà* [物化], for Zhuangzi. For

²³⁸ Savage, Daniel. *John Dewey’s Liberalism*. (SIU Press, 2001) p. 5

other ancient Chinese thinkers, transformation was primarily an ontological process, but for Zhuangzi, it was also a process of harmonious development among living creatures. A passage in the eighteenth chapter illustrates this:

How many are the seeds? They get water and become active, at water's edge they become the robes of frogs and oysters [like lichens]. They sprout on the slopes and become "Hill Slippers." Hill Slippers get rich soil and become "Raven's Claw." The roots of Raven's Claw become "Maggot Sties" and their leaves become "Butterfly Dewlaps." The Butterfly Dewlaps get together, transform, and become insects that live under the stove; their shapes peel off and they are called "Myna Gathers." After a thousand days, the Myna Gathers become birds called "Old Hollow Bones." The spittle of the Old Hollow Bones becomes a Simi [斯彌] and the Simi becomes "Pickle Flies." Yilu are born from the "Pickle Flies," and Huangkuang [黄匡] from Jiuyu [九猷]. Jiuyu are born from Maorui [蓼] and Maorui are born from "Rot Worms" and Rot Worms are born from "Sheep's Groom." Sheep's Groom couples with bamboo that has not sprouted for a long while and produces "Green Peace plants." Green Peace plants produce leopards and leopards produce horses and horses produce people. People, in time, return again to the workings. So all the myriad things come out of the workings and go back into them again.²³⁹

Though the details of this passage run somewhat contrary to our contemporary scientific understanding of evolution, and are probably not meant to be taken too seriously, there are several themes working here that relate to the growth of a Darwin-cum-Dewey variety – viz. perpetual change, taxonomic continuity of species and increasing complexity.

Just as Dewey saw growth as both a natural and social affair, so did Zhuangzi see transformation as "the coordinating of the patterns (*li* □) of continuity that emerge and persist in the natural, social, and cultural flux in which we are radically and

²³⁹ cf. Watson, pp. 195-6 [interpolated with my own translations]

resolutely embedded.”²⁴⁰ For Zhuangzi, just as for Dewey, knowledge was situational because it was concomitant with the emergence of these patterns in nature. Human beings contribute to the formation of the contexts we inhabit through interaction with other contributing factors. According to Zhuangzi, this kind of transformation can either accord with *dào* or work against it; it can be either harmonious or cacophonous. This is illustrated in the opening passages of Zhuangzi’s second chapter, *Qí wù lùn* [齊物論].

南郭子綦隱几而坐，仰天而
 ▪，嗒焉似喪其耦。

Master Qi of Nanguo sat arcanelly at a small table; he looked up at the sky and sighed in despair as if he had just lost his spouse.

顏成子游立侍乎前，曰：何居
 乎？形固可使如槁木，而心固
 可使如死灰乎？今之隱几
 者，非昔之隱几者也。

Master Yan-cheng Yòu, who stood there tending to him, said: “What is it? What’s made your face appear as hard as dry wood, and your heart as dead as ash? Is he who sits arcanelly at the table now, not the same person who sat there before?”

子綦曰：偃，不亦善乎，而問
 之也！今者吾喪我，汝知之
 乎？女聞人籟而未聞地籟，女
 聞地籟而未聞天籟夫！

Qi said: “Yan, that question is a good one! Just now I mourned the loss of myself. Do you understand? Oh. Perhaps you’ve only heard the pipes of man and not yet the pipes of the land, perhaps you’ve heard the pipes of the land and have not yet heard the pipes of nature.”

子游曰：敢問其方。

Yòu replied: “I dare to ask where you’re going with all this.”

子綦曰：夫大塊噫氣，其名爲
 風。是唯作，作則萬竅怒 ▪。
 而獨不聞之寥寥乎？

Qi continued: “The great glob produced its vital breath and its name became ‘wind.’ Sometimes it doesn’t blow, but when it does, it resonates loudly through countless openings. Have you not heard its tremendous roar?”

山林之畏佳，大木百圍之竅
 穴，似鼻，似口，似耳，似枅，似
 圈，似臼，似洼者，似 ▪ 者；激
 者，謫者，叱者，吸者，叫者，譟
 者，突者，咬者，前者唱于而

“In great, reverent mountain forests, it surrounds the openings and cavities of huge trees – even those as large as one hundred spans around – as if they were mere nostrils, or mouths, or ears; as if they were building squares, or corrals, or mortars, or hollows; as if they were puddles; intense,

²⁴⁰ Ames, Roger. “Knowing in the Zhuangzi: ‘From Here, on the Bridge, over the River Huo,’” in *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. ed. by Roger Ames. (SUNY, 1998) p. 226 [NOTE: This concept should not be confused with its homophone *lǐ*, which means “ritual.”]

隨者唱喁。

ruddy, howling, sucking, crying, roaring, shouting and biting; they first sing softly and later the harmony grows louder.”

洽風則小和，飄風則大和，厲風濟則眾竅為。而獨不見之調調，之刁刁乎？

“Gentle gushes produce small harmonies, and welling up produces great harmonies, yet when the tempest subsides these openings fall silent. Have you not seen this melodious movement, this cunning commotion?”

子游曰：地籟則眾竅是已，人籟則比竹是已。敢問天籟。

Yòu replied: “I take it that the pipes of the land are just these openings that you speak of. And the pipes of man are just bamboo reeds. I dare to ask about the pipes of nature.”

子綦曰：夫吹萬不同，而使其自己也，咸其自取，怒者其誰邪！

Qi explained: “When blown, all of these openings sound differently, and each shows attunement in its own way; in each case the tune chooses itself, but who does the blowing?”²⁴¹

This exchange is immediately followed by a comparison of great understanding, which is “elegant and easy-going” [閑閑], and petty understanding, which is “scattered and lazy” [閒閒].²⁴² What Zhuangzi seems to suggest is that the most harmonious lives are those that adopt the broadest perspectives. Those with petty perspectives view the vibrations of others as a nuisance, while those with a broad perspective join in the refrain. As Scott Cook has stated it,

... the angry cries of a myriad clashing individual entities might annoy us only if we recognize ourselves as one of their number, as a competitor whose meager voice gets drowned out in all the racket. If, instead, we were to step back for a minute and listen to the chorus from the standpoint of its unity... then we might come to see ourselves too playing whatever instrument is natural to us without trying to impose it upon others.²⁴³

²⁴¹ My translation.

²⁴² “Great understanding is 閑閑, petty understanding is 閒閒” ... the pronunciation of these characters is the same [xián], as is the denotation [idleness] but the connotation and etymology are slightly different. The former is derived from tree/wood [mù] and door/gate [mén], the latter comes from a combination of moon/moonlight [yuè] and mén. Thus, the connotation of the first may be “sturdy idleness” while the second could be read as “scattered idleness.”

²⁴³ Cook, Scott. “Harmony and Cacophony in the Panpipes of Heaven,” in *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*. Ed by Scott Cook (SUNY, 2003) p. 68

The difference, then, is between seeing oneself as an isolated individual in a society or as a contributing member of a community.

Community and Individuality

Although we commonly use “society” and “community” interchangeably, I believe Dewey’s contribution to political thought can be boiled down to a difference between thinking in terms of society and thinking in terms of community. The etymology of each word supports a distinction. Society derives from the Latin *societas* and has connotations of order and friendliness, which are most apparent when we use the term to refer to organizations such as recreational clubs and academic groups. If we think of society in these terms, *i.e.* as “ordered friendliness,” we may begin to look at some features of our global era in a new light. By itself, ordered friendliness seems fairly innocuous. However, when considered in conjunction with the machinery and practices of consumerism, “ordered friendliness” may invoke some chilling images of our future.²⁴⁴ Community, on the other hand, is derived from *communitas*, also a Latin term, which means fellowship and sharing things in common. This seems to be just what Dewey had in mind in his elucidation of the Public.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ This is nowhere more apparent than in cyberspace. The advent of the Internet was touted as the first real step toward cosmopolitanism, the next great frontier. But, like frontiers before it, it has largely failed to live up to its promise, and has instead become a haven for new forms of corruption and exploitation. Even when the Internet is not being abused criminally, its effects on culture are, at best, diluting and, at worst, corrosive. Instead of bringing us together, it seems cyberspace has driven us further apart, with only the thin illusion of togetherness as a consolation. Under this rubric, *friendship* has been replaced by mere friendliness. Friends have become a commodity, pre-packaged in a convenient list that changes on a whim.

²⁴⁵ It is likely that Dewey’s distinction between the Great Community and the Great Society was influenced by a similar one (made by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies) between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Though Dewey only ever mentioned Tönnies in relation to the latter’s scholarship on Hobbes, a 1949 letter from Arthur Bentley to Joseph Ratner can be found among

In 1927 Dewey released *The Public and Its Problems*, a series of lectures that were the fullest expression of his naturalized “instrumentalism” relevant to political thought. There, Dewey anticipated the need for moving from the nationalism of the “great society” towards the cosmopolitanism of “the great community” and developed what he saw as the philosophical groundwork leading to the latter. As he put it,

[I]f the Great Society is to become a Great Community; a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being. The highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it.²⁴⁶

On Dewey’s view, the concept of a “public” must be driven by problematic situations facing a particular group at a particular time, and, because we have largely failed to understand this, “the public” remains an ill-defined and illusory notion. Dewey’s approach provides a means for the public to realize itself and move towards the establishment of a world community that is based upon a conception of human flourishing through “native intelligence” rather than on the philosophical abstractions of individual rights and freedoms.²⁴⁷

The first chapter of Dewey’s text, which bears the title “Search for the Public,” begins with a discussion of the divergence of facts and theories regarding the nature of the political state. Dewey indicted political philosophers, on the one hand, for

Dewey’s collected correspondence which alludes to the (often unnamed) influence Tönnies had on American political theorists of Dewey’s generation.

²⁴⁶ Dewey, John. “The Public and its Problems.” *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953 – The Later Works*. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984) Vol. 2, p. 350 [hereafter abbreviated as *LW*, 2]

²⁴⁷ Cf. Savage, “Introduction: Pragmatic Instrumentalism,” for a fuller treatment of this difference.

beginning with a theoretical abstraction (the form of the Good, the social contract, *Weltgeist*, etc.) and interpreting whatever data they encounter in light of that ideal. He attacked political scientists, on the other hand, for the way they pass off their interpretation of data as brute fact. But, as he stated,

The more sincerely we appeal to facts, the greater is the importance of the distinction between facts which condition human activity and facts which are conditioned by human activity. In the degree which we ignore this difference, social science becomes pseudo-science.²⁴⁸

On his view, neither speculation nor analysis is adequate by itself because,

...the difference between facts which are what they are independent of human desire and endeavor and facts which are to some extent what they are because of human interest and purpose, and which alter with alteration in the latter, cannot be got rid of by any methodology.²⁴⁹

Thus, Dewey thought it best to leave aside the notion of the state, and concentrate instead on the concept of the public.

Dewey suggested that, rather than starting from the imagined cause of human actions and behaviors, we should begin with the acts themselves in order to get an understanding of political life. In this vein, he suggested that an any inquiry begun in earnest ought to start from “the objective fact that human actions have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others.”²⁵⁰ Accordingly, there are two types of consequences, those which affect only the parties involved in the action, and those that have collateral effects on others. This, he argued, was the germ of the distinction between private and public.

²⁴⁸ *LW*, 2:240

²⁴⁹ *LW*, 2:240

²⁵⁰ *LW*, 2:243

If you and I have a conversation, the consequences of which do not affect anyone else, then we may properly call this conversation a private one. But, if our discussion affects any other party, then our discussion is public. It is a commonplace in political theory to see this distinction, between public and private, conflated with that of the social versus the individual. Dewey believed that this was a mistake. On his view,

Many private acts are social; their consequences contribute to the welfare of the community or affect its status and prospects. In the broad sense any transaction deliberately carried on between two or more persons is social in quality. It is a form of associated behavior and its consequences may influence further associations.²⁵¹

Another mistake that is often made regarding the public and the private is the assumption that public affairs should be equated with the socially useful or expedient. Public endeavors (such as war) can have disastrous social effects, just as private ones (like business) may benefit human association. Though this insight “has not carried us far, at least it has warned us against identifying the *community* and its interests with the state or the politically organized community,” it has warned us against conflating community with *society*.²⁵²

Dewey’s argument was an ingenious one, and largely ahead of its time. Instead of attempting to define the state in theoretical or evidential terms, he instead looks toward the functions of human association. This functionalist approach is, of course, an outcropping of his naturalism. As we have seen, Dewey argued in earlier volumes like *Experience and Nature* that experience and nature were functionally contiguous with one another, that organisms were always immersed in commerce with their surrounding environment, and that our continual attempt to separate the human from

²⁵¹ *LW*, 2:244

²⁵² *LW*, 2:245 [emphasis added]

the non-human in experience was simply philosophical obstinance. In a similar way, on his view, a public is created, or *emerges*, from the consequences of associated living - an idea that still finds relevance in the work of thinkers like Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck. As Beck put it in 2006,

Although Dewey was certainly not thinking of global warming, BSE [mad cow disease] or terrorist attacks, his idea is perfectly applicable to world risk society. A global public discourse does *not* grow out of a consensus on decisions, but out of *dissent* over the *consequences* of decisions. Modern risk crises are constituted by just such controversies over consequences. Where some may see an overreaction to risk, it is also possible to see grounds for hope. Because such risk conflicts do indeed have an enlightenment function. They destabilise the existing order, but the same events can also look like a vital step towards the building of new institutions. Global risk has the power to tear away the facades of organised irresponsibility.²⁵³

According to Dewey, there could be many publics, as many as there are actions that have the indirect, public type of consequence. In fact, one person may belong to several distinct publics at one time. Were human associated activity healthy, *i.e.* not pervaded with corruption and exploitation, the result would largely resemble a harmony – much like the stasis an ecosystem would reach if its species were perfectly balanced. But, Dewey realized that such a condition was not achievable on a permanent basis, whether in politics or ecosystems, nor would it be desirable even if it were, because of the dynamic and variable nature of these systems. Just as changes in species and environments keep the natural world in constant flux, population growth, migration, and technological advancement keep the political realm in continuous change. Simply put, Dewey’s philosophy still presupposed the

²⁵³ Beck, Ulrich. “Living in a World Risk Society.” A Hobhouse Memorial Public Lecture given on Wednesday 15th February 2006 at the London School of Economics, p. 11-12 <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/sociology/pdf/Beck-LivingintheWorldRiskSociety-Feb2006.pdf> [see also Beck & Cronin. *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Polity, 2006), p. 35]

Enlightenment-era notion of social progress, but with a twist. Because he saw growth as both a means and an end, he rejected the idea of a final, utopian political end that had been espoused by Modern thinkers like Hegel and criticized by post-Moderns like Adorno.

Progress was not a necessary feature of the world for Dewey, but rather was a contingency that required careful and constant vigilance to ensure. As problematic situations continually arise, innovative solutions are continuously required. This was where Dewey's naturalism and instrumentalism intersected, and though critics, influenced by Moore's naturalistic fallacy or Adorno's suspicion of technocracy, balked at his ideas, this marriage foreshadowed many concepts still viable today. John Teehan and Christopher diCarlo are two thinkers who have argued that Dewey's thought was not as vulnerable to a Moorean critique as many surmised:

For Dewey, we engage in moral inquiry *because* there is no clear, objective moral truth at hand. We investigate in order to better understand the conditions of human valuations and so be better equipped to understand and resolve those dilemmas which we must face... For Dewey, to claim "x" is "good" is not to commit the naturalistic fallacy of identifying a natural property with a moral evaluation. It is to judge that "x" will resolve the problematic situation.²⁵⁴

According to Teehan and diCarlo, Moore's Open Question, once such a Deweyan understanding is in place, is a poor question, wrongly asked:

Once we have established that "x" resolves the dilemma to then ask if it is good is either redundant, or it is to ask for further evaluation of the proposed resolution—i.e. it is to ask "does x truly resolve the dilemma?" "does it resolve the dilemma in the short run but create greater long term problems?" "does it resolve the problem by frustrating other significant interests?" etc. These are all fair questions, indeed important questions. They do not imply, however,

²⁵⁴ Teehan, John & diCarlo, Christopher. "On the Naturalistic Fallacy: A Conceptual Basis for Evolutionary Ethics." *Evolutionary Psychology*. (2004) 2:42

that there is some fallacy lurking beneath the moral judgment, they merely seek to continue the process of moral inquiry in a meta-ethically and epistemically responsible way.²⁵⁵

Likewise, David Savage has argued against the line of attack that interprets Dewey's instrumentalism as an endorsement of technocratic and commercial opportunism, claiming that Dewey's major insight in this vein was that "theory is not separate from (or more noble than) practice but is itself derived from practice."²⁵⁶ Dewey's view was instrumental only insofar as it was functional and emergentist. Values were described as operative, not categorical or teleological, but such a description does not suggest that values are merely expedient for an individual. Instead, Dewey saw value as hypothetical and tentative and always open to revision toward broader application. His instrumentalism was always tempered by his fallibilism and his communalism. To put it in more contemporary terms, a Deweyan view of progress presupposes sustainability insofar as it always has an eye to what is best for the community, not the individual.

Dewey agreed with many critics of his day, like Walter Lippman, who argued that society had become too complex for the average citizen to make informed choices. However, he disagreed with Lippman's appeal to an intellectual elitism, and posited in its stead a splintering of society into smaller units. Dewey argued that the great community would be a composite of publics, with the latter term standing for any group facing a common problematic situation. In this way, he claimed, "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community."²⁵⁷ On Dewey's view, one person would naturally self-identify with numerous communities

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 43

²⁵⁶ Savage, p. 9

²⁵⁷ *PP*, LW 2:368

and institutions and the result would be a network of democratically participating citizens. As he wrote,

From the standpoint of the individual, it [democracy] consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups.²⁵⁸

Even in 1927, Dewey recognized that technological advancement in particular posed a practical problem for the realization of his concept of the public and admitted that traditional philosophical theory could not have anticipated such a problem. He wrote,

It seemed almost self-evident to Plato – as to Rousseau later – that a genuine state could hardly be larger than the number of persons capable of personal acquaintance with one another. Our modern state-unity is due to the consequences of technology employed so as to facilitate the rapid and easy circulation of opinions and information, and so as to generate constant and intricate interaction far beyond the limits of face-to-face communities.²⁵⁹

Dewey claimed that the single most confounding feature of technology for political theorists was its resultant political integration. The attendant confusion he attributed to the wholesale acceptance of classical individualism. As he saw it, the concept of state as an ordered friendliness of discrete individuals arose, in part, because no one had the “faith that human beings released from the pressure of this system [i.e. localized community] could hold together in any unity.”²⁶⁰ The disjunct between

²⁵⁸ *PP*, LW 2:327-328

²⁵⁹ *LW*, 2:306-307

²⁶⁰ *LW*, 2:308

how classical liberal theory thinks about human association, *i.e.* via individualism, and the actual conditions of political integration, on Dewey's view, is responsible for the submergence of the public.

In spite of attained integration, or rather perhaps because of its nature, the Public seems to be lost; it is certainly bewildered... our political "common-sense" philosophy imputes a public only to support and substantiate the behavior of officials. How can the latter be public officers, we despairingly ask, unless there is a public? If a public exists, it is surely as uncertain about its own whereabouts as philosophers since Hume have been about the residence and make-up of the self.²⁶¹

The unfitness of what passes for the public today, with respect to the concept of community from which it deviated, Dewey attested, is evident in the increase in the number of legal and extra-legal agencies since the industrial age. After all, the only way to maintain such a "Great Society," understood as an ordered friendliness, on the global scale is through an increase in what classical liberals called the "rule of law."

Zhuangzi's view of associated living reflects a similar emphasis on putting community first – as most Chinese schools of thought, particularly Confucianism, tended to do. In the preceding chapter, Zhuangzi's philosophy was portrayed as a critical response to Confucian precepts. This, however, is only half the story. By the time Zhuangzi was writing, Confucianism was well on its way to becoming a system of ritual posturing and officious scholarship. Even thinkers more closely aligned with the Confucian tradition (particularly Mencius and Xunzi, who were contemporaries of Zhuangzi) sought to reform these aspects of Confucianism. From the text, it becomes apparent that Zhuangzi's goal was not to overcome Confucius

²⁶¹ Ibid.

completely, but rather to salvage what was worth salvaging and supplement it with insights from an ascetic tradition that was developing into the school of *dào*.

When looking at the teachings of Confucius, it becomes obvious just how important community was to the early Chinese. On their view, community was a sort of web, wherein individuals participate in various connections with family, neighborhood and kingdom. The starting point of this web, according to Confucius, was known as *rén* [仁] (humanity or human-heartedness). Perhaps the best translation of *rén* would be “other-regarding” in the sense of having concern for others. Essential to the concept of *rén* is the notion of loving others. In the *Analects* we see Confucius, when asked about *rén*, say, “It is to love others.”²⁶² But, Confucian love should not be confused with the Christian *agapé* or the Greek *eros*. It is better characterized as familial or neighborly love. This is important because, for Confucius, the individual is irreducibly social.

According to Confucius, the best means for attaining such benevolence toward others is to “take one’s own familiar feelings as a guide.”²⁶³ This principle, which the Chinese called *shù* [恕], is often translated as “deference” or “reciprocity.” Etymologically, the character for Confucian *shù* is comprised of two parts. The upper portion is *rú*, which means “resemblance”, while the lower is “heart-mind,” or *xīn*. In a celebrated passage of the *Analects*, Confucius was asked, “Is there a rule which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?” he responded, “Is not

²⁶² *Analects* 12:22

²⁶³ This wording can be found in both the Raymond Dawson and Arthur Waley translations of 6:30 of the *Analects*.

reciprocity [*shù*] such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”²⁶⁴

Confucius tells of another more primordial virtue which can be considered the wellspring of *ren*. This wellspring is called filial piety, or *xiào* [孝], and could best be described as reverence towards one’s parents. Confucius believed that *xiào* and *ren* were closely linked, “Young men should be filial at home and respectful to elders when away from home.”²⁶⁵ Here, the importance of *xiào* to *ren* is like the importance of a root to a tree, securing the appropriate relationships of respect within the home is prior to securing respect within a community. However, *xiào*, despite its English translation, is not simply what is owed from a son or daughter. Rather, it involves both the idea that the parent will reciprocate what is due to the offspring, and the notion that obligation is not merely material. The first of these is illustrated in the *Analects* where Confucius is observed as saying, “Let a ruler be a ruler, a subject a subject, a father a father, and a son a son.”²⁶⁶ And, the latter is shown in the passage, “As far as present day filial piety is concerned, this means being able to provide sustenance; but even dogs and horses are able to receive sustenance. If reverence is not shown how does one know the difference?”²⁶⁷ Therefore, the idea of *shù* begins in the familial structure and is extended outward to larger contexts. If filial piety is the source of *ren* then it is important that it be practiced even after one’s parents have passed. Therefore, Confucius claimed, “When you serve them (parents) while they are alive do so in accordance with the rites; after they are dead,

²⁶⁴ Legge, James. (trans.) *The Analects*. (New York: Dover, 1971.) 15:24. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations will be to this translation.

²⁶⁵ *Analects* 1:6

²⁶⁶ *Analects* 12:11

²⁶⁷ *Analects* 2:7

when you bury them, do so in accordance with the rites and, when you sacrifice to them, do so in accordance with the rites.”²⁶⁸ This passage not only illustrates how Confucius believed that *xiào* could provide an uninterrupted source for *rén*, but also ties these two virtues in with the third major concept in the Confucian system, *i.e.* the principle of *lǐ* [禮].

If *xiào* is the internal source of *rén*, then *lǐ* could be considered the external instantiation that discloses *rén* to others. As was the case with *rén*, Confucius broadened the term *lǐ*, which previously referred to sacrificial ceremony, to encompass manners, etiquette, customs, and rules of propriety. Because *lǐ* was first used to refer to the rules of sacrifice, it is typically translated as “ritual propriety,” yet it is more accurately understood as the observance, appreciation, and implementation of all conventions having to do with the interaction between two or more individuals, often of differing social status. It is often paired with the concept of *yì* [義], which means something like “righteousness” or “appropriateness” and is the virtue exercised in social situations like gift giving and mourning, whereas *lǐ* is more often used in the context of politics and government. According to Confucius, “The superior man in everything considers righteousness [*yì*] to be essential. He performs it according to the rules of propriety [*lǐ*].”²⁶⁹

Another concept vital to a proper understanding of *lǐ* is that of “reverence,” or *jìng* [敬]. For instance, as Confucius put it in one passage, “High station filled without indulgent generosity; ceremonies performed without reverence; mourning conducted without sorrow – wherewith should I contemplate such ways?” Elsewhere

²⁶⁸ *Analects* 2:5

²⁶⁹ *Analects* 15:18

he wrote, “In the ceremonies of mourning, it is better that there be deep sorrow than a minute attention to observances.”²⁷⁰ Which is to say, he believed that *lǐ* was not a practice of empty observances, but carried with it always a true representation of *jìng*. When combined with *yì* and *jìng* in this way, *lǐ* can be considered an outgrowth of *rén*. To flesh this out in even more detail, let us consider another pair of terms familiar to Confucianism, *i.e.* *zhì* [質] (substance) and *wén* [文] (culture). Peimin Ni has related these two terms to Aristotle’s concepts of matter and form, respectively, with regard to the conceptions of *lǐ* and *yì*. He writes,

Appropriateness [*yì*] is the substance [*zhì*] of ritual propriety, and ritual propriety the refined form [*wén*] of appropriateness. ...both appropriateness and ritual propriety combined should be the refined form [*wén*] in which and through which a human-hearted person [*rén*] manifests her humanity.²⁷¹

This further elucidates the connection between regarding others with benevolence and ritual propriety. Only when we are proficient in exercising *lǐ* will *rén* be manifested. The upshot of this is that *rén* and *lǐ* are one and the same virtue expressed in different ways, one internally the other externally. This can be seen in the twelfth book of the *Analects*, wherein one of Confucius’ disciples says, “Culture (*wén*) is just as important as the stuff one is made of (*zhì*), and the stuff one is made of is just as important as culture. The skin of a tiger or leopard is no different than the skin of a dog or a sheep.”²⁷² Therefore, the relationship between form and substance (*wén* and *zhì*) makes three things explicit in the Confucian system: 1) *lǐ* and *ren* cannot exist independently of one another, 2) exercising *lǐ* allows others to

²⁷⁰ *Analects* 3:26 & 3:4

²⁷¹ Ni, Peimin. *On Confucius*. (Wadsworth: CA. 2002) p. 53

²⁷² *Analects* 12:8

see the *ren* of an individual, and subsequently, 3) it is only through *li* that human-heartedness and social roles are learned/communicated.

This Confucian connection of action to benevolence and righteousness through ritual is precisely what Zhuangzi railed against. For him, ritual was a human artifice that hampered natural genuineness.²⁷³ As it is put in the eighth chapter,

My definition of expertness has nothing to do with benevolence [*ren*] and righteousness [*yi*]; it means being expert in regard to your Virtue [*de*], that is all. My definition of expertness has nothing to do with benevolence or righteousness; it means following the true form of your inborn nature, that is all.²⁷⁴

For Confucius, the epitome of ritual propriety was the conduct of mourners at a funeral. Therefore, it should not be surprising that one finds several episodes in the Zhuangzi that depict funeral behavior contrary to the Confucian standard (which held that one should mourn family members for three years). In the eighteenth chapter, a story concerning the death of Zhuangzi's wife is told. When a friend came to console him for the loss, he found Zhuangzi on the floor, merrily beating a tub as a drum and singing. Shocked, the friend asks Zhuangzi, "It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing – this is going too far, isn't it?"²⁷⁵ Zhuangzi disagrees and explains that it makes no sense to mourn an event that is part of nature's transformation. As he puts it, "It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter."²⁷⁶

In the sixth chapter, there is a story of four sages, which connects this notion with Zhuangzi's view of community. It begins,

²⁷³ cf. Coyle, Daniel. "On the Zhēnrén." In *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. Edited by Roger Ames. (SUNY Press, 1998)

²⁷⁴ Watson, p. 103

²⁷⁵ Watson, p. 192

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

Master Ssu, Master Yu, Master Li, and Master Lai were all four talking together. “Who can look upon nonbeing as his head, on life as his back, and on death as his rump?” they said. “Who knows that life and death, existence and annihilation, are all a single body? I will be his friend.” The four men looked at each other and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts and so the four of them became friends.²⁷⁷

Later when one of the sages developed a severe deformity, and another lay on his deathbed, they each told their friends that such changes were welcome: “Now they [yīn and yáng] have brought me to the verge of death, if I should refuse to obey them, how perverse I should be!”²⁷⁸

Zhuangzi would have agreed with Dewey that ordered friendliness (especially the kind that is demonstrated in Confucian ritual) was not the most preferable way of living with others. The four sages mentioned above became friends because they recognized a very deep connection between them. In a story immediately following this one, Zhuangzi describes what true friendship consists in:

Three men, Master Sanghu, Meng Zifan, and Master Qinzhang were talking with each other, “Who is able to be with others without being with others, be for others without being for others? Who is able to climb the skies, roam the mists and dance in the infinite, living forgetful of each other without end?” The three men looked at each other and smiled, none opposed in his heart, and so they became friends.²⁷⁹

Just as in the previous story, one of the men falls ill and eventually dies. Confucius, hearing of this, sends one of his students to pay homage and finds the two friends singing in the presence of the corpse. When the student asks about the

²⁷⁷ Watson, pp. 83-84

²⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 85

²⁷⁹ This translation appears in Brian Lundberg’s “A Meditation on Friendship.” In *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. Edited by Roger Ames (SUNY Press, 1998) p. 211

appropriateness of such actions the two friends look at each other, amused, and ask “What does this man know of the meaning of ceremony?”²⁸⁰

What Zhuangzi seems to suggest in this story is that friendship involves a type of doing without striving and a perpetual “forgetfulness” among those that immerse themselves in the *dào* of nature. The first notion reasserts the importance of *wúwéi* [無為] in Zhuangzi’s thought, the latter may suggest that embracing the transformations of nature and forgetting the self allows for the formation of a true community. To flesh this latter point out further, we must consider the connection in Zhuangzi’s “Inner Chapters” between the notion of forgetfulness and no-self, or, *wújǐ* [無己]. Repeatedly throughout those pages, Zhuangzi reminds us that the best of us will have no self, no utility [*wúgōng*, 無功], and no renown [*wúmíng*, 無名].

Likewise, he goes to great lengths to demonstrate that great understanding comes on the heels of forgetting the ways of the world and the self (as illustrated in the passage quoted earlier regarding the pipes of man, of the land, and of nature). For Zhuangzi, as Brian Lundberg puts it, “forgetting one’s physical self is linked to going beyond the ritual guidelines, in this case, the most sacred of all – the funeral rites. Forgetting thus functions as the technique par excellence for achieving spiritual realization and increasing awareness.”²⁸¹

For Zhuangzi, the notion of self as a discrete individual – even one tied to others in a network of social and moral ritual – is an impediment both to understanding and to true friendship. In the traditionally Western picture, “the ‘self’

²⁸⁰ Watson, p. 86

²⁸¹ Lundberg, p. 213

experienced as closed off from what is not self, in part, is a consequence of the personal anxiety connected with our cultural belief in ontological separation and estrangement from God.”²⁸² Dewey balked at such a notion, just as Zhuangzi likely would have. It is important to mention here, that Zhuangzi’s advice about forgetting self should not be seen as equivalent to the Buddhist notions of selflessness, though this superficial similarity did aid in bringing Buddhism and Daoism together in subsequent centuries. Instead, Zhuangzi’s forgetfulness of self is more of a “getting out of one’s own way” by seeing the individual as inextricably entwined within one’s surroundings. Dewey held a similar view, which started to come into focus through his work in *The Public and Its Problems*. There, he claimed the individual...

... finds his conduct as a member of a political group enriching and enriched by his participation in family life, industry, scientific and artistic associations. There is a free give-and-take: fullness of integrated personality is therefore possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups reenforce [sic.] one another and their values accord.²⁸³

Later, in *Individualism Old and New*, Dewey carried this view to its logical conclusion and employed it to criticize what he described as the “rugged individualism” of the classical liberal tradition. Dewey laid out the problems surrounding rugged individuality thusly:

Our material culture, as anthropologists would call it, is verging upon the collective and corporate. Our moral culture, along with our ideology, is, on the other hand, still saturated with ideals and values of an individualism derived from the pre-scientific, pre-technological age. Its spiritual roots are found in medieval religion, which asserted the ultimate nature of the individual soul and

²⁸² Jochim, Chris. “Just Say No to ‘No Self’ in Zhuangzi.” In *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. Edited by Roger Ames (SUNY Press, 1998)

²⁸³ *PP*, LW 2:328

centered the drama of life about the destiny of that soul. Its institutional and legal concepts were framed in the feudal period.²⁸⁴

In its place, Dewey suggested that a notion of the individual based on “spontaneous function” in a “communal life.”²⁸⁵ Such a life would, as Daniel Savage has pointed out, allow for a free creativity within a community, because it brought together objectivity and subjectivity. In his words,

I admit that it is hard for me to understand why Dewey’s solution would strike anyone as controversial. Its basic premise seems simple and self-evident; pure objectivity necessarily excludes any creative contribution; pure subjectivity necessarily excludes the possibility of expression. On the one hand, to express one’s self artistically requires at least some objective components (material, language, common experiences or values) so that the work is capable of being communicated. On the other hand, for the expression to be creative, as opposed to imitative, some component of the work must be subjective (imagination, innovation, uniqueness, fantasy).²⁸⁶

This is very similar to how Roger Ames has characterized the operation of *wúwéi* in Zhuangzi’s thought – *i.e.* as “a productively creative relatedness.”²⁸⁷

Understanding *wúwéi* as a type of selfless, interpenetrating, creative association held epistemic implications for Daoism that ran conversely to Confucian standards, as well. As Ames and Hall have explained it,

In Confucianism, self is determined by sustained effort (*zhong* 忠) in deferential transactions (*shu* 恕) guided by ritually structured roles and relations (*li* 禮) that project one’s person outward into society and into culture. Such a person becomes a focus of the community’s deference (*junzi* 君子) and a source of its spirituality.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁴ *ION*, LW 5:77

²⁸⁵ cf. *ION*, LW 5:81

²⁸⁶ Savage, p. 62-63

²⁸⁷ Ames, p. 8

²⁸⁸ Ames and Hall, p. 38

As we have seen, Zhuangzi advocated an alternate sort of deference – where one deferred to the vitality of one’s surroundings rather than the codified norms of tradition. This meant that knowledge, for him, was an affair that understood nature “on its own terms without recourse to rules of discrimination that separate one sort of thing from another.”²⁸⁹ This type of knowledge Zhuangzi called *wúzhī* [無知], which is sometimes translated literally as “non-knowledge.” In the previous chapter, the *wúwéi* comportment of the *zhēnrén* toward her surroundings was described as “mirror-like,” and it was particularly with regard to knowing that Zhuangzi made heavy use of this comparison. As he put it in the seventh chapter, *Yīng dì wáng* [應帝王], “The ultimate person employs his heart like a mirror; not chasing, not inviting; adapting and not storing; this is the reason he is able to flourish and not meet harm.”²⁹⁰ And in the thirteenth chapter: “The heart of the sage in stillness is the mirror of the heavens and earth, the looking glass of the universe.”²⁹¹

Those familiar with contemporary neo-pragmatism will no doubt be reminded of Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) by these passages. However, this superficial similarity should not mislead us. Zhuangzi would advocate neither Western correspondence theories of truth or representational theories of language (the two “mirrors” in Rorty’s attack). His point instead is that knowledge is reactive and adaptive and is therefore best left unshackled by convention and fixed standards. The accuracy of the image in Zhuangzi’s mirror is only of secondary importance in comparison to the immediacy of harmony a mirrored reflection can demonstrate. In

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 41

²⁹⁰ My translation. “至人之用心若鏡，不將不迎，應而不藏，故能勝物而不傷。”

²⁹¹ My translation. “聖人之心靜乎天地之鑒也，萬物之鏡也。”

this way, Zhuangzi seems to be calling for a sort of spontaneous critical thinking (since creative thinking is the beginning of critical thinking) for oneself. Such a notion is something to which Dewey could assent, though he would have rejected any suggestion that there is any other kind of thinking. As he put it, “We talk about thinking for one's self. After all, the words ‘for one's self’ are superfluous or redundant. It is not thought unless it is for one's self.”²⁹²

Zhuangzi believed that one of the best ways for achieving this type of “non-active action” and “non-knowing knowledge” was to have what he called *wiyù* [無欲], *i.e.* non-desirous desire.” Just as with the other wu-forms above, the ostensive paradox in this concept is mostly due to the limits of Western translation. A better understanding of it would be as “deferential” desire or even “objectless” desire. Ames and Hall describe it as “shaped not by the desire to own, to control, or to consume, but by the desire simply to celebrate and enjoy” one’s surroundings.²⁹³ In a world of ever-changing events, Zhuangzi held, this was the only type of desire that would not be frustrated and could allow for the type of transformation required to stay in harmony with nature. This is what gives Zhuangzi’s philosophy that twinge of asceticism and agrarian anarchism. According to him, it is up to each of us to go beyond the limits and boundaries of civil society’s codes by rejecting convention.

Dewey saw it only slightly different. Though he would have agreed that the habits of tradition could be subverted and improved upon through critical thinking, he argued that such a capacity could only be honed by experience, and the best way to ensure this was to reconstruct education around inquiry. Simply put, Dewey

²⁹² Dewey, MW 15:175

²⁹³ Ames and Hall, p. 42

believed that if the education of a populace could be reconstructed in such a way that its people could, through critical thinking, become the master rather than servant of their habits, then it would be possible to have true democracy, or what he called “democracy as a way of life,” a way of living that would be at once anarchical (because it is an-archaic) *and* cooperative, a way of life where our faith in some prime mover, be it intelligent or not, is replaced with a faith in each other. He wrote, some 12 years after his work in *The Public and Its Problems*, that...

...democracy as a way of life is controlled by personal faith in personal day-by-day working together with others. Democracy is the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation - which may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition - is itself a priceless addition to life. To take as far as possible every conflict which arises-and they are bound to arise-out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree- even profoundly-with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends. A genuinely democratic faith in peace is faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other-a suppression which is none the less one of violence when it takes place by psychological means of ridicule, abuse, intimidation, instead of by overt imprisonment or in concentration camps. To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life. If what has been said is charged with being a set of moral commonplaces, my only reply is that that is just the point in saying them. For to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life is to realize that democracy is a moral ideal and so far as it becomes a fact is a moral fact. It is to realize that democracy is a reality only as it is indeed a commonplace of living.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ “Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us” [LW vol. 14 p. 228]

Likewise, Zhuangzi believed that following *wúwéi* would allow people to attain a higher understanding and harmonious association with one another by allowing transformation to act through them. The result of these two views is nothing less than a life unlike anything any human being has ever witnessed. In fact, such a way of life would perhaps *no longer even be human* – it would have been transformed into something much different. This evolution of the human being into the truly democratic being is, I believe, what ties Dewey’s naturalistic ontology and his unshakable hope for our political future to Zhuangzi’s advocacy of wandering at ease along the ever-changing *dào*.

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