

THE LIVE CREATURE AND THE CROOKED TREE THINKING NATURE IN DEWEY AND ZHUANGZI

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1. Introduction

Several commentators have drawn connections between the *Zhuangzi* and American pragmatism. A few have even made specific comparison to the ideas of John Dewey. However, these treatments are typically limited to discussions of experimentalism and instrumentalism. In this essay, it is argued that such comparisons should be subsumed under a more general comparison, which turns on the similarities in how Dewey and Zhuangzi employed nature, a sense of the natural, and “naturalism” in their philosophies. Such a comparison seems timely insofar as there has been a recent uptick in the number of interpretations which emphasize the normativity and/or the naturalism of the *Zhuangzi*, especially when the definition of naturalism is loosened in such a way that emphasizes “the unuttered conviction that the world is one and all its parts have access to all the others” (Lachs, 2009: 65-6).

This sort of view jibes closely with Dewey’s philosophy of nature. In 1944, Columbia University Press published a collection of essays titled *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, which represented the culmination of nearly forty years of philosophical work at Columbia by Dewey and his colleagues. The Columbia school of naturalism might best be described as a marriage between the language of being used by more primitive nat-

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uralists and the language of life-experience as used in post-Kantian traditions – the combination of which Dewey summed up as “humanistic naturalism.”

There are several themes in the *Zhuangzi* suggestive of humanistic naturalism. It has been noted that, “[t]he irritating sayings of Zhuangzi sting us like a gadfly until we awaken and empty our set, pet perspectives. Once we get over the shock, we shall find Zhuangzi, if not easy to understand, at least understandable” (Wu, 2006: 63). In this way, the text could be characterized as holding up an ethics of “aporetics,” in which; “One acts on the basis of what one does not know, what one cannot control, what one cannot contain, rather than fixed rules, determinate principles, or clear imperatives” (Lusthaus, 2003: 164). However, such action requires skillful improvisation, in which natural attunement with one’s surroundings is paramount.

Attunement with nature is one of the most recognizable themes in the *Zhuangzi* and while it may be tempting to see this as a mystical, spiritual moral notion, it makes better sense to view it more naturalistically, as a sort of “poetics of normativity,” which emphasizes the use of language in the text and “rests on the Daoist understanding of the Way as the ultimate source of normativity” (Lee, 2014: 43). Under such a reading, the language of the *Zhuangzi* is implicitly normative precisely because it is poetic, as in the original sense of Greek *poiesis* – or “bringing forth” – and the norms described therein are those of attunement with “the workings of the Way itself in Nature” (Ibid.). Taken seriously, this would suggest thoughtful human actions can shape nature just as much as nature shapes human action and thought. In other words, what we call thinking seems to lie in a dynamic interplay and continuity between humanity and nature.

This kind of thinking-nature can be found in the *Zhuangzi*’s well-known “knack passages,” where those who possess supremely attuned skill pay deep attention to the body. As Edward Slingerland puts it, “[W]oodshops and kitchens... revealed to [Zhuangzi] artisans and butchers, ferryman and draftsman, whose effortless ease and responsiveness to the world could serve as a model for his disaffected fellow intellectuals” (Slingerland, 2014: 143). Slingerland sees normative connections to somatic marker theory in this notion of the *Zhuangzi*, one which suggests a “practical intelligence” of impulses. The normative aspects of such an idea seem obvious when one recognizes the reconciliation of bodily impulse with intelligence as a type of “cultivation of the sentient body as a central tool of self-perfection, a key to better perception, action, virtue, and happiness” (Shusterman, 2004: 33).

Bringing these notions of aporia, attunement, and embodiment together presents several continuities to which Deweyan naturalism could commit: 1) an epistemological continuity, in which intelligence is analogous with a metabolic process, 2) an ontological continuity between actions and events, and 3) an axiological continuity in which there is no sharp division between facts and values. For some time now, Chinese thought has generally been associated, under a variety of names, with naturalistic points of view. As F.W. Mote once described it, “the genuine Chinese cosmogony is that of organismic process, meaning that all of the parts of the entire cosmos belong to one organic whole and that they all interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process” (Mote, 1971: 19). Similarly, Roger Ames and David Hall have associated Chinese cosmology with what they call *ars contextualis* (a contextualizing art) and Daoist cosmology, specifically, with what they call a “focus-field” model. Joseph Needham has referred to classical Chinese cosmology as “organic naturalism” and Tu Wei-Ming has underscored the importance of motifs such as continuity, wholeness, and dynamism in Chinese organicism, which he described as a vision of “all modalities of being [as] organically connected... integral parts of a continuous process of cosmic transformation” (Tu, 1981: 19). Understanding this, he explained, is to recognize the normative point “‘all things are my companions’... that we are consanguineous with nature. But as humans, we must make ourselves worthy of such a relationship,” through our own transformations (Ibid., 20). Such personal transformation, in the *Zhuangzi*, is tantamount to what one might call self-cultivation through the growth of personal efficacy.

Implicit in Dewey’s humanistic naturalism is the assumed continuity between intelligence and nature. Philosophical inquiry, for him, was not a retreat to a “view from nowhere,” but rather an integrated part of experience seeking 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 a line of reasoning leads to the prospect that human beings are continuous with their surroundings, that they are experiencing fields immersed within an enviroing field.² This type of joined 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 of mind and body.

² Cf. Paul Kurtz (1973), “Naturalism in American Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and the Civilizing Arts*, ed. by Craig Walton and John P. Anton, Athens: Ohio Univ. Press. Kurtz expounds on Dewey’s use of the phrase “enviroing field” throughout his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938).

Therefore, human understanding must be seen as 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, cognition 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 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 (Kim, 2003: 95). 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, the naturalist sees meaning and language as contextual, revisable and intimate. It 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.

What this means for ethics is that an agent should be in the practice of building up a repertoire of actions that are sustainable – just as the healthiest relationships in nature are sustainable. In other words, if human beings can determine what actions are mutually beneficial to them and their surroundings, with the least “collateral damage” or “blow-back,” they will be in a position to “fit” with their environment. As Dewey explained it, in *Democracy and Education*, 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 arising 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.

Accordingly, values are intrinsic to experience, i.e. they arise out of the organic interaction between humans and their surroundings, and are not derived from some divine or ethereal source. When this type of philosophical outlook emphasizes the continuity between individuals and their community it is known as ‘humanism,’ when it focuses on the connection between organisms and their environments it is typically called ‘naturalism.’ Thus, the brand of naturalism at the heart of this analysis may, most appropriately, be called “naturalistic humanism.”

2. The Live Creature

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. (Dewey, 1981: viii) 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 (Ibid., 10). Dewey’s utilization of experience throughout the text reveals he had something other than sensory impressions in mind for his philosophy. He was never fully satisfied with the way he had conveyed his idea, and by 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. (Ibid., 361)

Because of the baggage the term experience carries with it, Dewey is often accused of either hypostatizing perception, or idealizing ontology. Those who read Dewey in light of the former typically regard his position as a “metaphysics of experience.”³ This type of complaint 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.”⁴ Stated differently, Santayana believed Dewey fell into a naïve-realism, wherein memories, reflection, and abstract reason were trampled under a tyranny of the present. In response to Santayana’s review of *Experience and Nature*, wherein his naturalism was called half-hearted, Dewey dubbed Santayana’s position “broken-backed,” because he believed it indirectly re-instated the various dualisms naturalism sought to destroy (Dewey, 1984: 73-81).

Though most naturalists of that era (including Santayana) rejected classical substance ontology and the Cartesian assumptions drawn from it, what made Dewey unique among them was *how* he rejected it. As he put it,

³ The phrase “metaphysics of experience” was used only once by Dewey, and not in reference to his own view.

⁴ Cf. George Santayana (1925), “Dewey’s Naturalistic Metaphysics,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XXII, No. 25, 673-688.

... what we call matter 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 (Dewey, 1981: 64).

In Dewey's view, event, not substance, was the most basic component of nature. He based this position on the philosophical insights he had drawn from Darwinian evolution. Just as Darwin had shown, a species was not a static *eidos*, 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 concrescence of habit – both cultural and experiential. In this way, reason is not something over and above nature, but is immersed within it as a part of cultural experience. 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 (Dewey, 1982: 135).

This somewhat deflationary view of reason was advanced by many of the naturalists. Yet, Dewey came to it from a different direction. Instead of positing reason as the tenant of a reified mind, as thinkers like Santayana seemed to do, Dewey argued the intellect was a function emerging from the transaction of experiencing events (or “organisms”) from within the context of other events surrounding them (or “environment”) toward working out unstable situations – it was, in a word, instrumental. Santayana still held on to the presuppositions of a primordial, ordered beginning that gave rise to the very substance ontology he deemed so dubious. Dewey's event ontology, however, not only rejected the conception of substance, but also the Greek notion that there are originitive principles of intelligibility and organization on which such a conception depended 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 contextual, functional, or operational *within* experience. By San-

tayana's account, experience is passive and consciousness is derivative; by Dewey's, experience is spontaneous and consciousness is emergent. 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. . . . 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 (Dewey, 1984: 76-8).

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 accounting for cognition. Again, in response to Santayana, Dewey explained this connection thusly,

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" . . . *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 (Dewey, 1984: 80).

The "multitude of heres, nows, and perspectives" Dewey described is the philosophical offspring of a Darwinian insight regarding co-evolution which tells us that consciousness is not special, it is just one evolutionary path among many. It would be an intellectual conceit to insist that human understanding is somehow off-limits to such a process. Dewey's concept of the live-creature does not view consciousness as the pinnacle of evolutionary achievement, and thus relegates anthropocentric perspectives back to the ranks of nature.

3. The Crooked Tree

The *Zhuangzi*'s view of nature also entails a multiplicity of heres, nows and perspectives. In fact, the opening chapter of the text introduces this notion to the reader. This first chapter begins with the story of a giant fish, Kun, that transforms into a bird called Peng and travels "ninety thousand li to the south." 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?" Zhuangzi's answer is a cryptic one: "What do these two creatures understand? Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived" (Watson, 1968: 30).

Passages like this one, which question the limitations of perspective, may appear to support either a skeptical relativism or communion with some otherworldly *dào*.⁵ For most commentators, tying experience and nature together the way Dewey and Zhuangzi seek to do can only be accomplished by subsuming either one under the other. For them, one has to live as a skeptic in the "metaphysics of experience" of hypostatized perception, wherein the only philosophical accomplishment would be making interesting moves in a language game. Or, one must live as a mystic in the idealized ontology of a cosmos that is transcendent, mysterious, and fundamentally unknowable. However, depictions of *dào* found in the *Zhuangzi* are of "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" (Ames, 1998: 7). In other words, on Zhuangzi's view, *dào* is a continuity that arises *out* of a flux in nature, which includes human thought and action.

Likewise, Zhuangzi's "person of the *dào*" (which he called the *zhēnrén*) would not seek private, transcendent experiences. Neither would she doubt everything. Instead, she would be attuned to the natural world around her. The text makes many references to the attunement between human beings and *tiān* [天], and as David Hall and Roger Ames have noted, there is a "strong association between tian and the natural environment" (Ames and Hall, 2003: 64). According to Hall and Ames, Daoist cosmology is best understood as correlative insofar as it expresses a re-

⁵ This is particularly true after Wing-Tsit Chan published his *Source Book* in 1963. Kjellberg and Ivanhoe's *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism and Ethics in the Zhuangzi* (SUNY, 1996) and Cook's *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi* (SUNY, 2003) are largely representative of these respective views.

ciprocal 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, “there is ontological parity among the things and events that constitute our lives” (Ames and Hall, 2003: 13). Thus, experience, under this view, is considered as continuous and contiguous with the concrete world and a human being is seen as a “quantum of unique experience” (Ames and Hall, 2003: 11). 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 an emergent property, in which the various threads are *relations* among its constituents. As Ames has put it elsewhere, “the myriad things are perturbations of hylozoistic energies that coordinate themselves to constitute the harmonious regularity that is *dào*” (Ames, 1998: 5). The focus of experience for the *Zhuangzi*, then, would not be some disembodied mind, cut off from the rest of existence. Rather, it would be embodied in *xīn* [心] – a character representing the heart in classical Chinese. This is important because the *Zhuangzi* does not speak of knowledge as involving the “coolness of reason” and is devoid of the dualism to which such statements attend. For *Zhuangzi*, all understanding comes with embodied, contextual strings. Since individuals within the field are “mutually implicating,” experience always connects back to the field of nature. Understood in these terms, experience is not something that passively “happens to” but instead is something that is actively lived, across a situation, in what Dewey would have called a transaction. Thus, experience, for the daoist, insofar as it is experience, is simply life, *intensified*. Rather than standing for imprisonment in 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 emergent and evolving, an order called *dào*.

Because experience is active, and nature, dynamic, it might appear that ethical action should require, for the daoist, a rigorous and disciplined moral training in order to navigate the precarious and changing world around us. This was certainly the belief of Confucius, who advocated formal study, strict family values, and adherence to ritual as the means for developing a noble character in the youth. The daoist concept of *zhēn*, however, serves as a direct challenge to the Confucian ethical system. In a Nietzschean fashion, the *Zhuangzi* calls for a re-evaluation of all moral

conventions. Those who achieve this are called *zhēnrén* [真人], or “true person,” which operates conceptually in the *Zhuangzi* in a way very much like Dewey’s “live creature.”

The *zhēnrén* and the live creature both reflect the native vitality of the myriad things [*wànwù*] of nature. As such, they likewise mirror the constant transformation [*wùhuà*] of those things – which the *Zhuangzi* calls *wúwéi* [無為] and Dewey referred to as “mutual adjustment” (Dewey, 1986). *Wúwéi*, often poorly translated as “non-action,” is a type of effortless doing requiring “spontaneity,” or *zìrán* [自然]. The *Zhuangzi* tells us in order to avoid the confusion that can arise when opposing propositions become blurred, the *zhēnrén* must seek “clarity,” or *míng* [明]. As A.C. Graham has explained, 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 (Graham, 1983: 9).

This type of clarity and spontaneity had been leveled down in Warring States society at large by the conventions of Confucian ethics. The best way to recover that verve, according to the *Zhuangzi*, would be through reflecting nature. However, the *zhēnrén*’s reflection is not a detachment from nature, but an immersion into the broadest possible context/perspective and in this sense is more like an attunement. *Zhuangzi* did not mean for us merely to become more conscientious of our natural environment (although this was certainly a key element in his thought), instead he hoped a respect for the *dé* [德] 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?”⁶

The knack for overcoming difficulties would have been a highly valued kind of expertise in Warring States China. And the moral skill required to thrive in such a context would turn on cultivating a truly pluralistic open-mindedness that might lead one “to treat those who disagree... even profoundly... as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends”

⁶ *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 2.

(Dewey, 1988: 228). One might wonder how we might foster deep social and political harmony without a rigorous system of Confucian virtues and etiquette. But the *Zhuangzi* addresses this in its typical fashion, by looking for this knack in unfamiliar places – namely the workshops and forests of the common people. The skillful butchers, woodcutters, swimmers, ferry-men, and fishermen the text holds up as examples can be said to offer something of a philosophy of action, if not a full-fledged praxeology. This is one reason that the concept *zìrán* [自然] is so central to getting a handle on its textual themes and continues to challenge readers by presenting something of an aporetic imperative to cultivate oneself. As Kuang-ming Wu has stated,

It is most natural to speak as Zhuangzi spoke about naturalness. For naturalness always strangely stings us at our backs. Naturalness pulls us backward, convincing us that we must decrease our self-pomposity and become ourselves as we naturally are (Wu, 2006: 63).

Despite their differences in occupation, the characters in the knack passages are each chasing the same thing: *dào*, which is, as Cook Ding puts it, a “step beyond using one’s hands effectively.” The character used in the Cook Ding story is *jì* [技], which could also be translated as craft, talent, or ability. It is similar in meaning to *shù* [術], commonly translated as art/strategy. In the *Dáshēng* chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Carver Qing claims not to have any “artistic avenue” (*shù*) beyond not wasting his vital energies worrying about the outside world and those rewards external to his task. Each craftsman claims to follow *dào*, not possess it. This should be compared with two other stories from the *Dáshēng* – the cicada catcher and the old swimmer. The former claims to have a *dào* [*yǒu dào* 有道], which turns out to involve forgetting everything else but cicada wings; the latter says he has none [*wú dào* 無道], but admits to having developed over the many years something of a second nature for swimming in treacherous waters. It seems evident then, that while *dào* practices are diverse they share a stake in some larger notion of efficacy.

Perhaps the lesson here is that artisans like Cook Ding, Wheelwright Bian, and Carver Qing each have tapped into the same broad field of expertise through the perfection of his craft, though none is actually in possession of that broader expertise. In such a way, it could be argued, “knack” is domain limited, but nonetheless able to guide one towards *dàoshù*. Simply put, “knack” is *dào*-tracking. This could be the reason the *Zhuangzi* works so hard to put its lessons into the mouths of the un-

conventional. The syncretist thirty-third chapter of the *Zhuangzi* perhaps puts it best:

Many are the men in the world who apply themselves to doctrines and policies, and each believes he has something that cannot be improved upon. What in ancient times was called the “art of the Way” [*dào*shù] – where does it exist? I say, there is no place it does not exist (Watson, 1968: 362).

Therefore, naturalness in the *Zhuangzi* can be seen as a property of a natural, public field – one in which an actor must constantly learn to adapt to continuous changes in circumstances. As such, the *dào* practitioner finds herself in a constant state of moral *aporia*. The means for living well, it seems, involves fully attuning with the rhythms of one’s environment and embodying these in one’s own actions.

To do so 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” (Ibid., 40). 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 *míng-míng zhēnrén* (or truly enlightened person) would respond in the most appropriate way, and do so without any deliberation.

But, such deftness often requires innovation, not convention. Throughout his text, there are stories of physically deformed figures, particularly crippled men and crooked trees, which exhibit the highest virtue because they rest at ease within their own nature. For example, 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” (Ibid., 64-5). 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 crippled man who pays a visit to Confucius, but because of his awkward appearance, receives an unkind welcome. Later, when Laozi asks the crippled man if Confucius can be freed from the shackles of his narrow-mindedness, the crippled man responds “When nature [*tīān*] has punished him, how can you set him free?” (Ibid., 72).

Yet, Zhuangzi did not advocate unqualified innovation. Unreflective innovation can sometimes 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. Self-transformation is one of the most prominent themes in the text. According to Zhuangzi, it is better to have a crippled form than to have one’s vitality crippled by convention. When individuals are allowed to develop their native vigor, and become *zhēnrén*, a type of freedom is produced that implements the best aspects of individuality and community.

Thus, the *zhēnrén* is one who seeks attunement through “thinking nature,” a relationship which refers to the people in her community, as well. She respects the autonomy of others, but is not afraid to be “a crooked tree” and buck the system. Perhaps the most important aspect of being a *zhēnrén*, and what leads to the realization of the sage, is the understanding that change does not stagnate, that transformation is a process that is not only life-long, but extends well beyond any single, individual life.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will compare the concept of nature as it appears in the philosophies of the American pragmatist John Dewey and the Chinese text known as the *Zhuangzi*,⁷ with an aim towards mapping out a heuristic program which might be used to correct various interpretive difficulties in reading each figure.⁸ I shall argue that Dewey and *Zhuangzi* both held more complex and comprehensive philosophies of nature than for which either is typically credited. Such a view of nature turns on the notion of continuity, particularly that between an experiencing organism [Dewey's "live creature"] and the conditioning environment [*Zhuangzi*'s "crooked tree"]. Where Dewey's and *Zhuangzi*'s ideas about nature converge, one finds similarities in prescriptions made for human action, and in the few places where they differ, one finds mutually complementary insights.

Keywords: Dewey – *Zhuangzi* – Daoism – Naturalism – Humanism

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieses Paper vergleicht das Konzept der Natur, wie es in den Philosophien des amerikanischen Pragmatikers John Dewey und des chinesischen, [nach seinem Autor benannten] Textes *Zhuangzi* erscheint, mit der Absicht, ein heuristisches Programm zu entwerfen, das dazu dienen kann, verschiedene interpretatorische Schwierigkeiten bei der Lesung dieser beiden Autoren zu überwinden. Ich vertrete die Position, dass sowohl bei Dewey als auch *Zhuangzi* komplexere und umfassendere Philosophien der Natur zu finden sind, als man es

⁷ Following scholarly conventions, I refer to the author of the first seven "Inner" chapters of the *Nanhua zhenjing* as *Zhuangzi*, and the text which bears his name as the *Zhuangzi*.

⁸ Any effort to situate the *Zhuangzi* within a western framework faces difficulties, primarily the interpretive troubles which surround the text. The abstrusity of the *Zhuangzi* has been well documented in recent literature, with countless explanations offered for interpretive quandaries presented by the text.

ihnen normalerweise zugesteht. Eine solche Sichtweise beruht auf der Vorstellung einer Kontinuität, insbesondere zwischen dem erlebenden Organismus [Dewey's "live creature"] und der formenden Umwelt [Zhuangzi's "verkrüppelter Baum"]. Dort, wo Dewey's und Zhuangzi's Vorstellungen von der Natur zusammenfließen, findet man vergleichbare Anweisungen für menschliches Handeln, während man an den wenigen Stellen, wo sie sich unterscheiden, Erkenntnisse findet, die sich gegenseitig ergänzen.

Schlagworte: Dewey – Zhuangzi – Taoismus – Naturalismus – Humanismus