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KANT AND CHINA: AESTHETICS, RACE, AND NATURE

I. Introduction

Naturalistic and antihumanist accounts of early Lao-Zhuang 老莊 Daoism and of the uncanny or terrifying sublime suggest that the everyday life and conventional personality of the individual is interrupted and displaced by overwhelming impersonal powers that reveal the "human" to be a false construction and the world an aesthetic, natural, or mystical play of forces. This is often portrayed as entailing an either/or between anthropocentric humanism, with all of its questionable assumptions about "the human" as distinct from animals and the natural world, and an impersonal naturalism that seems to depersonalize and deindividuate the person.

I will examine whether there is an alternative to both of these one-sided perspectives and argue that human beings can be individuated within and in the context of their natural world. Such a natural and yet still ethical individuation can be glimpsed in the work attributed to the ancient Chinese thinker Zhuangzi 莊子, the *Zhuangzi*,[1] and in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. According to standard readings, this is a hopeless strategy to the extent that Kant is concerned with the person's transcendence and Zhuangzi with its natural immanence. Furthermore, these radically divergent texts have no shared language, kinship, or identity.

Instead of advocating a hidden affinity, a critical reading of both reveals that Kant's third *Critique* goes beyond his more typical complicity with the anthropocentric domination of nature and that the *Zhuangzi* does not eliminate individuality and the human in its skeptical challenging of conventional human perspectives and concern with *dao* 道 and *tiandi* 天地 (heaven and earth, or "nature"). Between Kant and Zhuangzi, there is an open or empty space for considering human individuality in the context of the natural world.

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This article relies on a reinterpretation of the *Zhuangzi* as an ethics of natural yet not inhuman individuation and responsiveness in order to examine Kant's problematic interpretation of China and its "mysticism," involving a troublesome racial aesthetics, and Kant's articulation—more evocative of early Daoist approaches to nature and Chinese aesthetics—in the *Critique of Judgment* of nature as free natural beauty and the sublime.[2] By stressing human responsiveness to free natural beauty, Kant proves that there is more than the human domination of nature as either (i) a constituted product or (ii) mere objects of use and exploitation. Still, in the core of the third *Critique*, it appears as if the sublime reveals nature to be more than the human world only in the end for it to be lesser than human dignity. Kant's sublime risks endangering the person while disclosing the possibility of reaffirming the dignity of the individual in relation to the natural world. If that dignity is not affirmed, the person is overwhelmed in the adventurous or the grotesque. It remains to be seen if the awe and terror of the sublime does not lead to the assertion of a dignity and vocation that transcends the world but instead leads to the possibility of a renewed individuation of the human being within the world in relation to the dynamic impersonal forces of nature.

II. China and the Aesthetics of Race and Nature

Deploying an aesthetics of race, or racial aesthetics, Kant attributed qualities to the various races of the world in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* from 1764. Kant identified Asian Indians and the Chinese with the moral aesthetic category of the "grotesque," remarking of the latter:

> What ridiculous grotesqueries do the verbose and studied complements of the Chinese not contain; even their paintings are grotesque and represent marvelous and unnatural shapes, the likes of which are nowhere to be found in the world. They also have venerable grotesqueries, for the reason that they are of ancient usage, and no people in the world has more of them than this one.[3]

Earlier in the *Observations*, Kant described the category of the grotesque used in this passage, undoubtedly revealing a lack of understanding of Chinese practices and painting as a gradation of the sublime: "Unnatural things, in so far as the sublime is thereby intended, even if little or none of it is actually to be found, are grotesqueries."[4] The initial examples thereof are duels, cloisters, and graves of saints; castigation, vows, and monkish virtues; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; and the empty subtleties of Scholastic philosophy.[5]

The grotesque is correlated by Kant with the "weaker understanding" of the fantast and crank—i.e., with what he considered to be enthusiastic dabbling in fantastic fiction and/or the mystical, such as Ovid (whom Kant continued to quote in his works) and Emmanuel Swedenborg, and with the ritualism, scholasticism, and superstition he associated with premodern Catholic Europe.[6]

Kant does not appear to ever change this negative stance toward what he considered Chinese. Nor did he ever share Leibniz and Wolff's affirmative reception of various aspects of Chinese philosophy, politics, and ethics, where ideas and practices from China are seen as examples that can instruct modern Europeans.[7] Kant's apparent hostility toward the non-European world is not limited to China. This has been explained by reference to increasing European colonial activity and the escalating disrespect for other ways of life as inferior and to be subjugated, although Kant was critical of colonization and slavery as well as by Kant's problematic development of the discourse of race in a scientific or pseudo-scientific language.[8]

In his 1764 work, Kant is extending to the other peoples of the world categories that are simultaneously anthropological, moral, and aesthetic and are first used to classify other Europeans, including the "phlegmatic" Germans. Kant's stereotypes of the Chinese being overly refined and cunning, superstitious, and ritualistic are elucidated through the category of the grotesque. As marvelous and stultified, as somehow inhuman and unnatural, Kant is suggesting, without describing in detail, that it is a misrelating to the sublime. Whereas the sublime ought to evoke awe or terror yet always returns the observer to the dignity and moral vocation of the human, gradations of the sublime such as the adventurous and the grotesque leave the self, and accordingly human dignity and moral personhood, lost in the powers of nature and tradition.

Kant repeatedly returned to the loss of the person in nature that he perceives in the East. Unlike Leibniz and Wolff's positive reception of China, and akin to Malebranche's condemnation of the Chinese for being Spinozistic, Kant's lectures on religion from the mid-1780s associate Asian thought with the mystical experience of nature, assimilating it to Spinoza:

> To expect this [e.g., divine participation] in the present life is the business of mystics and theosophists. Thus arises the mystical self-annihilation of China, Tibet, and India, in which one deludes oneself that one is finally dissolved into the Godhead. Fundamentally one might just as well call Spinozism a great enthusiasm as a form of atheism.[9]

Such an atheistic mysticism or enthusiastic naturalism is incoherent according to Kant, since it breaches the transcendental separation

between immanence and transcendence, the sensible and its conditions and the supersensible whereof nothing cognitively meaningful can be stated. Kant's depiction in this passage targets not only Buddhism but also Daoism, given his interpretation of its identification with the monstrous and grotesque in "The End of All Things." In language that partly evokes the *ru* 儒 or Confucian disapproval of Buddhism and Daoism that probably informed his sources, Kant claimed:

> From this [improper dabbling in the transcendent] comes the monstrous system of Lao-kiun [i.e., Laozi 老子] concerning the *highest good*, that it consists in *nothing*, i.e., in the consciousness of feeling oneself swallowed up in the abyss of the Godhead by flowing together with it, and hence by the annihilation of one's personality; in order to have a presentiment of this state Chinese philosophers, sitting in dark rooms with their eyes closed, exert themselves to think and sense their own nothingness. Hence the *pantheism* (of the Tibetans and other oriental peoples); and in consequence from its philosophical sublimation Spinozism is begotten. . . [10]

In line with Christian ontotheology, Kant interprets the nothing and nothingness as primarily negative and pantheism as its celebration rather than as the affirmation of things and life in their immanent significance. Friedrich Nietzsche turned these two elements, nothingness and the self-affirmation of life in its immanence, against each other in his critique of Buddhism and the Asiatic. Ironically, Kant's portrayal of the Chinese was applied to Kant in Nietzsche's abuse of him as "der große Chinese von Königsberg" and "das Königsberger Chinesenthum"; with such labels Nietzsche seems to have some combination of moralism, mysticism, and ritualism in mind.[11] Nietzsche's polemical identification is obviously insufficient either to excuse Kant or link Kant and Chinese philosophy in any serious way. Even if Kant had more knowledge of Chinese thought, he might have further identified Daoism with the fantastic, akin to Ovid, Spinoza, or Swedenborg, and Confucian philosophy with the ritualism and scholasticism of Catholicism. Such associations are not unfamiliar in some recent and better informed authors who should know better.[12]

Instead of concluding with Kant's questionable judgments about the Chinese, or the affinities Nietzsche intimates, the following sections concern the relation between the human and the natural by reexamining the significance and import of (i) the beauty of "free nature" and of the sublime in Kant's philosophy and (ii) what evokes free natural beauty and the sublime in the *Zhuangzi* and, to a lesser extent, the *Daodejing*《道德經》. In the next section, I inquire into whether the third *Critique* can be interpreted as a middle ground between impersonal nature and moral personality. In the last section, I consider whether Lao-Zhuang Daoism truly dissolves the human

into mystical nature, as both Kant and Confucian critics of early Daoism contend. Rather than being mystical absorption in the static unity of the one, it might indicate the possibility of Zhuangzi's free and easy mobility within the immanence of dynamically changing nature, just as Kant wrote of English gardens and Baroque design—although cultivating natural worldly freedom cannot be said to be merely a project of the imagination in early Lao-Zhuang Daoism—by "[pushing] the freedom of the imagination almost to the point of the grotesque, and [making] this abstraction from all constraint by rules the very case in which taste can demonstrate its greatest perfection in projects of the imagination."[13]

III. A Daoist Reading of Nature in Kant's Third *Critique*

Kant's anthropological speculations concerning the Chinese are part of the dubious development of Enlightenment discourses about race, yet his depictions of the grotesque and the sublime and of absorption into the inhuman persist as questions, given the continuing significance of Kant's thought and contemporary debates concerning the actuality, import, and value of the idea of the human person. Kant's impoverished assessment of Daoism remains to some extent recognizable in newer approaches that celebrate or fear the loss of the person. The works attributed to Laozi and Zhuangzi continue to be associated with tendencies appearing to deny the moral personality of the individual. These tendencies include the mystical, the naturalistic, the antihumanistic, and inhumane and totalitarian legalist government.[14]

The *Zhuangzi* in particular is a work full of stories of fantastic transformations that undermine constant identity and threaten moral dignity and responsibility, celebrating the anarchistic and aesthetic playfulness of life and being free and at ease in the world as well as philosophical dialogues and reflections that have become a focal point for discussions of skepticism and deconstruction that reveal conventional human action, knowledge, and values to be uncertain. In the context of post-humanist and postmodern interpretations of the uncanny and terrifying sublime, and of mystical and deep ecological approaches to nature, challenging the metaphysical assumptions that privilege the human in anthropocentric humanism and personalism, both skeptical and mystical depictions of early Daoism are interpreted as implying that the everyday personal life of the individual is interrupted, dismantled, and undermined or transformed by overwhelming and/or more elemental impersonal powers.[15] The person and the human are accordingly revealed to be artificial constructions, with the world being an aesthetic, natural, or mystical play of inhuman forces.

Despite the third *Critique* and the *Opus Postumum*, Kant's philosophy of nature was criticized in German Romanticism for neglecting the vitality and holism of nature and, in works such as Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for deepening the instrumental domination and exploitation of nature.[16] For such authors, the *Critique of Judgment* is too little, too late, or simply inconsistent in addressing nature as a vital interdependent whole or in an environmentally sensitive way.[17] Insofar as nature receives value in the end only in relation to human feeling, thought, and dignity, and thus has no independence in relation to the human, it is clear which side Kant falls on in the conflict between an anthropocentric humanism that values the person at the expense of the natural world and animal life, and an impersonal naturalism (whether scientific, romantic, or mystical) where the person disappears as transient part or fabricated composite.

The sensual-material or naturalistic moment is to some degree recognized in Kant's critical philosophy: first, in the first *Critique*'s principle of phenomenality that, however, leads back to the transcendental power and unity of consciousness; second, in the empirical and causal motivations that the person ought to overcome through the moral law; and third, in the sublime that risks destroying the person while disclosing the possibility of reaffirming the dignity of the individual in relation to the natural world. By placing it at risk, the abyss and terror of the sublime heightens the feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*) and, through its temporary interruption, the mind's own striving is shown to break with its absorption in sense-objects and surpass "every measure of the senses."[18]

Kant's account of the feeling of life is historically connected with early modern discourses of *vis viva* (living force) in Leibniz and the more materialist notion of the *conatus* in Hobbes and Spinoza. These concepts concern individual vitality and personal individuation in relation to impersonal natural forces. These early modern philosophical concepts were reflectively displaced by Kant from a direct cosmological metaphysics of nature to reflection on human moral sensibility and vocation in the context of life. In relation to the forces and conditions of life, humans find their own purpose in themselves and individuate themselves as moral beings in a worldly context. Whereas the beautiful "carries with it directly a feeling of life's being furthered," the sublime "is a pleasure that arises only indirectly; it is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger."[19] Such moral individuation in response to nature is not the subsumption of a particular under a universal category or the exemplarity of a type, as with determinate judgment, and thus, not the pure dominion of active spirit over passive nature.

Instead of being the assimilative drive and mastery of the self-interested *conatus*, as some critics have interpreted *Lebensgefühl*, it is the unpredetermined responsive and reflective generation, formation, and cultivation of individual and social aesthetic and moral sensibilities in relation to particular phenomena. The feeling of life is the possibility of a prereflective awareness of self and other. Without a predetermined concept, it involves the nexus of nature as significant in itself and human feeling that cultivates nature's significance, even if sensibility must transcend the senses and sensuality to realize its rational vocation for Kant. The third *Critique* is not only a work about the generation and articulation of concepts. It concerns the coming to word and concept of what is heterogeneous, not given, or without a concept: the sensuous, the natural, and the felt in art and genius, language, and the *sensus communis*.[20]

The *sensus communis* is a sharing of sense proceeding through feelings rather than a common understanding working through concepts.[21] It is without a determinate concept or judgment and is universally communicable in requesting assent as distinct from legislating agreement.[22] As such, it allows for the interpretation and communication of the noncognitive and nonconceptual, particularly feeling.[23] Kant's *sensus communis* consists of a horizon of socially formed preunderstandings. They are not merely prejudices with the conservative function of reproducing habit, custom, and tradition to the extent that they are communicative media that are open to and transformed by the interactions between members of the community. The height of individuation in Kant is the genius who discovers ideas and ways of expressing them.[24] Although restricted by the demands of rationality unfolded in the three *Critiques*, genius provides new forms and models for encountering and interpreting phenomena and oneself, as the genuinely and transformational "otherwise" has a significant role in approaching society, culture, and art.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant explored how nature can be judged reflectively as having purposes, humans can be said to be ultimate purposes, and art can embody and enact "purposefulness without purpose" as "lawfulness without law" or purposiveness without a concept of a determinate teleological final cause. This playful and anarchic removal of barriers and predetermined purposes in experiencing the free-form of the beautiful—e.g., what is free in not being grounded in the concept of how the object ought to be or in an idea of purpose or perfection[25]—and the formlessness of the sublime is connected with the feeling of life and contrasted with the seriousness of ethical, political, and religious purposes as governed by fixed forms and final ends.

The "unison in the play of the powers of the mind" is not a confused concept or inadequate idea but a feeling of inner sense.[26] Such felt spontaneity and playfulness, as the promise of freedom from a predetermined purpose and as responsiveness in relation to the forces and conditions of life, indicates a noninstrumental, noncoercive, and nondominating activity understood as a creative receptiveness or responsive spontaneity in encountering the myriad things and the world as an ineffable whole inviting further investigation and inquiry.[27]

Kant's third *Critique* does not, therefore, purely defend either the aesthetic use or moralistic domination of nature, as various critics such as Günter Wohlfart contend.[28] It is deeply ethical in locating the individuation and self-articulation of the person in a worldly, sensuous, and bodily as well as a social context. The self does not cognitively or theoretically know itself. Instead, the self finds itself, according to the third *Critique*, in its comportment, cultivation (*Bildung*), and culture in relation to nature, the sublime, and the supersensible.[29] According to John Zammito, this work was partly Kant's reply to the pantheism controversy that impacted German intellectual life in the late 1780s.[30] As opposed to being primarily reactive against pantheism and early romanticism, both clearly rejected by Kant, the third *Critique* articulates an alternative or middle ground affirming the person in relation to the forces and conditions of nature through feelings of life such as those of the beautiful and the sublime. Whatever their relation to the human faculties, Kant insists that both the beautiful and sublime please intrinsically, for themselves, rather than instrumentally, for something else, and that their purposiveness cannot be reduced to purposes—i.e., instrumentally to human purposes.

Kant's approach to the feeling of life, reflective judgment, and *sensus communis* in the *Critique of Judgment* are ways of nonmechanistically, yet not metaphysically or teleologically in the strong sense, experiencing and articulating the nexus of life. They are nonmechanistic insofar as Kant describes the beautiful as free of calculative and instrumental interest, and the sublime as contrapurposive, addressing nature through a reflectively articulated purposiveness without a predetermined purpose. This nexus of life involves both the "external" natural world and the "internal" relations of the faculties of the subject.

The analysis offered here places Kant's critical philosophy in a different light, as having a "hermeneutical" dimension insofar as the human subject intrinsically lacks the transparency of self-knowledge (at least as a rationalistically intelligible essence) yet does live from the feeling of life that opens up questions of the self-understanding, interpretation, and individuation of that life. The

proto- or quasi-hermeneutical aspects of the third *Critique* do not suspend or escape the conditions and demands of theoretical and practical reason. The book indicates strategies for a hermeneutics of "a" life or "individuated" life that do not rely on metaphysical self-knowledge or the rational psychology of the soul.

Kant's thought does not leave us with the bare mechanistic nature of the natural sciences nor return to a metaphysical or strong teleological conception of nature. It addresses questions of the formation and individuation of personal identity through reflective judgment and the *sensus communis*; these do not command or legislate to the phenomena but unresponsively or responsively interpret and communicate with them, in the context of the heightening and lessening of the "feeling of life" that seeks a balance and harmony in relation to itself and its world.[31] Such dynamic harmony does not deaden the mind with a static unity, since it is animated and enlivened with the connections and resonance between what is different and singular.[32]

The singular "this" indicated and addressed in feelings and judgments of taste—"this rose is beautiful," to use Kant's example—is distinct from the general or universal spoken of in logical judgments, including those that are aesthetically oriented, such as "roses are beautiful."[33] Whereas reflective judgment evokes the experience of dynamic harmony proceeding from a particular, without subsuming it under a pregiven concept insofar as the concept is precisely what is in need of being articulated, determinate judgment subsumes or synthesizes particulars according to a predetermined universal concept. As Rudolf Makkreel notes of Kant's distinction, the harmony of reflective judgment is a co-relational balancing between particulars instead of a strict determinate synthesis according to an established concept or totalizing integration from above: "A harmony involves a reciprocal relation between two distinct elements; a synthesis, as Kant conceives it, involves a one-sided influence for the sake of a strict unity."[34]

Kant's thinking of harmony in a play of forces and conditions, including in the face of the terror of the sublime (with the human disposition rising above sense objects and beginning to realize its nonsensuous and moral vocation), offers an alternative to (i) an overly anthropocentric reading of Kant; and (ii) Kant's own inadequate appreciation of Chinese painting, aesthetics, and early Daoism. From their own sensibilities and in their own languages, they both concern the harmony and balance within the individual (as the free, unforced balancing in the play of the flood-like *qi* 氣, and in Kant's language of the free unforced harmonizing of the faculties) and between the individual and the environing natural world that it transcends, without abandoning, in responding to it with freedom and ease.[35]

IV. The "Daoist" Critique of Kant

Kant's lack of knowledge and understanding of non-European cultures and peoples could be forgiven according to some principle of charity as merely circumstantial and not integral to his thought. However, the problem is worse than this insofar as Kant was, as Robert Bernasconi argues, in fact systematically ethnocentric and racist.[36] Thus, Kant's undeniable racism cannot be dismissed as merely empirical and pragmatic and thereby irrelevant to the realm of "pure theory." Despite the real, powerful, and undeniable deficits in his writings, Kant's sound arguments are not refuted by his unsound ones. Kant's practical philosophy retains a critical reflective and socially emancipatory import that surpasses the problematic horizon of his prejudices and continues to address the inequalities and injustices of the present. Kant's proposition that each human being deserves to be treated with moral dignity and as an autonomous agent is radically egalitarian in its scope even as this normative claim to moral equality—beyond positive laws and pragmatic political calculations—is compromised and undermined in his discussions of race, gender, cultural difference, and class.[37]

Recent race theorists rightly illuminate and object to the real limitations of Kant's egalitarianism. Coming from a different angle, Wohlfart and Hans-Georg Moeller have articulated "Daoist" critiques that oppose the rigidity of Kant's narrow moralism with the apparent freedom of amorality, his limited rationalistic humanism with a broader naturalism, and abstract Western philosophy with more concrete Eastern wisdom. Wohlfart asserts that Kant's philosophy is complicit with an individualistic domination of nature and that the early Daoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi will liberate us from the isolation and alienation of such problematic individualistic humanism.[38] Yet if the arguments developed in the previous and next sections of this paper are accurate, then Kant's philosophy is more responsive to nature's spontaneity and early Daoism is more permeable by human individuality and personal morality than is frequently claimed. Kant's thinking of the co-responsiveness of the natural and the human, particularly in the third *Critique*, is not as foreign to non-Western ways of thinking as he himself thought or as contemporary Western "Daoist" critics contend.

Moeller further maintains the opposition between Kant and Daoism, as interpreted through systems theory, in his recent work defending amorality.[39] Moeller appropriately criticizes Kant's "views on sex, servants, the death penalty, and the killing of illegitimate children" without noting how this "amoral" and "negative" critique of morality contradicts itself by relying on normative and moral judgments that Kant's statements are objectionable for ultimately moral

reasons.[40] Moeller's normatively justifiable moral outrage and implicit appeal to claims of justice and equality for servants, women, those executed by the state, and homosexuals undermines his overall argument that we ought not to be morally indignant nor employ normative "moralistic" ideas of justice and equality.

The rejection of the abuses of moralism reveals itself to be moralistic rather than "amoral" and does not escape the ethical as easily as it proposes. As I maintain elsewhere, early Daoist texts—including supposedly morally indifferent passages such as chapter five of the *Daodejing*—do not only negatively criticize conventional moralities but do so for ethical motives by indicating a minimalist ethos that participates in caring for and nourishing life.[41] It is also important to point out the risks of the systems-theoretical elimination of ethics and the "person" as prehistoric metaphysical fictions for the sake of depersonalized structural–functional systems that limit persons to their socially defined functions and roles.[42] As Enrique Dussel argues, there are no ethics in systems-theoretical thinking insofar as there is only the play of a relative identity and difference and no genuine other.[43]

Moeller's contention that the moral purity of Kantian ethics is implicated in moralistic terror from the French Revolution to National Socialist genocide should be juxtaposed with Hannah Arendt's more nuanced interpretation. Arendt revealed both the centrality of appropriate moral judgment as the capacity to reflectively apply moral rules in Kant's practical philosophy and the severe failure of such critical moral judgment (that is, the moral foolishness involved in the refusal to reflectively and appropriately apply moral norms under National Socialism) in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.[44] Emmanuel Lévinas, who also argued for the primacy of the ethical, analyzed the nihilistic reduction of the other person to the amoral brute facticity of nature and socially ordered function in National Socialism and exposed the depersonalizing systematic totalities that conceal the systems-interruptive prophetic call for justice for the other.[45] Whereas Luhmann and Moeller argue for decoupling morality and law, thinkers from Kant to Lévinas and Dussel show that the ethical interpersonal sources of law and politics are the possibility of its critique, renewal, and transformation.[46]

The *wuwei* 無為 ("nonaction" or a noncoercive deferential action) of the Daoist sage might be interpreted as a functioning behind the scenes that indifferently allows systems to operate on their own. This neutrality thesis is shared by both libertarian and legalistic readings of the *Daodejing*. Their neglect of the moral address of others and the sage's coparticipation in nourishing life reveals their kinship. A different interpretive strategy suggests that the sage nourishes and cares for the myriad things in their transience just as heaven and earth are said to do. In chapter seven of the *Daodejing*, the reason why

heaven and earth endure is not because they are amoral, indifferently neutral or cruel; it is because their life is for others rather than for themselves.[47] Although the *Daodejing* did not use a prophetic style of speech, the chapters depicting the disasters of war, oppression, and famine could well be said to speak for the abject and the oppressed against the systems that misuse them and lead them to early and unnecessary death.[48]

The *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* both encourage accepting the natural death of others and oneself while discouraging early and unneeded humanly produced death. Naturalistic and systems-theoretical interpretations prove that early Daoist texts do not justify a metaphysical or transcendent conception of the self or person. Yet the claim that there is a substantial self is not equivalent to the claim that the self has a moral status. In early Daoism, it is the natural embodied self that needs care and nourishment. The longevity and flourishing of life ought to be promoted rather than practices leading the living to misery and perishing. This early Daoist recognition of the transience, suffering, and finitude of worldly creatures and humans consequently entails an ethical reverence for them in their moment of life.

V. Nature and Freedom in Kant and Zhuangzi

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant explored both art and nature as embodying "purposefulness without purpose" or the form of purposiveness without a cognitively represented end or teleological final cause. Kant's strategy presupposes the demystified nature of the modern natural sciences and the persisting need for a different way of understanding human experiences and cultures of nature in this modern disenchanted context. Since Kant cannot directly appeal to or employ a cosmological, metaphysical, or teleological conception of nature, he turned to the aesthetic experience of nature. Kant opposed and revised Leibniz's teleological and metaphysical conception of living force (*vis viva*) in his description of the feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*) as an aesthetics of personal worldly existence. This is not necessarily the loss that antimodernists maintain. It is in this "aesthetic" turn that Kant approximates basic dimensions of the *dao* articulated in early Chinese philosophy. Kant contrasted the playful and anarchic lack of purpose with the seriousness of ethical, political, and religious purpose, including the racial aesthetics and anthropology found in other works. Such spontaneity and playfulness, as freedom from a preordained purpose, can be analyzed in relation to the image and model of "free and easy wandering" unfolded in the *Zhuangzi*.[49]

Such an analysis does not reveal any determinate parallels and analogies. It does, however, allow for the reconsideration of whether Kant privileged the human and neglected the natural and whether early Daoism neglected the human in prioritizing nature. These radically divergent perspectives offer two different articulations of a noninstrumental, noncoercive, and nondominating activity understood as either (i) wandering free and at ease in the world or (ii) a creative receptiveness or responsive spontaneity in encountering the myriad things and the world.

Kant emphasized the nonconceptual yet universal satisfaction enacted in the nonattached and free play of forces in aesthetic judgment. The *Zhuangzi* articulates a nonconceptual and nonattached play involving transitions between a multiplicity of perspectives. This includes the contra- or counterpurposive that Kant finds displeasing in the beautiful, despite the role he gives it in the sublime and his noting the beauty of the useless and hence free object.[50] Instead of limiting this multiplicity and variability of transitions and perspectives to the freedom of the imagination and play in the aesthetic domain, and ultimately subordinating it to morality as in Kant's third *Critique*, the Daoist sage is portrayed as responsively free and at ease amidst the myriad things.[51] Zhuangzi's responding without retaining, acting upon without harming, is more expansive than any conditional and limited goal or purpose that would limit the self to its perspective without recognizing its inherent transience and multiplicity. Such responsiveness does not—to speak Kant's language—presuppose and is not restrained by a determinate concept, even though it employs concepts and words that are unfixed yet not therefore meaningless. Liberation from the determinate, purposive, and useful enables human beings to relate to things and their context in a fundamentally different, noninstrumental way. This way cultivates the self but is not therefore egotistical, since it calls on the self to individuate itself amidst things. It is naturalistic yet not thereby inhuman, if it is human to respond to, be oriented by, and participate in the dynamic transformations of heaven and earth.

Each of these works in its own way concerns individuation through cultivating balance in relation to nature within and outside oneself. Kant's third *Critique* and the *Zhuangzi* are not merely aesthetic. They are deeply ethical works in (i) challenging the instrumental reduction of nature and the naturalistic reduction of the person or individual and (ii) indicating the freedom in interaction and harmony between the human and the natural world. Nevertheless, despite such resonance, Kantian and Daoist visions of freedom and balance in relation to self and world remain incommensurable.

As Kant noted from his *Lectures on Ethics* to the *Critique of Judgment*, nature and animals are not to be purely instrumentalized,

exploited, or treated with indifference or cruelty, since how humans relate to them reflects how they sense and cultivate their own feeling of life and moral vocation. In the context of the moral heightening and formation of the feeling of life, humans have indirect and mediate duties to animals, including negative duties against cruelty and positive duties of love and humaneness,[52] even as such duties and sentiments are ultimately subordinate to the necessity of human needs.[53]

While Kant did recognize nature's beauty and sublimity independently of calculative interests and limited human—as distinguished from moral–vocational—purposes, he still demanded the person's separation from nature for the sake of morality and the postulates of morality (freedom, immortality, and God), thereby rehabilitating theistic and transcendent religion, as unfolded in the third *Critique*'s concluding pages. In contrast, although not without recognition of the transcendence or transformation within immanence, the Zhuangzian Daoist finds ethical independence dwelling within nature itself and disinterestedly embracing the myriad things in the immanence of their singular self-so-ness (*ziran* 自然): following each being's own grain, including one's own, and accordingly discovering one's freedom in the midst of the world.[54]

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Endnotes

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1. The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 passages are cited by chapter. I have consulted the *Library of Chinese Classics* Chinese–English edition of the *Zhuangzi* by Wang Rongpei, Qin Xuqing, and Sun Yongchang (Changsha: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe, 1999); Burton Watson's *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); Martin Palmer's *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (London: Penguin Arkana Publishing, 1996); A.C. Graham's *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001); Hyun Höchsmann and Yang Guorang, *Zhuangzi* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007); and Brook Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009).
2. I argue for the ethical orientation of early Daoism in Eric S. Nelson, "Responding with *Dao*: Early Daoist Ethics and the Environment," *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 3 (2009): 294–316; and "Questioning Dao: Skepticism, Mysticism, and Ethics in the *Zhuangzi*," *International Journal of the Asian Philosophical Association* 1, no. 1 (2008): 5–19. Also compare Dan Lusthaus, "Aporetic Ethics in the Zhuangzi," in *Hiding the World in the World*: *Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*, ed. Scott Cook

(Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 163–206. For a contrary view arguing for the amorality and anti-humanism of early Daoism, see Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amorality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 35–39.

3. Immanuel Kant, "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime," in *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2: 252. All Kant citations are by volume and page number of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften (Akademieausgabe)* and all translations are from the Cambridge edition of the *Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge University Press) unless otherwise noted.
4. Ibid., 2: 214.
5. Ibid., 2: 214–5.
6. Ibid., 2: 222.
7. On Leibniz's interpretation of China and Chinese philosophy, see Eric S. Nelson, "Leibniz and China: Religion, Hermeneutics, and Enlightenment," *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment* 1 (2009): 277–300; and "The Yijing and Philosophy: From Leibniz to Derrida," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (2011): 377–96.
8. Compare Robert Bernasconi, "Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up: The Challenge of Enlightenment Racism to the Study of the History of Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 117 (2003): 13–22; "Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race," in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11–36.
9. Kant, "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion," in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 28: 1052.
10. Kant, "The End of All Things," in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8: 335.
11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* in 15 Bänden (KSA), ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Verlag Walter de Gruyter, 1980): KSA, 5.144; KSA, 6.177; compare Stephen R. Palmquist's discussion in "How 'Chinese' was Kant?", *The Philosopher* 84, no. 1 (1996): 3–9.
12. On the problematic assumptions of Western sinology, see the preface to Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2004), xi–xx.
13. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5: 126.
14. I describe and respond to a number of such readings in "Questioning Dao," 5–19, and "Responding with *Dao*," 294–316.
15. Jean-François Lyotard rejected the overly simplistic identification of the sublime with a politics of the sublime that would be terror and its celebration in *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982–1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 67–71.
16. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). This critique continues in Adorno's later works such as *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 80; *History and Freedom*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 209–10. I examine Adorno's environmental critique of Kant in Eric S. Nelson, "Revisiting the Dialectic of Environment: Nature as Ideology and Ethics in Adorno and the Frankfurt School," *Telos* 155 (2011): 105–126.
17. For instance, as argued in Ann A. Pang-White, "Nature, Interthing Intersubjectivity, and the Environment: A Comparative Analysis of Kant and Daoism," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (2009): 61–78. Based on the argument developed in this essay that there is an intimate relation between the aesthetic, the ethical, and the experience of nature, I disagree with the conclusions that nature in the third *Critique* is inconsistent and that the transcendental subjectivity and worldly phenomenalism of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are more compatible with early Daoism and environmental ethics.
18. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 250.
19. Ibid., 5: 245.

20. Kant, *Notes and Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 20: 202–3.
21. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 238, 293.
22. Ibid., 5: 216, 221.
23. Rudolf Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 164.
24. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 317.
25. Ibid., 5: 222, 229.
26. Ibid., 5: 228.
27. On the spontaneity and responsiveness of life, compare Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, 106, 156.
28. Günter Wohlfart, *Die Kunst des Lebens und andere Künste: Skurrile Skizzen zu einem eurodaoistischen Ethos ohne Moral* (Berlin: Parerga Verlag, 2005).
29. Kant, 5: 265; on the sublime and supersensible conditions of the subject and its moral cultivation, see Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, 79–81, 83–4.
30. John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6–12, 228–48.
31. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, 3–6.
32. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 219.
33. Ibid., 5: 215.
34. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, 47.
35. Chapter four of the *Zhuangzi* describes how it is by knowing without knowledge and by emptying the self through the "fasting of the mind" that one opens oneself to the spontaneous responsiveness of one's vital energy or force (*qi*), receiving in sincerity and generously responding without assertion or imposition. See Höchsmann and Guorang, 103–4, Palmer and Breuilly, 29–30; Watson, 57–8; Ziporyn, 26–7.
36. Robert Bernasconi, "Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up," 13–22, and "Who Invented the Concept of Race," 11–36.
37. On Kant's racism, see ibid. Mary J. Gregor describes Kant's "unqualified egalitarianism" in her introduction to Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xvii; Allen W. Wood discusses Kant's "strict egalitarianism" in *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 133.
38. Wohlfart, *Die Kunst des Lebens und andere Künste*, and "Metacritique of Practical Reason," in Palmquist, ed., 2010, 53–73.
39. Moeller, *The Moral Fool*, 35–39, 80–85.
40. Ibid., 83.
41. See Nelson, "Responding with *Dao*," 301–302.
42. Moeller, *The Moral Fool*, 122.
43. Compare Enrique D. Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1998), 257; Asger Sørensen, "Dussel's Critique of Discourse Ethics as Critique of Ideology," *Public Reason* 2, no. 2 (2010): 97; and also Holger Zaborowski, *Robert Spaemann's Philosophy of the Human Person: Nature, Freedom, and the Critique of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 166–167.
44. Moeller associates Kant and National Socialist "cleansing" in *The Moral Fool*, 81. Hannah Arendt investigates Eichmann's purported Kantianism in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 135–137. I suggest a more complex view of Kant's moral theory, one that includes forms of impure and flexible moral and political judgment, in Eric S. Nelson, "Moral and Political Prudence in Kant," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 44, no. 3 (2004): 305–319.
45. Emmanuel Lévinas initiated this assessment in the mid-1930s, see *On Escape* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 50–55.
46. Moeller, *The Moral Fool*, 122. Enrique D. Dussel formulated this point more radically when he contrasted the priority of the ethical person-to-person relation in the political (as equality, fraternity, and solidarity) with the amoral "totality of institutions that have to articulate themselves as natural" and are "neither just nor unjust" but "simply

natural facts." Dussel challenged this "cynical" affirmation of the *autopoiesis* of the self-reproducing system (totality) with the ethical moment of liberation arising from the alterity of the oppressed. See Enrique D. Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1998), 7, 39, 72, 156.

47. "Heaven is enduring; the earth is long-lasting. The reason why heaven and earth can be enduring and long-lasting is that that they do not live for themselves." Quotation from Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 47.
48. *Daodejing*, Chapters 31, 57, 69, 75.
49. I develop the ethical character of early Daoism further in "Questioning Dao," 5–19, and "Responding with *Dao*," 294–316.
50. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 210–1, 5: 245.
51. Hyun Höchsmann and Christian Wenzel address such concerns by stressing the practical-ethical character of freedom in both Zhuangzi and Kant in their respective articles: "The Starry Heavens Above—Freedom in Zhuangzi and Kant," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31, no. 2 (2004): 235–52; and "Ethics and Zhuangzi: Awareness, Freedom, and Autonomy," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2003): 115–26.
52. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 27: 459, 710.
53. Ibid., 27: 460.
54. This point evokes Kant's critique of the self-sufficiency of morality (i.e., that morality is its own reward regardless of hope in a future life) and nature (i.e., that nature exists indifferently in and out of itself without regard for human hopes) in Spinoza and Spinozism with which Kant associated Daoism (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 452). Despite revealing affinities and relativizing differences in this paper, there an irresolvable tension remains between the moral transcendence emphasized by Kant and the natural immanence articulated in early Daoism.