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## **Do the Deepest Roots of a Future Ecological Civilization Lie in Chinese Soil?**

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### **I Can philosophy help us to negotiate the Anthropocene?**

Civilization is the product of a happy geological accident – a ten to twelve thousand year period of climate stability, known as the Holocene. With climate stability came seasonality and predictable weather, where these conditions made it possible to grow crops, store food and hence accumulate wealth. Agriculture provided the material basis for the sedentary societies that gradually evolved the stratified, literate, artisanal, administratively centralized forms of social organization known as civilization.<sup>1</sup> It was climate stability that also provided the conditions for the urbanism and eventually the industrialism of such societies, since stability enabled people to establish large, permanent built environments without fear of flooding or destruction of infrastructure by the elements. Climatic fluctuations in this period, leading to extended droughts or freezes, often resulted in the collapse of local instances of civilization.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the advent of agriculture, when people lived in small, nomadic, hunter-gatherer societies, in dangerous and uncertain environmental conditions, they were dependent on the contingent affordances of nature. Without technical means of transforming the world to suit their own purposes, they had no alternative but to accommodate and adapt to the natural environment. With the onset of the Holocene and the new conditions of climate stability that allowed for the emergence of agriculture and hence for the birth of civilization however, humans began to develop the technical means for transforming nature. This transition was inevitably accompanied by a psychological re-orientation to reality - a change of mindset. Where pre-civilizational peoples had been psychologically oriented to “the given”, cultivating accommodation, attunement and adaptation to the world as they found it in all its actuality and particularity, civilizational societies were built on the discovery that the given was not immutable. The natural order of things could be altered to suit human convenience. At a certain stage of civilization, some societies accordingly began to cultivate a new mindset of abstraction from the merely present and particular,

allowing for the construction of conceptual alternatives to the contingently actual. This emerging way of thinking, aided of course by literacy but also in its turn productive of literacy, emphasized reflexivity and involved a shift from a pre-reflexive focus on the world in the concreteness of its inexhaustible detail to a reflexive focus on concepts and categories as abstract entities in their own right.<sup>3</sup>

With this new focus on concepts in their own right in addition to the original focus on the concrete things which conceptualization enables us to describe, came an interest in the nature of the cognitive processes by which abstraction is achieved: the rules of composition and coherence by which such cognitive processes are governed. A whole new, highly recursive level of awareness came into view: observation of the laws of abstraction enabled concepts to become more sharply defined, while sharply defined concepts proved increasingly amenable to the “laws of thought”. Without clearly delineated concepts, basic presumed laws of thought, such as those of excluded middle and non-contradiction, do not apply. For example, if identity is conceived in a diffuse fashion, such that the identity of a particular thing is understood to be context dependent, then a statement such as that a particular individual is either human or not may not be true. Whether or not a particular individual counts as human may vary according to the context of consideration. In other words, logic – in this case, the law of excluded middle - depends for its applicability on well defined concepts, while concepts in turn may be honed by the application of logic: if it is accepted that a particular individual must either be or not be human, then human-ness itself must be defined in terms that exclude other categories of the same logical type.

For hunter gatherer societies, attuned to the diffuse, context-dependent and relational modes of existence and identity that characterized the still fully ecological environments on which they depended, conceptual precision, or the sharp definition of concepts, was not adaptive. Diffuse and relational categories were essential for negotiating a life-world in which the identities of all things were still inextricably and densely ecologically intertwined. In relation to such categories, the so-called “laws of thought”, first codified by Aristotle as principles of logic, did not apply.<sup>4</sup> As people started to disentangle their life-worlds from nature however, in the transition to civilization, they created around themselves a built or artefactual context in which the identities of objects – such as houses and chairs - were genuinely discrete and unambiguously instrumental in significance. In other words, as people replaced nature with fixed, built, human-designed environments, a whole new horizon of concepts and categories amenable to sharper delineation and hence to manipulation in accordance with the rules of what came to be known as logic, opened up. Once the rudiments of logic were available, reason emerged, paving the way for philosophy.

With the aid of reason, philosophers – notably the presocratics - were able to construct abstract and schematic representations of reality. Culturally enshrined as a revered (and indeed civilizing) epistemic end in itself, such philosophical activity can however also be seen indirectly - historically and functionally - as a prelude, a necessary condition, for the manipulation and transformation of

reality. By performing logical operations on abstract representations, philosophers were able to construct new blueprints for reality, thereby motivating and enabling a new ethos of substitution, imposition and control in place of the old ethos of adaptation to nature.

Philosophy – which emerged in the so-called Axial era, 800-200 BCE, when civilization had reached maturity<sup>5</sup> – might thus be seen as a product of the reflexive faculty that accompanied the shift from a hunter-gatherer way of life to life under the conditions of civilization, an offshoot of the distinctive *praxis* of civilization. It was in this sense both a definitive expression of the civilizational mind-set enabled by the climatic stability of the Holocene and a powerful tool for the further development of that mind-set, a further development that would in due course see the wholesale subjugation of nature by civilization.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century climate stability will, it seems, no longer be assured. Anthropogenic climate change seems set to disrupt weather patterns and increase the severity of extreme weather events, leading to catastrophic droughts, floods and storms. The new era of anthropogenic environmental upheaval has recently been labelled the Anthropocene. According to this new idea, Earth has “exited the current geological epoch, the 12,000 year old Holocene, and entered a new epoch, the Anthropocene” in which “the human species is now the dominant Earth-shaping force.”<sup>6</sup> This new Earth-shaping impact on the planet “includes altering biogeochemical cycles (carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, etc), modifying terrestrial water cycles through changing river flows, land-use changes, etc, and driving extinction rates which are unprecedented since the dinosaurs.”<sup>7</sup>

In the Anthropocene then, the environmental context of civilization is likely to change. Philosophy, as the study of the ultimate existential questions facing humankind, must surely address such a change, and help, if possible, to navigate humanity through it. But as a product of the very consciousness that arguably enabled civilization to subjugate and hence unbalance nature in the first place, it is uncertain whether philosophy is in fact an appropriate or useful tool for this task. This is the question I wish to explore in the present paper.

## **II *Theoria versus strategia*: contrasting modes of thought**

In order to pursue this question, let us return to the origins of philosophy and consider in a little more detail the phenomenology of this new method of thinking. The earliest origins of philosophy in the West were of course in ancient Greece. Philosophy emerged as a distinctive tradition in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. To grasp the distinctive phenomenology of this tradition I would like to compare it with a wisdom tradition that prevailed at the same time in China. Although these two traditions nominally shared the goal of wisdom, their approaches were very different. (I shall return below to the question why philosophy did not gain as strong a foothold in ancient China as it did in ancient Greece despite the fact that civilization in China long antedated civilization in Greece.)

My starting point for this comparison was an article by French sinologist and philosopher, Francois Jullien, "Did Philosophers have to Become Fixated on Truth?".<sup>8</sup> Contrasting the figure of the ancient Greek philosopher with that of the ancient Chinese sage, Jullien pointed out that where the philosopher set out to *explain* the world, the sage set out to *adapt* or *accommodate* himself to it. Where the philosopher sought *truth* ie an abstract schema that accurately represented reality, the sage aimed at *congruence* ie he sought to identify tendencies or dispositions at work in particular situations that could be harnessed to his or others' best advantage. The thinking of the sage remained explicitly inextricable from agency rather than becoming, like the thinking of the Greeks, an epistemic end in itself.

I would like to suggest that Jullien's contrast between the Greek philosopher and the Chinese sage opens up a further contrast between what might be called *theory*, on the one hand, and *strategy*, on the other.<sup>9</sup>

The theorist engages in a particular form of abstractive thought. He picks out concepts from the psycho-cognitive mesh of his thinking and, by further abstraction, sharpens them into well-defined abstract categories. In the process he shifts his focus from the world itself as the object of his cognition to these reified categories ie categories treated by him as (ideal) entities in their own right. By manipulating and combining these categories in accordance with abstract principles of inference and evidence, the theorist may eventually produce a schema that is considered accurately to reflect or represent some aspect of reality. Such a representational schema is then judged to be *true*.

The truth about reality, or some aspect of reality, is permanent. It is in fact eternal: the world changes, but the truth about the world does not change. Things arise and pass away, moment by moment, but the truth about things is timeless. The goal of thought, from the theorist's perspective, is to grasp truth, and the grasping of truth is an end in itself.<sup>10</sup> But in allowing his attention to become thus deflected from the "external" world to this timeless, abstract, inner realm of categories and conceptual constructs, the theorist's own position in relation to the object of his cognition changes. Unlike the "external" world, theoretical constructs are the theorist's own creation, assembled and scrutinized within the theatre of his own intellect. In grasping reality indirectly through the lens of an abstract map or model then, the theorist is engaging with something which is, in the last analysis, his own creation. Since he routinely conflates theoretical model with world itself, his status as architect or author of the model subliminally inflects his relationship with reality. As a result of this rarely scrutinized phenomenology of theorizing, the theorist tends subconsciously to see himself as author or active subject in relation to a world experienced as construct or passive object.

Let me explain this point in a little more detail. In the process of perceiving the world through the lens of theory – which is to say, via the inner theatre of the intellect - the ancient philosopher became subconsciously removed from the world. As the architect of the schema, he could not be included amongst its contents. This architect who could not be included in his own abstract schema

was, I am suggesting, the original *subject*, and the world as abstract construct, viewed from within the theatre of the subject's intellect, was the original *object*. It was, in other words, via the subtle duplication involved in *theoria*, the introjective act of specular knowing, that the world first became a mere *object* for the human mind, ideal and hence inert and untouchable and completely devoid of real presence or agency of its own. This separation of active, world-constructing subject from the merely acted-upon, constructed object, was presumably the origin of the famous mind/body or mind/matter *dualism* that has systematically inflected Western thought. This dualism is a function of the subject-object bifurcation that inevitably accompanies the act of theorizing itself. It will implicitly block any outlook which attributes subjectivity, agency, mentality, purpose or presence to the world at large. The mode of relationship with reality encouraged by the dualist outlook will accordingly be one of presumption: the world is perceived as a mere object for the theorist to use as he sees fit.

The *strategist*, by contrast, focuses not on abstract schemas at an inner remove from reality but on the immediate field of actual, outer influences and concrete particulars in which he is immersed. He examines these concretely and corporeally in order to discern how that field is impacting on his agency. His interest is not in abstract architectonics but rather in his own immediate situation and how the influences at play in it are tangibly impinging on him in the present moment. He does not need a theory about the nature of reality in order to respond strategically to this field of influences: he can directly feel environmental pressures increasing and decreasing as he responds now this way, now that. Nor does he address this field as a completed totality; it extends just as far as the range of his own sensitivity, and, as he moves around, this range is constantly changing. Accordingly, to train the strategic faculty, one does not teach reason, which is to say, rules for the articulation and organization of thought in the abstract key, but rather sets mindfulness exercises or practices which cultivate sensitivity and responsiveness. This is why Chinese sages typically received their training in martial and other Daoist arts rather than in discursive inquiry.

In understanding the contrast between theory and strategy, etymology is helpful. The word, "theory" derives from the Greek, *theoria*, a looking at, thing looked at; *theoros*, spectator; and *thea*, spectacle. "Strategy" is derived from the Greek *strategia*, "office or command or art of a general", from *stratos*, "multitude, army, expedition" and *agein*, "to lead, guide, drive, carry off", from Sanskrit *ajirah*, "moving, active". In light of this, strategy may be understood as concerned with the coordination of collective or individual agency. Cognition is required for such coordination, but this is not the kind of cognition involved in *theoria*, which abstracts from the empirical agency of the subject in order to attain a more detached representation of the world. In *strategia*, cognition remains in the service of agency.

Strategic consciousness, in other words, is inherently nondualist. Rather than enacting an inner subject/object bifurcation and engaging with reality as a passive construct of his own devising, the strategist remains immersed in a

fluxing field of concrete particulars and pressures which are registered not as part of an abstract totality at an epistemic remove from the subject, but in terms of their immediate impact or influence on the agency of the embedded, nondual self.

Through strategic experimentation the strategist quickly discovers that the best way of negotiating a field of influences in which one is immersed – where this field includes the cross-cutting wills or conativities of others - is generally to adapt to them. That is to say, the best way of negotiating such a field is to make one's own ends as consistent as possible with surrounding influences and conativities, rather than seeking to impose one's will upon them. This is self-evident inasmuch as she who achieves her goals in ways best calculated to conserve her own energy will be most fit to continue to preserve and increase her own existence. Strategy then, the province of the Chinese sage, points to *wu wei*, the way of least resistance, which can be understood not simply as the giving up of one's own ends in deference to the ends of others but rather as tailoring one's ends to theirs and using the energies already at play in one's environment to further one's goals.

The strategist thus discovers *wu wei* for himself via a process of strategic experimentation. By reflecting on this process, he also discovers that *wu wei* is the natural modality of all beings: what works for him as an agent responsively and spontaneously negotiating a field of environmental forces will work for any being strategically negotiating such a field. Hence it is the strategy that will be naturally selected for all beings. In experientially discovering *wu wei* for himself, then, the strategist reflectively, though without the aid of theory, also discovers the way of all nature. In China this way is called *Dao*.

It is arguably the dualist outlook bequeathed to the West by the theoretic orientation of philosophy which has led in our own era to environmental crisis. For when the theoretic objectification of reality inaugurated by philosophy for contemplative purposes gave rise, many centuries later, to a more accurate, detailed and comprehensive form of theorization—the body of knowledge known to us as science—humanity was empowered to exercise its agency on an unprecedented scale. This form of agency, rooted in theory, was very different from the strategic agency of the ancient sage. It was no longer the agency of a self negotiating reality from a point of immersion within it but rather that of a subject premeditating its action by reference to a once-removed abstract schema. This calculated form of agency turned out to entrain undreamed-of efficacy. However, the dualism that is built into the very process of theorizing ensures, I have suggested, that agency rooted in theory will be unaccommodating. It will be innately instrumentalist.

Such instrumentalism is indeed what may be observed in the history of the West. Science, the offshoot of Western philosophy, has given birth to modernity, the instrumentalist form of civilization par excellence that has spread industrialization throughout the world - to great human advantage but at deadly cost to the natural environment.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century it was philosophy itself that hunted down – and critiqued - the dualist or binary roots of Western thought. The role of binary oppositions was intensively explored by deconstructionists, notably Jacques Derrida.<sup>11</sup> The influence of deconstruction was in turn key across a range of critical discourses, including feminism and postcolonialism. Environmental philosophers also bemoaned the entrenched dualism of the Western tradition that has systematically elevated the human, as subject, locus of mind, agency, purpose and meaning, over nature rendered as brute object, realm of mere matter, devoid of mind and hence of meaning, purpose and intrinsic value.<sup>12</sup> It was this dualism, environmental philosophers pointed out, that underpinned the endemic anthropocentrism and instrumentalism of Western attitudes to the natural world. In place of dualist theories of nature, such philosophers offered theories that sought to represent nature as subject, locus of mind, agency or intentionality, and the moral values that accompany mind.<sup>13</sup> It was expected that when nature was reinvested with mind in this way, a more respectful and considerate attitude to the natural environment would follow. But such revised theories of nature have proved to have little traction in Western cultures. If my present analysis is correct, and it is theory itself that underwrites dualism and phenomenologically re-inscribes it in every act of theorizing, then it is not surprising that theoretical remedies for a problem which, at the deepest level, springs from theory itself, will be unavailing.

So this is a dilemma for the West. But what of China? There were of course theoretical as well as strategic tendencies in the thought of ancient China. (Scholars such as the Moists, Legalists and followers of the School of Names, as well as Confucius and Mencius, displayed theoretical tendencies in their thought.) But Francois Jullien seems right in suggesting that these theoretical tendencies never became the defining perspective of Chinese civilization. Throughout its long history, the defining perspective of Chinese civilization remained the strategic one of accommodation and adaptation, elegantly codified in the normative principle of *wu wei*. Even China's departure from tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its embrace of modern forms of civilization dictated by Western science, may be seen, at the deepest level, as an instance of its traditional disposition to accommodate and adapt.

### **III Alternative foundations for civilization: China and the West**

China may have owed this difference from the West to the continuity of its civilization with its own indigenous roots. The form of civilization that evolved so gradually in China was deeply informed with, and organized around, the fundamental principle of *Dao*, a principle inherited from its pre-civilizational past. This was a principle that explicitly resisted theorization. As Laozi puts it in the opening line of the *Daodejing*, “the *Dao* that can be told of is not the eternal *Dao*”.<sup>14</sup> As a principle, *Dao* suggests instead the strategic approach to reality that is still today characteristic of many indigenous societies. In China, theorization was kept in check by the pervasive influence of this principle. At the same time, deference to *Dao* enabled a robust syncretism that refused any exclusive bids for truth to flourish, binding together disparate traditions, such as Confucianism and

Buddhism and latterly Marxism, as well as Daoism itself, to create an open yet distinctively Chinese outlook.

The continuity of Chinese civilization with its indigenous roots is evident in the prominent role that shamanism played in the early history of China. Historians of civilization note this as a distinctive factor in the development of civilization in China by comparison with the West.<sup>15</sup> Shamanism, a feature widely shared by a great variety of hunter gatherer societies around the globe, consists of a set of spiritual practices whereby socially ordained individuals – shamans – communicate with a spirit-world assumed to co-exist with nature. The purpose of such communication is to gain transcendent knowledge, guidance, magic or healing energy; this is then channeled back to the shaman’s community. Shamans work closely with animal powers, totemic animals generally serving as spirit guides on shamanic flights between the everyday world and the spirit world. Such reverence for animals and trust in their spiritual power, rooted in totemism, is characteristic of hunter gatherer outlooks that have not yet demoted animals to the wrong side of culture-nature dualism.

In the formative stages of Chinese civilization, shamans continued to hold their earlier high status as societies transitioned from hunting and gathering to pastoralism and agriculture. By the second millennium BCE, emerging social elites were appropriating the knowledge and prestige of shamans to lend spiritual direction and legitimacy to their political intent. Shamans were co-opted to mediate between the spirit world, now figured as Heaven, and the secular world, now figured as Earth, in order to obtain a “mandate of Heaven” for the will of imperial rulers.<sup>16</sup>

This absorption of a pre-civilizational form of spirituality, normally associated with hunter gatherer societies, into the civilizational structure of China, might be explainable by the relative absence of rupture in the transition from pre-history to history in China. Though ethnically diverse, the cultures and languages of the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins evolved gradually and continuously over millennia – they were not subject to outright conquest or colonization by alien cultures. (Even during later imperial periods of “barbarian” (Manchu and Mongol) dominance, Chinese language was maintained as the language of governance; Manchus and Mongols themselves were significantly sinicized rather than subsuming the Chinese under their own foreign cultures.)<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the reason for the persistence of shamanism in the evolution of a distinctively Chinese form of civilization however, its pivotal role in turn ensured the persistence of basic elements of hunter gatherer consciousness in the Chinese outlook, where this militated against the dualizing tendencies, noted above, of civilization per se.

A different unfolding of civilization is evident in the West. Ancient Greek civilization, in the form described, for example, by Francois Jullien, emerged in the centuries following waves of invasion by alien Indo-European peoples, such as the Dorians, Aeolians and Ionians, from the Danube basin in the second millennium BCE. These peoples are thought to have hailed originally from the



steppelands of southern Russia.<sup>18</sup> Their arrival in those parts of the Mediterranean which would come to be known as Greece represented a profound rupture in the evolution of civilization in the area. The prior, pre-Greek cultures of the indigenous (non-Indo-European) peoples – named by the Greeks themselves as the Pelagians – were relatively obliterated. Although these peoples were already civilized, there is evidence that their cultures retained a spiritual orientation to nature that may well have represented a certain continuity with earlier, hunter gatherer ways of life. In any case, with the sharp cultural break that the Indo-European invasions represented, little continuity would remain between post-Homeric Greek civilization and an indigenous past.<sup>19</sup> The stage was accordingly set for the emergence, in the classical period, of a fully post-indigenous, dualized, theoretic consciousness.

#### **IV Philosophy in a strategic mode as foundation for a new ecological civilization**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century China sought, for pragmatic reasons, to weave science, with its Western philosophical underpinnings, into the open texture of its outlook. However, by virtue of the spectacular material success of science - its capacity to co-opt nature for human purposes – this theoretic outlook is currently perhaps threatening to displace the notion of *Dao* as the generous well-spring of Chinese civility. It is threatening to replace *Dao* with a dogmatic materialism that hides an underlying dualism that in turn inevitably subjects the larger earth-community to human despotism.

From the perspective of the argument presented here, it would be a tragic error for China to abandon *Dao* as its guiding principle. Theory, with its offshoot, science, is of course of enormous developmental significance in the cultural evolution of humankind. It cannot be ignored or set aside. But unless theory is subsumed under a *strategic* orientation which leaves all ultimate questions open, and seeks only to respond to the actual promptings of the world, then it will trap China as it has the West in a dualism that will continue to play itself out in the instrumentalization of nature.

In the West, we have, I think, ceased genuinely to relate to reality itself because we have ceased to experience it directly – we apprehend it only through the dualizing lenses of theory. In the twenty-first century we exist increasingly inside a discursive bubble, a world both materially made over to suit human convenience and interpreted exclusively in terms of our own ever-intensifying self-preoccupation. We have ceased to experience what it is like to exist, to act, in synchrony with the larger community of life and hence in accord with *Dao*. Theory cannot convey this re-animating experience; on the contrary, it alienates us from it. Only through *cultivation*, defined in relation to certain kinds of arts or practices, can we engage with reality in this spontaneous and responsive way. Daoism is a repository of such arts and practices – martial arts, taiji, calligraphy, internal alchemy – but many other fields of human endeavor offer potential others.

If philosophy is to help us repair our relationship with nature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the face of ecological upheaval on a planetary scale, then it may need to integrate theory with a strategic orientation that is sensitive to environmental cues and capable of responding spontaneously to them, without discursive pre-conception. Such an orientation can be achieved only through practices that enable us to immerse ourselves psychophysically in nature, thereby enabling us to experience nature immediately as the psychoactive directive and responsive matrix of our own being. If theory could in this way be subsumed under a strategic orientation, the result would surely indeed be a form of wisdom.

However, it is hard to know how such wisdom could be described, since any name would tend to co-opt it exclusively to theory. If one adopted terms such as “cosmological wisdom” or “ecological wisdom”, one might be tempted to unpack them in exclusively theoretical terms, as ways of life dictated by the cosmological or ecological sciences. Laozi of course had similar difficulties working out how to refer to the wisdom of following *Dao*, since *Dao* itself cannot be named. “The *Dao* that can be told of is not the eternal *Dao*.” But the root meaning of the term, *philosophy*, namely *love of wisdom*, is surely apposite in this connection, as it implies a form of understanding that includes an experiential, even spiritual, certainly extra-discursive dimension. To reconceive philosophy along non-dualist lines may in fact take us back to certain strands of the original philosophical enterprise. For while ancient philosophy seems indeed to have become fixated on truth, as Francois Jullien argues, and in this sense allowed theory to shape the Western tradition, counter-tendencies also existed in the Hellenistic world.

Historian of ancient philosophy, Pierre Hadot, has detailed how philosophy was understood by certain schools, notably the Stoics and Epicureans, precisely as a way of life, pursued not merely through discourse but also via spiritual exercises and meditational practices aimed at opening out the narrow perspective of the individual to the perspective of the cosmos as a whole.<sup>20</sup> For Stoics and Epicureans, according to Hadot, this expansion of consciousness, this capacity to perceive one’s interests and assumptions in the context of a larger field of inter-relations and hence to recognize the ego-distortedness of one’s habitual outlook, was a definitive key to wisdom. In the light of this consciousness, the imperative always to serve one’s own interests would give way to a more generous, accommodating tendency, with a felt sense of the rightfulness of the claims of other beings. As the product of direct experience, such an expanded perspective, with its attendant moral values, would be grasped by the practitioner as self-evident rather than entertained, as it would be were it merely a posit of reason, as a contingent theoretical position open to contestation by competing theories.

In an epoch – the Anthropocene – in which humanity is rapidly destroying the ecological integrity of the biosphere, new moral values, particularly in the form of an environmental ethic, are urgently needed. Contemporary philosophers, heir to the tradition of philosophy as *theoria*, can and do offer theoretical arguments in favour of environmental ethics. But these values have so far exerted little influence on society. The reason for this is perhaps that, as an instance of theorizing, environmental ethics, like philosophy generally, phenomenologically

re-enacts the subject-object split that underpins anthropocentrism, thereby reinforcing anthropocentrism psychologically even as it attempts to refute it rationally. Moreover, as a mere theoretical posit, environmental ethics remains contestable and hence optional, subject to rational demurrals by those for whom it is inconvenient. For modern civilization, based on an ethos of industrialism and hence subjugation of nature, any ethos of moral consideration for the interests of nature is not merely an inconvenience but a direct threat. If environmental ethics is to acquire the force of self-evidence and hence the authority it needs in order to supplant the anthropocentrism so core to modern civilization, it may need to be explored and imparted by way of more immediate, experiential methods than have so far been the province of philosophy. In other words, *cultivation* of consciousness may be required in addition to discourse.

In the West we can look back to traditions such as those of the Stoics and Epicureans in the search for clues to transforming philosophy into a discipline dedicated not merely to discourse but to the cultivation of an attitude of attunement to the interests of all beings. But Stoic and Epicurean methods pale in comparison to the methodological resources offered by China, with its long and highly evolved tradition of adaptation and accommodation, codified as the Great *Dao* and cultivated via a vast array of dedicated practices. China thus seems well placed to lead the way towards a discipline that subsumes theory under a larger strategic perspective. The figure of the Chinese sage, beckoning us down the path of *wu wei*, perhaps offers a new point of departure for thinking about appropriate cognitive modalities for the Anthropocene outside the compromised parameters of the Western tradition. Just as ancient Greek philosophy laid the foundations for the civilization, rooted in *theoria*, which would eventually manifest as modernity, so such a new cognitive modality, theoretically literate but responsive in its larger orientation to nature, might help to lay foundations for a future, ecological civilization.

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<sup>1</sup> Prentice, Richard, 'Cultural Responses to Climate Change in the Holocene', *Anthós*, 1.1. (2009)

<sup>2</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, London, 1982) for a classic study of the profound changes in consciousness that accompanied the transition from orality to literacy. For an environmental perspective on these changes, see David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage, 1996)

<sup>4</sup> The early anthropologist, Lucien Levy Bruhl, pointed out in a series of books how the thought of indigenous people follows a different "logic" from the patterns of thought

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discernable in the history of Western thought. See, for example, *How Natives Think* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1926) and *The Soul of the Primitive* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928)

<sup>5</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: the Beginning of our Religious Traditions* (New York: Knopf, 2006)

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Baskin, 'Paradigm Dressed as Epoch: the Ideology of the Anthropocene', *Environmental Values* 24 (2015) 9-29. Quote from p. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid* p 10

<sup>8</sup> Francois Jullien, 'Did Philosophers Have to Become Fixated on Truth?', *Critical Inquiry*, 28, 4 (2002) 803-824

<sup>9</sup> See Freya Mathews, 'Why has the West Failed to Embrace Panpsychism?' in *Mind That Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*, ed. by David Skrbina (Advances in Consciousness Research Series) (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2009), 341-260. Several passages in the following pages are adapted from this chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger offered a famous analysis of *theoria*, where *theoria* was more or less equated by him with metaphysics. I am not a student of Heidegger, and do not owe the analysis I am offering here to him, so I am not particularly well placed to comment on the overlap between the two accounts. So far as I can tell however, Heidegger was aiming to bring out the distinction between things experienced discursively - as fully discursively mediated - and things experienced immediately, as instances of being, where being is an aspect of reality that cannot be captured by discursive schemas. To "remember" being was to be brought back into the actual presence of the world rather than remaining trapped within the unreal and literally lifeless world of human discourse. I am sympathetic to this project, but my own analysis is explicitly focused on overcoming dualism and does not need recourse to Heideggerian language to explain either its aims or its findings. Any overlap between the two accounts can, I think, be attributed to the fact that both bear evidence of Daoist influences, in my own case, avowedly; in Heidegger's case, unavowedly.

<sup>11</sup> The locus classicus of this work is Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (eds) *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970) 247-265

<sup>12</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)

<sup>13</sup> The entire field of ecophilosophy may be seen as the attempt, firstly, to break down dualism as it pertains to nature and thereby, secondly, to recover the moral significance of nature.

<sup>14</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) p. 139

<sup>15</sup> Kwang-Chih Chang, 'Ancient China and its Anthropological Significance' in *The Breakout: the Origins of Civilization* ed. by Martha Lamberg-Karlovsky (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004) 1-11; also *The Formation of Chinese Civilization: An Archaeological Perspective*, ed. by Kwang-chih Chang, Pingfang Xu, Sarah Allan, Liancheng Lu (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* Kwang-Chih Chang.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, the influence of the Chinese upon their foreign rulers was not entirely one-way. Manchu and Mongolian rulers also retained and disseminated aspects of their own culture while governing China. See Naomi Standen, 'Foreign Conquerors of China' in *Demystifying China: New Understandings of Chinese History* ed. by Naomi Standen (Lanham Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013) 33-40

<sup>18</sup> Adam Nicholson, *The Mighty Dead: Why Homer Matters* (London: William Collins, 2014) Ch 9.

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<sup>19</sup> Harald Haarmann, *Roots of Ancient Greek Civilization: the Influence of Old Europe* (Jefferson North Carolina: McFarlane & Co, 2014) 9-40

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, translated by Michael Chase (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002)