Reviews

Eric S. Nelson: Daoism and Environmental Philosophy: Nourishing Life

New York, Routledge 2021. 156 pp.

1. Overview: Book and Author

A man from Lu gifted King Yüan a knot. The king ordered all talented people to come and unravel it. But nobody succeeded. A pupil of Ní Yùe asked for permission to try. He could unravel one half of the knot, but not the other. He said: "It is not that it could be unravelled and I did not succeed, instead it cannot be unravelled." The man from Lu was consulted. He said: "Yes, the knot indeed cannot be unravelled. I made it and know that it cannot be. But someone who did not make it and still knows that it cannot be unravelled is surely more talented than me." Thus the pupil of Ní Yùe solved the knot by not solving it. (cited in Heubel 2016: 201, transl. DB)

Compared to the myth of the Gordian Knot, in which the knot is ultimately cut by a sword, this classical Chinese story illustrates a different way of tackling an overly complex problem: solving it by not solving it. Can we apply such examples of paradoxical thinking in early Daoist writing to the complex 'knot' of closely intertwined social and environmental problems in the Anthropocene? Could we use strategies like non-solution, non-interference, or non-domination in relation to the global crisis? These are the key questions posed by Eric S. Nelson's new book *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy*. It is thus placed it neatly in the middle of the debate about how Daoist ideas can be applied to the environmental crisis on one hand (Parkes 2021, Sťahel 2020, Schönfeld/Chen 2019, D'Ambrosio 2013) and the need to decolonise Western thought on the other (Bendix et al. 2021, Allen 2019).

Nelson is a humanities professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. His work is on Critical Social Theory, hermeneutics and phenomenology as well as Daoist and Buddhist philosophy, especially in relation to intercultural environmental philosophy.

Daoism and Environmental Philosophy explores the potential of early Daoist texts – such as the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* – as a source of guidance for contemporary environmental practice in the Anthropocene. In revealing the critical and transformative dimensions of these, he develops an intercultural political

ecology. In this review, I present this line of argument in more detail before discussing Nelson's work.

2. Detailed Description of the Book

2.1 Introduction: Early Daoist Ethics and the Philosophy of Nature

Before embarking on his investigation, Nelson lays the groundwork. **First** of all, he openly embraces early Daoist writing as a hybrid of religion and philosophy. Daoist writing has to be understood as a practical philosophy of life where the aim is to "reflectively encounter, engage, and question the circumstances and conditions of one's life and engage in an art or technique of living" (Nelson 2021: 6).[1] He stresses that as such, **secondly**, Daoist writing seeks to have "a transformative effect" (ibid.: 8) on individuals and governments, recommending multiple models of how one can best live and act. This can be achieved through communicative strategies like sceptical reasoning, paradoxes, or open ended questions that are not common in Western philosophical and scientific debates. **Thirdly**, Nelson shows that the idea of "nature", in the narrow sense of a unified external world that supports and limits human activity, does not exist in early Daoist writing. **Fourthly**, Nelson advocates a "critical therapeutic ecology" that rejects coercively fixated actions and instead prioritises minimalism, non-domination, non-dualism, and the self-ordering abilities of uninterrupted natural processes. **Finally**, Nelson flatly rejects interpretations that cast Daoism as favouring fatalistic or indifferent passivity. Instead he argues that in the present era it would recommend "restoring and reviving the broken, interrupted, and pathological patterns of an ecologically devastated earth and damaged life" (ibid.).

2.2 Nourishing Life, Cultivating Nature, and Environmental Philosophy

Chapter 2 is concerned with several terms and concepts that are key to Nelson's analysis. The guiding theme here is a critical discussion of what "nourishing life", the subtitle of the book, means in different classical Daoist works (cf. ibid: 24f.). The main opposition runs between its interpretation as (a) echoing natural tendencies (cf. ibid.: 26f.) and (b) as artificial enhancement of life (cf. ibid.: 27f.). Using a paradoxical synthesis (ibid. 34ff.) Nelson argues in favour of a middle way – the "responsive attunement" of actions to the unhindered flow of natural processes (cf. ibid.: 42). Nelson concludes that in the Anthropocene, where the extreme domination of nature by human beings has disrupted the self-patterning of natural systems, such unforced participation in the sum of happenings (*dao*) is a sustainable form of action that is non-coercive but not neutral or indifferent.

1 In line with Nelson's book, I refer to early Daoist philosophy and texts.

2.3 Wuwei, Responsive Attunement, and Generative Nature

Chapter 3 provides the core of the book's argument. In this chapter Nelson reveals his paradox-based interpretation of how we should and should not act when facing the Anthropocene.

The key term here is *wu-wei*, a combination of the Chinese words *wu* (without, nothing, no, not) and *wei* (to do, act as, serve as, become). Nelson distinguishes between three different classical readings of this term. While **Confucianists** see *wu-wei* as moralistic and cosmological – "nature and humanity cooperate to engender a harmoniously balanced and hierarchically organised state of affairs" (Nelson 2021: 51) – **Legalists** stress the non-engagement side, for example the king should not (publicly) interfere with the duties of his ministers but remain hidden behind the laws that he makes. Nelson's investigation focuses on the last of these, the **Daoist** approach. The only norm here is that the course of things, the *dao,* should be followed (ibid.: 53), which means "working with the natural tendencies in things toward restoring sustainable, functional, self-reproducing relational systems" (ibid.: 56).

In this context, *wu-wei* does not simply mean not acting – no ethical guidelines can follow from that – but "a special kind of flexible, receptive, or minimal action, a way of comporting oneself or being attuned" (ibid.: 49). In other words, *wu-wei* is timely, unforced action with minimal effort. Any effort must be in tune with the self-organised flow of ongoing transformations and not impose changes that disrupt the flow. Nelson therefore translates *wu-wei* as responsive attunement.

He concludes that *wu-wei* "contests and disrupts the maximalism of relentless aggressive intervention, commodification, and overproduction and consumption characteristics of existing capitalist societies and political economies" (Nelson 2021: 69). So although *wu-wei* was "not developed in the context of the modern ecological crisis […] [it] can be ecologically redeployed and reimagined for the sake of present life and addressing its most pressing environmental crisis-tendencies" (Nelson 2021: 68).

2.4 Emptying Ecology: Nothingness, Language, and Encountering Things

Chapter 4 deepens the analysis of chapter 3 by exploring the philosophical ideas behind the *wu* in *wu-wei*. It is crucial to understand that in Chinese philosophy nothingness is an engendering, life-giving precondition for everything else. The meaning of the ethical concepts described in Chapter 3 thus depends on the interpretation of *wu*.

Nelson explores the dimensions of *wu* by analysing the philosophy of (non-) language in the concepts of emptiness (74ff.), uselessness (80ff.), and nothingness (87ff.). The related Daoist strategies of mental 'emptying', 'fasting', and 'self-forgetting' are aimed at removing the illusionary divisions between things. They therefore contest the discursive barriers that have been erected between the self

and others, humans and things; these are the barriers that facilitated the extreme domination of nature with drastic social and environmental consequences in the Anthropocene. As Nelson puts it:

"The recognition and appreciation of things (that which is as it is) pulls us […] outside of our own presumptions and projects toward the nothingness that cannot be determinatively said and conceived even through the most flexible and indirect uses of language. […] [T]hat can inform and allow the reimagining of environmental philosophy" (ibid.: 96).

2.5 Early Daoist Biopolitics and a New Daoist Political Ecology

While Chapter 4 concluded that the ecological strategy of emptiness releases things so they can flourish in their own way, Chapter 5 outlines the broader concept of "Daoist political ecology" on a similar basis. Chapter 5 is therefore the most political and most frequently criticised part of the book.

Here, the term 'political ecology' is already a political statement that suggests that an environmental ethics will not suffice given the "systematically reproduced social-economic processes in advanced capitalist societies" (Nelson 2021: 100). Nelson states that social and political philosophy must "offer an environmentally oriented critique of existing social structures and institutions that directly and indirectly harm creatures and degrade ecosystems" (Nelson 2021: 100). In this chapter he therefore explores what early Daoist sources can contribute to contemporary critical ecology and social theory.

In doing so, Nelson contests the anachronistic dichotomy that posits Daoism interpretations as either totalitarian (101ff.) or anarchic (106ff.). Rejecting these two extremes on the grounds that they are a reductive and de-contextualised modern misreading of the *Daodejing*, he tries to show how the eco-democratic practices (112ff.) of care, nurture, and the primacy of others could be derived from a more complex and comprehensive study of it. He therefore concludes that the "Daoist inspired critical models [of political philosophy] are potentially far more radically democratic in teaching more expansive forms of non-domination that anarchically release persons and things from forms of violence, hierarchical stratification, and coercion" (ibid.: 116).

2.6 Epilogue: Emptying Ecology and Chan Buddhism

Chapter 6 is a historical excursion into the way classical Daoist ideas of emptying were taken up in Chan Buddhism. Nelson's main aim here is to highlight the complexity of good self-cultivation in Daoist ethics, by contesting interpretations that stress antinomianism (123ff.) on one hand and perfectionism in aretaic virtues (129ff.) on the other. His main reason for including this chapter is to show the reader how "to speak in paradoxes and [thereby] challenge conventional and moralistic ways of thinking and living" (Nelson 2021: 119). In this context he concludes that

Daoist and Chan discourses and practices "indicate a therapeutics and embodied practices of emptying that dismantle the illusions of self-power and the mastery and domination of nature that reflects our current ecological crisis-tendencies" (ibid.: 134).

3. Discussion

Eric S. Nelson's *Daoism and Environmental philosophy* provides us with a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the relevance of classical Daoist texts for critical environmental philosophy in the Anthropocene. His work could not be more topical as he embraces the need to reject both the de-politicisation of the politico-economic driving forces behind the current socio-ecological crisis tendencies and a coercive environmentalism that ultimately has authoritarian dimensions. Remarkably, his middle way is neither neutral nor apolitical, as are many interpretations of Daoism as spiritual escapism, radical individualism, and fatalistic indifference. Against such an unworldly withdrawal from the political, Nelson formulates a political ecology that goes beyond an environmental ethics.

Nelson deserves great credit for avoiding the two most common pitfalls in the use of Daoist concepts to address the Anthropocene: romanticisation of classical Chinese philosophy and flirtation with the idea of eco-authoritarianism (e.g. Schönfeld/Chen 2019). This is the key aspect of his book that makes his work an outstanding contribution to the pressing challenge of finding a fresh and undogmatic perspective on how (not) to act in the Anthropocene.

I have, however, three main criticisms of Nelson's book. The **first** relates to his writing style. Many passages, especially those containing crucial conclusions and syntheses, seem to drown in opaque word-clouds that repeat various combinations of phrases and words such as "myriad things", "flourishing", "shared elemental body of life", "nurturing", "the embodied self", and "the environing world". These provide little in the way of clarity on the complex paradox-based thinking that Nelson outlines, but instead sow conceptual confusion and mystification. **Second**, despite the convincing discussion of the different political ecologies in classical Daoist texts, the resulting synergy of "Daoist political ecology" remains undeveloped in argument and has manifold shortcomings. One is the simplistic embedding of Daoist concepts in modern Western European political philosophy (113f.). It is not persuasive to vaguely hint at parallels between Daoist concepts and the works of Plato, Mill, Arendt, and Habermas – an analysis of concrete relations is lacking. **Third**, Nelson's work seems to be trapped between the conflicting ideas of critical social theory on one hand and social psychology on the other. He tries to unite both dimensions in his "therapeutic ecology", but the synthesis is ultimately unconvincing. Nelson's view on individual self-cultivation is only weakly linked to capitalist social developments, and his critique of socie-

tal structures and institutions falls short of explaining how exactly it is linked to practices of self-cultivation. What effect does personal transformation through the process of emptying have on societal transformation towards non-dominant relations with nature, given the social context of advanced capitalist societies?

Despite these criticisms, I fully recommend *Daoism and Environmental Philosophy* to anyone interested in exploring the relevance of classical Chinese philosophy in the Anthropocene. The careful synopsis of early Daoist texts embraces the challenge of paradox-based thinking without abandoning the idea of a practical philosophy. Indeed it could inform urgently needed new approaches in contemporary environmental policy and practice by offering a fundamental rethinking of the relations between society and nature in the Anthropocene that posits them as an unresolvable but not hopeless paradox.

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