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PLATO'S COSMIC ANIMAL VS. THE DAOIST COSMIC PLANT:
RELIGIOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: Heidegger claims that it is the ultimate job of philosophy to preserve the force of the “elemental words” in which human beings express themselves. Many of these elemental words are found in the various cosmogonies that have informed cultural ideologies around the world. Two of these “elemental words,” which shape the ideologies (ethics, aesthetics, and religion of a culture) are the animal-model of the cosmos in Plato’s *Timaeus* and the mechanical models developed in the 17th-18th centuries in Europe. The paper argues that Daoism employs a third, and neglected, plant-model of cosmogony and of human life that provides an illuminating contrast to the other more well-known models. First, Plato’s animal-model of the cosmos and, second, the alternative Daoist plant-model of the cosmos are discussed. Third, the paper replies to the objection that the organic model in general and the plant-model in particular cannot accommodate human freedom. Fourth, it is shown how the Daoist plant-model supports a novel account of the central Daoist notion of *wu-wei* (doing nothing, but everything gets done). Fifth, the paper rebuts the objection that the Daoist plant-model of the cosmos and human life is fatally nihilistic. Sixth, the paper argues that the Daoist account of the origin of human religion, art and historical feeling cannot be properly understood apart from its plant-model of the cosmos and human life.

Key Words: Daoism, Plato, philosophy, *wu-wei*, religion, cosmogony

"Every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as the paradigmatic model. The creation of the world becomes the archetype for every creative human gesture..."
 Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (45)¹

Since a cosmogony expresses a model for an entire way of living, understanding a culture's cosmogony provides great insight into the science, art, religion, and ideology of that culture². Whitehead identifies two great cosmologies (each with its own cosmogony) that have dominated Western thought as that of Plato's *Timaeus*, where the cosmos is a living organism, and the "mechanistic" cosmologies of the 17th-18th centuries that anticipate modern "scientific" cosmologies.³ Whitehead even claims that Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato's philosophy of organism.⁴ Plato proposes a specific *animal-model* of the cosmic organism.⁵ Hume, remarking that the universe is not like a watch or a knitting room, mentions both animal and plant-models of the cosmos as alternatives but does not elaborate on the distinction.⁶ By contrast, parts of Chinese philosophy, especially Daoism, offer a picture of "the organismic nature of the universe" based on a plant-model.⁷ Although Daoism employs multiple models of the Dao (water, the Uncarved Block, the Female, the Valley, and the Newborn Child,⁸ the plant-model deserves to be included as well. The Platonic animal and the Daoist plant-models of the cosmos represent two very different sets of moral and religious intuitions about the ultimate nature and meaning of human life.⁹ Although there are exceptions on both sides, the animal-model is more entrenched in the West and the plant-model is more often accorded a *fundamental* role in the East. Heidegger writes that the ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the force of the most elemental words in which *Dasein* expresses itself.¹⁰ The present paper explores the very different "elemental words" in Plato's animal and Daoist plant symbolisms with a view towards understanding the very different ideologies built upon them. The first part presents Plato's animal-model. The second part contrasts Plato's animal-model with Daoism's plant-model. The third part replies to a common objection that the plant-model cannot accommodate human freedom. The fourth presents a plant-model of the Daoist notion of *wu-wei* (doing nothing, yet everything gets done).¹¹ The fifth part rebuts the objection that Daoism, on the present plant-model, is nihilistic. The final part argues that a proper understanding of the Daoist view of the origin of human ideologies, religion, art and "historical feeling," is inseparable from its plant-model of human life.

Plato's Cosmic Animal

"The world... has become a visible animal, containing the visible... God who is the image of the intellectual, the... most perfect—the one only begotten heaven."

Plato, *Timaeus* (92c)

Plato could have chosen to model the cosmos either on an animal or a plant but specifically chose the animal-symbolism.¹² There are many *mixed* views that employ both. In the *Euthyphro*, Plato himself has Socrates compare the education of the youth to the farmer's care for "his young plants."¹³ Indeed, following Empedocles and Democritus, Plato thinks of plants as a kind of minimal animal.¹⁴ Thus, Plato has a minimal role for plant-symbolism but the *higher* aspects of the animal soul are more fundamental.

First, Plato's cosmos is created by the *Demiurge*, "the father and maker" of the cosmos.¹⁵ Since Plato's cosmos is the perfect animal it is "endowed with intelligence," where intelligence (Reason), consists in the ability to grasp the perfect Forms. Since this perfect rationality is on display in the orderly movements of the heavens, Plato's mortal organisms, themselves modelled on the cosmic organism, are *drawn to the heavens above*. Thus, the rational soul is likened to "winged steeds" and their "winged chariots."¹⁶ Since it is the "natural property" of wings to "raise that which is heavy and carry it aloft," these rational souls can "climb the steep ascent even to the summit of the arch that supports the heavens."¹⁷

There the rational soul "beholds... the pasturage [on] the plain of Truth... proper to [its] noblest part."¹⁸ It is drawn to this heavenly "meadow" because it "is nourished thereby."¹⁹ The rational soul is likened to an *animal*—a steed that is *powerful* enough to *fly* to the arch of the heavens. Since the "pasturage" on "the plain of truth" nourishes it, this powerful animal *feeds* on the plants in the meadow there.²⁰ Plato gives a vivid picture of the contrast between the superior *animal* soul and the inferior plant-soul which latter exists for the *use* of animals.

Plato's animal-centric cosmology is also, therefore, oriented towards the pursuit of knowledge.²¹ One must "strain every nerve to attain precision and knowledge."²² Since such knowledge must be expressed in words Plato emphasizes the importance of language and discourse.²³ The emphasis on discourse means that language is not merely used for asserting propositions but for *social communication*.²⁴ Recall that Socrates' main occupation was *social* discourse in the marketplace.²⁵ Plato also sees a close connection between knowledge, social communication and freedom.²⁶ He identifies the "free man's knowledge" with the philosopher's knowledge which aims at truth.²⁷ Finally, Plato's identification of the Sun as the source of wisdom traces to his view that males descend from the Sun and

the females from the earth.²⁸ The achievement of knowledge for Plato is a *manly* affair requiring great strength and daring in the use of steeds, chariots and the like. This is important because, as argued later, Daoism connects the principle of plants with the female principle.

Plato does *not* paint an entirely negative picture of the (female) earth. The Earth is “the eldest of the created Gods.”²⁹ The first humans, Athenians and guardians, sprang from the Earth.³⁰ The Earth is “as pure as the starry heaven in which it lies.”³¹ The Earth goddess is variously praised.³² The point is not that the (female) Earth is represented *completely* negatively but that it is a *lesser* god than the (male) Sun. Since the (male) Sun is the symbol of The Good, the goodness of the (female) earth is *derivative* from that of the Sun.

Daoist Plant-Symbolism

“According to Chinese etymologists the symbol *Ti* [for God] was a symbol of the calyx and the heart of a flower, from which the generations of the blossoms, fruit and new plant will develop.”
Chang, *Creativity and Daoism* (60)

The Daoist plant-model is as deeply rooted in Chinese culture as the animal-model is rooted in the West.³³ On the ancient Chinese view, “God” created the world, not as Plato’s *Demiurge* rationally *crafts* a cosmos out of chaos, or the perfect Christian God creates the world from nothing, but as a plant *grows* from the heart of a flower.³⁴ The same theme is found in the “gourd” cosmogony of early Daoism.³⁵ The Daoist picture issues in very different paradigm of human life. Whereas Plato compares the human soul to a *powerful* animal destined to fly to the heavens, the Daoist employs plant-imagery to symbolize that human beings are like plants *rooted in the earth*.³⁶ For this reason the bamboo tree, because of “its upright outward bearing” and “inner emptiness,” is used by Daoist painters to symbolize the gentleman.³⁷ Thus, Chang suggests that Wang Tseng-tsu’s painting of the bamboo tree may even be taken as a symbol of the painters own “subjective ideality.”³⁸

Recall that Plato does have Socrates’ say that the good educator should “take care of the young plants.”³⁹ Compare this to Laozi’s remark,

What (Dao's) skilful planter plants /Can never be
uptorn...⁴⁰

However, whereas such plant-symbolism is a *leitmotif* (because Plato’s plant-soul is the minimal, nutritive, soul in Plato), it is *central* in Daoism. While Plato sees the cosmos as created by a rational (male) creator patterned on the perfect eternal Forms, *Daoism* sees heaven and earth as growing from a (female) root destined to remain a “mystery.”⁴¹ Daoists see no *rational* blueprint for the growth of the world: “The female mystery is ...

the root from which grew heaven and earth.”⁴² Further, whereas Plato emphasized the importance of knowledge, *Daoism* enjoins one to “renounce all knowledge.”⁴³ Plato’s adoption of the Sun as an image of the Form of the Good (the source of wisdom) correlates with his view that males descend from the Sun.⁴⁴ Since Plato’s (male) *Demiurge* (the “father” of all things) looks to the eternal Forms for guidance in creating a perfect cosmos, Plato’s picture is that of a (male) reason attaining knowledge (illumination) in the light of the (male) Sun (the Form of the Good). By contrast, *Daoism* holds that true strength lies in the mysterious (female) “root,” sunk in the dark soil, from which heaven and earth arose.⁴⁵

Similarly, whereas Plato holds that the statesman must possess rational knowledge of the Good, Laozi, referring to the great ruler, writes,

His case is like that (of the plant) of which we say
that its roots are deep and its flower stalks firm:--
this is the way to secure that its enduring life shall
long be seen.⁴⁶

Whereas, for Plato, the path to knowledge (even *earthly* knowledge of statesmanship) requires a powerful animal *ascent* to the “heavens,” *Daoism* enjoins the opposite—the *descent* of one’s roots deep into the *lowly* (female) earth.

Plato’s and Laozi’s opposing organic models also issue in contrasting views in the nature of strength. Whereas Plato emphasizes the great *strength* of the (male) animals (steeds) needed to carry the soul upwards to “the plain of Truth,”⁴⁷ Laozi counsels that

[F]irmness and strength are the concomitants of death; softness and weakness, the concomitants of life. Hence he who (relies on) the strength of his forces does not conquer; and a tree which is strong will fill the out-stretched arms (and thereby invites the feller). Therefore... what is firm and strong is below, and... what is soft and weak is above.⁴⁸

Whereas Plato, in typical Greek fashion, emphasizes the *display* of strength,⁴⁹ Laozi enjoins the *display* of weakness (which is not the same as enjoining weakness). *Daoism* just has a different paradigm of strength. Since *Daoism* holds that *visible* strength invites enemies it holds that the true strength (of the tree) must be *hidden* in the (female) roots sunk in the dark soil, not displayed in the “strong... out-stretched arms” of the (male) tree.

Further, whereas Plato emphasizes the importance of language and discourse, *Daoism* emphasizes silence and quietude,

You listen to it but it is not to be heard. Its name is soundless. To return to the root is... quietude, which is also... a return to one’s destiny.⁵⁰

Chang writes: "The contemplation of the utmost in quietude leads to the hidden recesses of creative power... [I]t is from this realm that beauty is manifested to the objective world."⁵¹

Finally, there may be no greater contrast between Plato and Daoism than in their different attitudes to freedom deriving from their different models of the cosmic organism. First, although freedom is a common theme in Plato, there are relatively few direct references to freedom in Daoist texts but those that exist are revelatory. When these occur, they generally refer to a *spiritual* freedom that comes from insight into one's inner nature, the "freedom and serenity" that make for "natural reflection."⁵²

A state may be ruled by (measures of) correction;
weapons of war may be used with crafty dexterity;
(but) the kingdom is made one's own (only) by
freedom from action and purpose.⁵³

Whereas Plato praises freedom *of* action, Laozi praises freedom *from* action. Similarly, Zhuangzi's philosophy may, essentially, be a plea for freedom, but, again, it is a "spiritual freedom, liberating the individual more from the confines of their own mind than from external restraints."⁵⁴ Although both Plato and Daoism employ the language of freedom, they have completely different paradigms of freedom. The Daoist emphasis on freedom *from* action is the very opposite of the Greek emphasis on *worldly achievement via free action*. Whereas Plato's animal-model enjoins the active *animal-model* of freedom, the Daoist plant-model enjoins overcoming the "ego centered self" in order to achieve "submission" to the "primordial source" that *unites one with nature* rather than separating one from it.⁵⁵ What, to the Western mind, with its animal-model, looks like freedom, looks, to the Daoist mind, like a rootlessness separation from one's true nature. Similarly, what to the Western mind, with its animal-model, looks like submission, looks, to the Daoist, with its plant-model, like finding one's roots to one's true self in unity with nature.

One might object that this contrast between Plato's notion of freedom to act and Daoism's notion of submission to nature is misguided because Plato is one of the paramount *enemies* of freedom.⁵⁶ And Popper is correct that Plato's *Republic* endorses an authoritarian picture in which the ideal state is compared to a hive.⁵⁷ Popper's sees Plato's idea of freedom as that of a soldier drone mindlessly sacrificing itself for the hive. But what is important in the present paper is *not political freedom per se* but the sort of "freedom" that *rootless animals* possess in contrast with *plants rooted in earth*. The issue is the difference between the animal and plant-models of organism. Spengler (1928, 3, 7) characterizes *this* difference,

Servitude and freedom—this is in last and deepest
analysis the differentia by which we distinguish

vegetable and animal existence... I distinguish being or “being there” (*Dasein*) from waking- being (*Wachsein*)... In being [*Dasein*] destiny rules, while waking consciousness distinguishes causes and effects... A plant's existence [lacks] waking consciousness.⁵⁸

Spengler contrasts the “freedom” associated with (animal) *Wachsein* and the “servitude” to the soil associated with (plant) *Dasein*—the word Heidegger uses to denote human Being-there.⁵⁹ Since an animal, “no matter how small and restricted can choose, and move *freely* through space, it needs a “waking consciousness” (*Wachsein*) to enable it to *control* things by “distinguishing causes and effects.”⁶⁰ For this reason a world-view founded on animal *Wachsein* will issue in an ethics involving the idea of free choice (based on calculating causes). By contrast, a world view founded on the idea of plant *Dasein* will emphasize *Destiny*. A seed does not choose, but is destined, to become a tree.

For this reason Daoists do not develop an ethics in the sense of a set of rules for behavior. Daoists no more need a set of rules for action than an acorn needs a set of rules for developing into an oak tree. Daoist “ethics” is more akin to a virtue ethics, an ethics of *cultivation*. Just as one cultivates a plant to grow strong and healthy one cultivates human being to do the same, to bring out their inherent virtue (*de*).⁶¹ Indeed, from Daoism's perspective, the effort to change people in most moral systems founded on the conscious following of rules actually does more harm than good by perpetuating a false sense of self that alienates people from their inherent virtue.⁶² It is no accident that when Daoists explain their view that morality is against nature they use the tree analogy.⁶³

Contrasting the waking consciousness of animals and the *dreamlike existence of plants*, Spengler describes the “enigmatic fear” one feels on seeing “the blind dreamlike earthbound existence” of “the dumb forest, the silent meadows” as “the flowers at eventide ... one after another ... close in the setting sun.”—suggesting a new dimension of significance to Zhangzi's comparison of life to a dream: “You and Confucius are also dreams and I who call you a dream am also a dream.”⁶⁴

Recall that even Plato holds that animals have a plant-soul. For similar reasons, Spengler holds, his plant-model can be applied to human beings,

A herd that huddles together trembling in the presence of danger,... a man desperately trying to force his way to God—all of these are seeking to [escape] the life of [animal] freedom into the vegetal servitude from which they [had been] emancipated into individuality and loneliness.⁶⁵

The animal is the plant *plus* something, namely, restless animal “freedom” to wander rootless over the earth at the mercy of animal *Wachsein* (Plato's Reason).

One would, however, be mistaken in thinking that Spengler holds that plant-being is inferior to animal-being. His point is the reverse, namely that the “emancipation” of the animal from “vegetal servitude” is merely the emancipation into individuality (separation from nature and loneliness). Animal “freedom” is really *freedom from one's roots* and animal *Wachsein* is no compensation for the animal's *alienation* from its “being” (*Dasein*).

The plant-symbolism is not confined to the East. Heidegger quotes Hebel's remark that “We are like plants, which—whether we like to admit it... or not—must rise out of the earth in order to bloom in the ether and bear fruit.”⁶⁶ Hegel writes that “the difference between men and women is that between animals and plants” where men correspond to animals and women to plants because the female “principle” is “the rather vague unity of feeling.”⁶⁷ Similarly, Scheler writes, “[T]he vegetative principle seems to predominate in women and in races that till the soil in contrast to those who raise herds and are nomads, and in Asia as a whole (except for the Jewish parts).”⁶⁸ Hegel's and Scheler's remarks may seem racist and sexist, but Daoists, who see superiority in the female principle, may see it differently. Part of Spengler's point in identifying “being there” (*Dasein*) with the vegetative principle and “waking being” (*Wachsein*) with the being of animals is that the West, partly due to its legacy to Plato and other rationalists, overvalues animal *Wachsein* and undervalues rooted plantlike *Dasein*. Thus, Daoists see a false assumption in the view that the aggressive (male) rootless *Wachsein* of animals is superior to the silent meditative rooted (female) *Dasein* of plants. The “male” principle produces a greater spectacle but it is in the silent rooted female principle that the “*Destiny*” of the species resides.

Reply to an Objection to the Plant-Model

“A closed society, at its best, can be justly compared to an organism.... A closed society... resembles a herd or tribe in being a semi-organic unit whose members are held together by semi-biological ties... [It is impossible] to apply the organic theory successfully to an open society.”

Popper, *An Open Society and its Enemies* (169)

Organic theories of the state, society, ethics, etc., have generally received considerable criticism. Popper sees the “open society” as incompatible with an organic model: “[M]ost attempts to apply the organic theory to our society are veiled forms of propaganda for a return to tribalism.”⁶⁹ Organic theories are perceived to view the individual as

subservient to the whole organism. The picture of a citizen as a drone who must sacrifice themselves for the good of the whole is often associated with organic theories of the state. It does not matter if one substitutes the organism of society, the family, or nature. There is a common perception that organic theories *per se* undermine *individuality* in favor of *submission to the whole*. Popper sees talk of unity with the Dao or nature as mere “propaganda” that enjoins passive submission to some individuality-suppressing “whole.”

Since Daoism is a species of organicism it is liable to such criticisms. Further, some of the language in Daoist works does seem to imperil individual freedom. Mei suggests that “the way of life” that accords with the Dao is one of “yielding passivity.”⁷⁰ Chang suggests that in becoming one with the Dao “the human elements drop away” and, quoting from Zhuangzi, describes approvingly how one is able to “free oneself” from one’s “own existence.”⁷¹ Indeed, Daoist ideals have come under attack from many modern Chinese who see them as the root of a kind of passivity that has harmed Chinese civilization.⁷²

Not everyone, however, is pessimistic about organic theories. McCloskey remarks that an organismic theory of human life can be defensible only if the “parts” of the organism, individual human beings, are “capable of choosing for themselves an independent existence.”⁷³ Can one envisage a kind of organism in which the “parts” retain considerable freedom within the whole? It would seem that this possibility is more plausible for the animal-model than the plant-model. When McCloskey envisages a case in which the parts of the organism enjoy free choice, he presupposes Spengler’s “*Wachsein*” (the animal consciousness that reckons causes and effects as a basis for free choice). He is not thinking of Spengler’s plant-*Dasein*. Perhaps Popper’s criticisms of organic theories are strong against the Daoist plant-model but are not nearly so strong against Plato’s animal-model?

In fact, this critique of the Daoist plant-model is misguided. For it is a mistake to think that the organic model *per se*, in *either* of its animal or the plant forms is *condemned* to defend all of the more unpalatable aspects of *some* organismic theories. The organic model is based on a *metaphor* and its proponents can decide which parts of the *comparison* they wish to emphasize and which they do not.⁷⁴ Daoists need not mindlessly transfer unpalatable features of plant-life into rules for human life—and a close look at the texts shows that they do not do so. After admitting that Daoism enjoins a yielding passivity, Mei adds that Zhuangzi mastered a “sophisticated... satire of conventional thinking, boldly imaginative in asserting the freedom of the individual.”⁷⁵ This is backed up by Daoist doctrine.

In Daoist terms, passivity corresponds to the *yin* element, but to paint a picture of Daoist organism or the Daoist way of life as passive is to forget that this must be *balanced* by the *yang* (activity) element.⁷⁶ As Chang puts

it, "The value of the Dao consists in its ability to reconcile opposites on a higher level of consciousness" resulting in a "balanced way of living."⁷⁷ That is, one must be careful not to elevate one passage in a Daoist text into a symbol of the whole. This is a mistake in any area of study but the error is especially egregious when it is done to a philosophy whose whole point is to achieve the proper *balance* of *all* the *opposing* dimensions of human life. The view that Daoism is committed to a passive or submissive posture in the world, in the *popular* sense in which a slave is passive or submissive, is a narrow caricature of Daoism properly understood.⁷⁸

A Plant-model of the Daoist Notion of *Wu-wei*

"To seek the Dao one loses day by day... [un]till one has reached doing nothing (*wu-wei*). Do nothing and yet there is nothing that is not done".

Laozi, *Dao de-jing* (§ 48)

Daoism does not provide an ethics in the usual Western sense of a set of rules or laws for human behavior.⁷⁹ Laozi counsels that "Vast Virtue is derived from the *Dao* alone," not, that is, from something like the Greatest Happiness principle or the Categorical Imperative.⁸⁰ In opposition to these rule-oriented models, Daoism stresses the notion of *wu-wei*. This seems paradoxical. How can one "do nothing and yet everything gets done"?

In fact, plants sprout and flower and everything gets done that needs to be done and yet plants do not *do* anything in the sense in which human beings do things. Sprouting and flowing are not *actions* in the sense in which firing a gun is an action. Davidson asserts that a genuine human action must be something that was done intentionally *under some description*.⁸¹ Thus, John performed an action in kissing Fred because he intended to kiss someone, namely Nikki, but, since it was dark, kissed Fred by mistake. This contrasts with the case in which a muscle spasm catapults John's mouth onto Fred's cheek against his will. The former is still an action because it involves an intention that happens to have missed its mark. The case of the muscle spasm does not and, therefore, is not a genuine *action*.

Although scholars disagree about whether or to what extent intention is a necessary component of a genuine action, philosophers of action regularly use animal examples but examples from the plant kingdom are not used. Malcolm wonders whether animals are "automatons" and Frankfurt wonders whether spiders control their legs when they walk but neither wonder whether plants are *acting* when they flower.⁸² The reason is that plants are so very different from animals that the conceptual category of action simply does not apply to plant "behavior"—and in that difference lies the plant-model of *wu-wei*. In ordinary language one says the dog *wants* to catch the squirrel, i.e., animals are ordinarily understood to *represent* items in their

environment.⁸³ Further, if the dog is to catch the squirrel, it cannot just represent the squirrel. It must represent itself, an “other” (the squirrel), and itself acting on that other. This dualism of self and object is central to our ordinary notion of action, but this animal-model does not apply to plants.⁸⁴ One does not say that the sunflower “wants” to follow the sun across the sky. Thus, Zhuangzi employs a plant-analogy to explain *wu-wei*,

[Y]ou have a large tree and are worried about its uselessness. Why do you not plant it in the realm of nothingness ... so that you may wander by its side in non-action (*wu-wei*), and you may lie under it in blissful repose.⁸⁵

Zhuangzi's advice to this person with a useless tree is that they should wander by the tree's side in non-action (*wu-wei*). *They should become like the useless tree* and lie under it in Blissful Repose just as the tree itself rests in Blissful Repose. The tree does not do what it does *for the sake of some utility*. It does not absorb sunlight *because* it wants to produce fruit to sell at market. That would make it resemble a businessperson. Seedlings sprout and grow *spontaneously* into mature plants by virtue of their “internal *telos*.”⁸⁶ Plants, unlike animals, do *not* require knowledge imparted by “external instructions.” Plants do not “follow a rule” when they sprout or flower, and, therefore, have no need for Kripke to explain to them what it means to say they do so.⁸⁷ Thus, Frisina suggests that talk of how plants represent their environments should be replaced by talk of how they *interact* with their environment.⁸⁸

In summary, the plant-model clarifies the notion of *wu-wei*. Plants do not *intend* to flower—but they still flower. In the sense of “doing” applicable to humans, the plant does *nothing*, but everything (sprouting, flowering, seeding) gets done because flowering is not an *action* performed by plants. The same applies to human beings. It is only when one looks at *wu-wei* on the animal-model inherited from Plato and other rationalists, with its *dualism* of subject and object, knower and known, that *wu-wei* seems to be paradoxical or nonsensical.⁸⁹

Daoism's Nihilism and Deep Ecology

“Its upper side is not bright;
Its underside is not dim.
Continuous, unceasing and unnamable,
It reverts to nothingness.”
Dao De-jing (§14).

From Plato's rationalist perspective, the plant-model suggests that the cosmos grows irrationally—thereby rendering it incomprehensible. This is illustrated in the Neo-Platonist Macrobius' description of the ascent from “the dregs of being” through the plants, to the lower animals, to the

higher animals, to human beings, to angels, and, finally, to God.⁹⁰ Surely, the rationalist holds, the cosmos, and with it, the proper human way of life, cannot be modelled on plants, something barely removed from the very “dregs of being” (almost nothingness). Is not Daoism committed to a kind of nihilism here?

Many scholars have rejected the view that Daoism is committed to any kind of nihilism about human beings.⁹¹ However, the plant-model enables one to provide a *positive* account of the sense in which plants, and by extension human beings, “revert to nothingness.” Spengler writes: “A plant... is nothing on its own account” but is merely a “part of... a single process of nature... accomplishing itself... in the plant.”⁹² On this model, Daoism’s view that the Dao, and with it, human beings who follow it, “revert to nothing” does not mean “nothing” in the standard Western logical sense. Spengler is not claiming that $\sim (\exists x) (Fx)$ (where “F” = “is a plant”) and Daoists do not hold that plants, and by extension, human beings, literally do not exist. Daoists only mean that, like a plant, human beings are not truly separate from nature but are *only an extension of it*. They are, so to speak, “nothing” apart from it. But the idea that human beings are only an extension of nature is one of the main theses of the modern “deep ecology” movement.⁹³

The Root of Religion, Art and Historical Feeling

“[T]he greatest of all life’s secrets, the secret that all religious mysteries and great poems seek to penetrate ... [is] how the plantlike in [creatures] drove them to reproduce themselves for the maintenance of the eternal cycle, how the one great pulse-beat operates through all the detached souls, filling, driving, checking, and often destroying...”
Spengler, *Decline of the West*, v. 2 (5)

These three paradigms, the cosmos as machine, the cosmos as animal and the cosmos as plant, represent three very different *elemental* ways of looking at the world and, therefore, three different ideologies for life. The first two are familiar. The plant-model is much less so because it is generally found only in obscure alien views like Daoism, which, with its “untranslatable “Dao,” the “basic principle of Chinese existence,” expresses the “deep historical feeling” of the Chinese.”⁹⁴ It is admittedly virtually impossible to translate such alien concepts into modern language.⁹⁵ But this is precisely why understanding the Daoist plant-model is important. For it provides an illuminating counterbalance to the dominant Western ways of thinking about human life.

Spengler describes the “deep historical feeling” that pervades Daoism,

A plant knows only a relation to the when and the wherefore. The upthrust of the first green shoots out of the wintery earth, the swelling of the buds, the whole mighty process of blooming, scent, color, glory, ripening – the desire to fulfil a destiny, constant yearning towards a ‘when’.⁹⁶

The plant “knows” (so to speak) only its Destiny, the glory of the endless cycle, the mighty process of blooming, ripening, color, scent—and to the degree that human beings have this residual plant-soul, they participate in the deep historical feeling of a *certain* Destiny.⁹⁷

To the Daoist, Plato's animal-model, which emphasizes reason, intelligence, and conscious intention, is a misguided *anthropomorphism* that reads more *reason* into the world than is justified. For Plato conceives of the cosmos on analogy with the way he conceives of himself—as a rational animal. Plato's picture of the cosmos is his picture of himself writ large.⁹⁸ By contrast, the Daoist sees Plato's animal-model as a product of that animal *Wachsein* which forgets Spengler's (and Heidegger's) *Dasein* (the dark unfathomable unconscious primordial root of cosmic Destiny).

These animal and plant paradigms represent two entirely different ways of looking at things and, therefore, two entirely different “ideologies” for human life. From the perspective of animal *Wachsein* dreams are only Shakespeare's “children of an idle brain.”⁹⁹ Others see in dreams a glimpse into the creative unconscious.¹⁰⁰ The Daoist plant-paradigm is important precisely because it reminds one of this darker unconscious primordial source of creativity that is invisible to the sciences produced by animal *Wachsein*. Thus, the “greatest of life's secrets” is that it is from the “dreams” of “the plantlike” (the female) in human beings that religion, poetry and art arise.¹⁰¹ This reveals a new *positive* significance in Zhuangzi's allusion to the dreamlike quality of human life: “You and Confucius are also dreams and I who call you a dream am also a dream.”¹⁰² Zhangzi is not committed to deny the contributions of the sciences produced by animal *Wachsein*. His aim is to remind one of the primordial creative *Dasein* on which *Wachsein* depends but which is largely invisible to it—and that is Daoism's gift of humility and self-knowledge to the modern (scientific) world.

Notes

¹ See also Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 75; Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1998), 21.

² The Greek “Cosmos” does not translate perfectly into Chinese. See Humboldt's (1997, 69) description of the Greek notion of the cosmos. Alexander Humboldt, *COSMOS: Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, v. 1. E.C. Otté, (trans.) (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997), 69. However, the ancient Chinese had various

concepts that played roles in their thinking analogous to the role of the concept of the cosmos in the West. Yu-lan Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, v. 1, Derek Bodde, (trans.). (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 284-5, 382-397, 395-399. Thus, it is common to use the word “cosmos” to convey Chinese conceptions of “the totality of all things.” Nathan Sivin, *Cosmos and Computation in early Chinese Mathematical Astronomy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969). Thus, the present paper does not deny the difference between the Chinese and Western conceptions of this totality. Indeed, it is a modest attempt to clarify some of those differences.

³ A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (corrected edition) (NY: Macmillan, 1978), xiv

⁴ Whitehead, *Process*, 39.

⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, Benjamin Jowett, (trans.). *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, (ed.'s) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 30c

⁶ David Hume, “Dialogues on Natural Religion,” in *Hume: Selections*, Charles Hendel, Jr., (ed.) (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), § VII. These remarks are made by Philo, who is thought to represent Hume's views. C.M. Lorkowski, “David Hume: Religion,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* URL: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/hume-rel/>, § 1.

⁷ Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (NY: Alfred Knopf/Random House, 1957), 17 n 3a. Alan Watts, *What is Dao?* (San Francisco: New World Library, 2000), 92. The claim is not that the plant-model is *unique* to Daoism. In fact, it pervades ancient Chinese thought. For example, Confucius compares human nature to a tree and the attempt to make a person moral to making cups and bowls out of the tree—which obviously kills the tree. Edward Slingerland, *Trying not to Try: Ancient China, Modern Science and the Power of Spontaneity* (NY: Broadway Books, 2015), 131. However, this fascinating remark must be left for another occasion.

⁸ Yong Choon Kim, *Oriental Thought* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1973), 70.

⁹ Jung sees great significance in plant symbolism: “As a plant produces its flower, so the psyche produces its symbols.” C.G. Jung, (ed.). “Approaching the Unconscious” *Man and His Symbols* (NY: Dell, 1968), 53. Henderson holds that whereas plants are symbols of the *psyche*, which, for Jungians is the *totality* of psychic process, the animal is a narrow symbol of *instinct* alone. Joseph Henderson, “Ancient Myths and Modern Man,” *Man and His Symbols*, 152. It is in this spirit that Watts compares the conscious ego to a plant cut off from its roots. Alan Watts, *Still the Mind: An Introduction to Meditation* (Novato: New World Library, 2002), 42. In Jung's terms, Plato's animal-symbolism gives a view of a cosmos modelled on the *surface instincts* of animals whereas Daoist plant-symbolism reflects a view of the cosmos infused with the deep unconscious aspects emphasized in a more holistic notion of psyche.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (trans.), (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), § 44.b

¹¹ Although one associates *wu-wei* with Daoism, it is also found in Confucianism but is rejected completely by the “rationalist” Mohists. Edward Slingerland, *Trying not to Try*, 24-25, 199, 209. See also note 33 below.

¹² Sarah Broadie, *Nature and Divinity in Plato's Timaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 91-92, 258

¹³ Plato, *Euthyphro*, H.N. Fowler, (trans.), *Collected Dialogues*, 2d-3a.

¹⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 7a-b. See also Hendrik Lorenz, "Ancient Theories of the Soul," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ancient-soul/> 2009. §'s 1, 2, 3.1-3.2

¹⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, 28c.

¹⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, R. Hackforth, (trans.), *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 246a

¹⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246d-247b.

¹⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248b-c.

¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248b-c.

²⁰ Aristotle too holds that plants are for the use of animals. A.L. Peck, Preface to Aristotle's *Generation of Animals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), xli. This position is not inevitable. One might in a less animal-centric view see animals as created for the sake of plants—to fertilize them. Paul Guyer, editor's Introduction to Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xxxvi.

²¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, Hugh Tredennick, (trans.), *Collected Dialogues*, 74e-75e; Plato, *Republic*, Alan Bloom, (trans.), NY: Basic Books, 1968), 484a-d; Plato, *Theaetetus*, F.M. Cornford, (trans.), *Collected Dialogues*, 170b.

²² Plato, *Republic*, 504d-e.

²³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 273e; Plato, *Theaetetus*, 165a-168b; Plato, *Timaeus*, 26b, 47a, 75

²⁴ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176a

²⁵ Debra Nails, "Socrates," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/>, § 1.

²⁶ Plato's apology for freedom is a part of his heritage from a Greek culture that prizes freedom above all (Rahe, 1992, 28-54).

²⁷ F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (Amherst, NY: Humanities Press, 1935), 84, 176, 262.

²⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, Michael Joyce, (trans.), *Collected Dialogues*, 190a-b.

²⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 40c.

³⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 414d.

³¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 109b-c.

³² Plato, *Timaeus*, 40c; Plato, *Laws*, 955e.

³³ Brian van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), 134-135, 175) discusses the meaning of the plant-symbolism in Mengzi. See also A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (Open Court, LaSalle, 1995), 352-3 and note 9 above.

³⁴ There is another word, *T'ien* (which means, roughly, heaven) for God in ancient Chinese language, but this signifies another strand of Chinese culture. See Chung-Yuan Chang, *Creativity and Daoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1970), 60-61.

³⁵ N. J. Giradot, *Myth and Meaning in early Taoism: The Theme of Chaos* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 187, 208-209, 219, 230ff. See also Lihui Yang and Deming An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, (Ipswich, Mass: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 22.

³⁶ A. C. Graham, *Disputers*, 274.

³⁷ Chang, *Creativity*, 8.

³⁸ Chang, *Creativity*, 8.

³⁹ Plato, *Euthypro*, 2c-d.

⁴⁰ Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, §54.

⁴¹ Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, § 6.

⁴² Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, § 6.

⁴³ Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, §10, 18-19, 38

⁴⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 508b-c; Plato, *Symposium*, 190a-b.

⁴⁵ Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, §'s 6, 10, 61; See also Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu Wei and Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Idea in Early China*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83.

⁴⁶ Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, §59.

⁴⁷ Homer writes "[R]ein'd with gold, his foaming steeds before.... [S]he begg'd with streaming eyes/Her brother's car, to mount the distant skies,... A mortal man, who dares encounter heaven"). Homer, *Iliad*, Alexander Pope, (trans.), *Project Gutenberg* (1899) URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6130/6130-h/6130-h.html> Laozi writes: "When the Dao prevails in the world, they send their swift horses to (draw) the dung-carts. When the Dao is disregarded... war-horses breed in the border lands." Laozi, *Dao de-jing* §46. While the Greek war-horses "dare" to climb to heaven, the Daoist shuns war and sends its swift horses to draw dung carts.

⁴⁸ Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, § 76.

⁴⁹ Recall Achilles proud display of strength, leading to his downfall, in dragging the body of Hector by a chariot for all of Troy to see. Homer, *Iliad*, book 22, lines 430-431.

⁵⁰ Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, § 14, 16.

⁵¹ Chang, *Creativity*, 184.

⁵² Chang, *Creativity*, 48, 120, 157, 211.

⁵³ Laozi, *Dao de-jing*, §57.

⁵⁴ P. Mei, "Skepticism and Mysticism in Chuang Tzu", *Sources of the Chinese Tradition*, v. 1, Wm. De Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, and Burton Watson (NY: Columbia University Press, 1969), 62-63.

⁵⁵ Chang, *Creativity*, 180-181.

⁵⁶ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), Chap's 6-10.

⁵⁷ See the references to the "guardians" of the state as drones. Plato, *Republic*, 552c, 554b, 555d, 559c, 564b, 567e, 573a; Plato, *Laws*, 901a.

⁵⁸ Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, v. 2 (NY: Knopf, 1989), 3, 7. See Heidegger on the significance of Destiny to *Dasein*. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* §'s 12, 76.

⁵⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* § 2.

⁶⁰ Spengler, *Decline*, v. 2, 3.

⁶¹ Ronnie Littlejohn, "Daoist Philosophy," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, § 5 URL: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/daoism/>

⁶² Alan Chan, "Laozi," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2013, § 7 URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/>

⁶³ Graham, *Disputers*, 120. See note 7 on the tree analogy.

⁶⁴ Graham, *Disputers*, 195

⁶⁵ Spengler, *Decline*, v. 2, 3

⁶⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Memorial Address to Konrad Kreutzner," *Discourse on Thinking* (Chicago: Harper and Row, 1966), 47

⁶⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, T.M. Knox, (trans.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), addition to paragraph 166.

⁶⁸ Max Scheler, *Man's Place in Nature* (NY: Noonday Press, 1962), note to 14

⁶⁹ Popper, *Open Society*, 170.

⁷⁰ P. Mei, "Metaphysics and Government in the Lao Tzu," *Sources of*, 50.

⁷¹ Chang, *Creativity*, 131-132.

⁷² Chad Hansen, "Daoism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2007), § 9.4 URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/daoism/>

⁷³ H. J. McClosky, "The State as an Organism, as Person, and as End in Itself," *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1963): 306

⁷⁴ This does not mean that one could not produce a disturbing plant-model of human beings (as one sometimes finds in science fiction) but only that Daoism is not committed to do so.

⁷⁵ Mei, "Skepticism and Mysticism", 63. See also Hansen, "Daoism", § 7.

⁷⁶ Isabella Robinet and Phyllis Brooks, *Daoism: Growth of a Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 6-9.

⁷⁷ Chang, *Creativity*, 11.

⁷⁸ Recall that Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Thomas Cleary (trans.), (Charlotte: Fall River Publisher, 2014), 1, 170-172, 193, is inspired by Daoist principles.

⁷⁹ The view that Daoism rejects *all* ethical rules is fostered by the false view that Daoism is the *simple* opposite of Confucianism. Russell Kirkland, *Daoism: The Enduring Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2004), 209-216). Daoists are only committed to flout rules that go against the Dao.

⁸⁰ Daoist "ethics" most resembles a "virtue ethics." Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012) §'s 1 & 4 URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/> However, it is doubtful that any of the standard categories capture the distinctive nature of Daoist "ethics".

⁸¹ Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), essay 3.

⁸² Norman Malcolm, "Thoughtless Brutes," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 46: 5-20 (1972-1973); Harry Frankfurt, "The Problem of Action", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15: 157-62 (1978).

⁸³ Warren Frisina, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Towards a Non-Representational Theory of Action* (Albany: SUNY, 2002), 62.

⁸⁴ The present paper does not contradict Rorty's critique of the representational paradigm. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 7, 29-30, 378. The point is rather that perhaps one might consider modelling animal-behavior on *non-representational* plant-behavior.

⁸⁵ Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu), *The Zhuangzi, Sources*, 68.

⁸⁶ Slingerland, *Effortless Action*, 246.

⁸⁷ Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

⁸⁸ Frisina also suggests that plants possess "innate knowledge" ("*liang-chih*") of their relation to the environment that does not need to be represented. Frisina, *Unity of Knowledge*, 85. However, since knowledge requires an object, Frisina here *anthropomorphizes* plants, leading to the same potential dualisms of knower and known associated with human knowledge that Daoists wish to avoid.

⁸⁹ Something similar to the concept of *wu-wei* employing plant-symbolism is found in *Matthew* (6:28): Jesus said: "[W]hy are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin." *New American Standard Bible* URL: <http://biblehub.net/search.php?q=lilies>. Hume's remark earlier in the present paper that the universe is not like a "knitting room" is likely an allusion to *Matthew* 6:28. See also Von Franz's discussion of the link with the plant-symbolism in *Matthew* 6:28. Maria Von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," *Man and His Symbols*, 196.

⁹⁰ A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 63, 90.

⁹¹ Chan, "Laozi", § 6; Hansen "Daoism", §'s 1, 4.

⁹² Spengler, *Decline*, v. 2, 3. See also Chang, *Creativity*, 64.

⁹³ Marti Kheel, "The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair," *Environmental Ethics*, 7 (1985).

⁹⁴ Spengler, *Decline*, v. 1 (14).

⁹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton-Bollingen Series, 2005), 3-4.

⁹⁶ Spengler, *Decline*, v. 2 (7).

⁹⁷ Note that the present paper does not presuppose any biological views about plants and animals. The Daoist view is not based on botanical science. The notions of plants and animals in the paper are employed as symbols (Spengler's "the plant-like" in creatures), to capture something primordial about the natures of humanity and the cosmos. See Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 1-2, 8.

⁹⁸ Nietzsche remarks that every philosophy up until now has consisted in "a species of involuntary and unconscious autobiography". Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Walter Kaufmann, (trans.), (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia, 2016), § 6.

⁹⁹ Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (I, iv, 96).

¹⁰⁰ J.F. Pagel, *The Limits of Dream: An Exploration of the Mind /Brain Interface* (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2010), 165-166.

¹⁰¹ Just as the Daoist view does not depend on the views of botanical science, it does not depend the views in scientific psychology about dreams. The notion of dream in Zhuangzi and in Spengler is not a scientific concept but is used as a symbol to capture something primordial about human life.

¹⁰² Quoted in Graham, *Disputers*, 195.

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