

A New Horizon in Environmental Philosophy Seen Through Daoism

Choi, Jin-Seok

(Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy at Sogang University)

Choi, Jin-seok is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Sogang University. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy at Beijing University in 1996. His publications include "Noja-wa yuga sai: gwajeom chogan chulto ihu" (Between Laozi and Confucius : after Guo-Dian Bamboo Books Unearthed) (2001) and "Doga cheolhak-ui jayeonjuui-wa hyeondae hwan-gyeong munje-ui sisajeom" (The Naturalism of Daoist Philosophy: Points of Suggestion for Contemporary Environmental Problems) (2000). E-mail: choijin@ccs.sogang.ac.kr.

The Beginning

From 26 August to 4 September 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was held in Johannesburg, South Africa. The many topics discussed at the summit could be narrowed down to the following: finding ways to improve the quality of life in this generation while minimizing damage on the environment and natural resources for future generations. Even more simply put the environment was the main subject. Considering that some 60,000 people—heads of 106 states, representatives of 189 countries and international organizations, and NGOs from each participating country—participated in the summit, one can see that the environment has become a major, universal concern.

While actual practices, such as reducing carbon dioxide release, reducing waste, and protecting nature, are important, these actions need to be sustained by a worldview that ensures that people practice them everyday. In other words, the mode of life that led to the current environmental crisis must be replaced with one that accommodates nature. Without a change in worldview, there can be no fundamental solution to the problem.

Common Understanding of Daoist Philosophy

Two common subjects in Daoism are naturalism and environmental issues. At first approach, one can expect Daoism can to teach lessons on naturalism and a message of how to maintain a desirable

environment different from the current one. Such an understanding is often mentioned the works of scholars of Daoism.

“Although having obtained a sophisticated level of knowledge, they founders of Daoism, believing that the [ceremony, music, and penal administration](#), the traditional norm of the Zhou dynasty, could not end the social disorder of the time, abandoned the secular life and resigned to the anti-humanistic life of a hermit.... Furthermore, through an intellectual filtering process, they developed a sophisticated system of thought out of the lives of these people who abandoned the secular life. Opposing the humanist philosophical trend of the time, they adhered to naturalism and firmly maintained a criticism of traditionalism. They devoted their energies to criticizing and pointing out that the human civilization was on the wrong path. Therefore, indetermination is the early Daoists’ ideological trait, and their method of expression is extremely paradoxical. The ultimate goal they had hoped to reach was a life of absolute freedom without attachment.”¹ [In this passage](#) Daoism is understood as a system of thought of a group of hermits who adhere to naturalism that opposes humanism.

There is some truth in understanding Daoist philosophy in terms of naturalism. Rather than considering human beings as unique entities with transcendental values, Daoism sees them in relation to other entities in nature as a whole. For this reason, Western philosophy is described as mechanistic and Eastern philosophy, organic²; the West as civilization-centered, or human-centered, and the East as nature-centered. Similar contrast exist within the East between Confucianism and Daoism: Confucianism is considered civilized, while Daoism is considered as anti-civilization or nature-oriented, and Confucianism secular, and Daoism, nonsecular. These contrasts are more evident in writings such as the following: “The function of Confucianism is in education and politics, and being successful in politics and education rests in cultivating a good Confucian grounding in ethics and morality. On the contrary, Daoists and Daoism demonstrated more diverse functions historically by pursuing areas related to the desires of personal life, such as literature and arts, medicine and martial arts, health and longevity. Being grounded in Confucianism means living a life dependent on the values that constitute a society, such as money, fame, and power. However, the Daoist pursues not the life of a general or a prime minister but that of an [immortal hermit \(sinseon\)](#).”³ “The naturalist perspective of the East differs from that of the West. The philosophy of

¹ Yi Jae-kwon, *Doga cheolhak-ui hyeondaejeok haeseok* (A Modern Interpretation of Daoist Philosophy) (Daejeon: Munkyoung Publishing Co., Ltd., 1995), p. 13.

² Song Hang-yong, “*Nojang cheolhak-ui saegae* (The World of Laozi and Zhuangzi’s Philosophies),” *Dongyang sasang-gwa hwan-gyeong munjae* (Eastern Thought and Environmental Issues) (Seoul: Mosaek Publishing Co., 1994).

³ Yi Gang-su, “*Nojang cheolhak-ui jayeon-gwan*” (The View of Nature in Laozi and Zhuangzi’s Philosophy), *Dongyang sasang-gwa hwan-gyeong munjae*, pp. 81-82.

Laozi and Zhuangzi is often referred to as naturalist philosophy, or naturalist thought... The concept opposite of nature is the machine.”⁴

In brief, the Daoist naturalism discussed by Daoist scholars is a term used in an anti-humanist, or anti-civilization, context. Thus, it is understood as a lifestyle that is closer to the desires of individual life through being faithful to original human nature, while maintaining a distance from money, power, and fame. Daoist naturalism is often seen as possible only in life deep in the mountains or rural places, not on the streets, or in government offices or schools.

Environmental Issues: Root Cause and Possible Solutions

The problems regarding naturalism are similar in character to the environmental issues confronting us today. Many environmental philosophers, or ecological philosophers, unreservedly, attribute the ecological catastrophe brought on by modern industrial civilization in the last several decades, ranging from pollution and the destruction of the ozone to a drastic decrease in the diversity of plant species to the anthropocentric worldview and its concept of material progress. Anthropocentrism that justifies human rule and control over nature did not develop by chance but is a product of metaphysical thinking. It is modern metaphysics that created the human being who represents, calculates, and dominates. Heidegger summed up the characteristic of modern metaphysics succinctly in his dictum that man has become the subject,⁵ which means that human beings have become an existence that bases all existence on their existence and truth. According to this view, the highest form of human existence is not in the life of contemplation and meditation but in processing reality and the practical life of labor. Domination and utilization of reality have thus become the essence of modern rationality. In other words, rationality in the modern world is not an accommodating rationality that contemplates and listens to reality but an aggressive rationality, or a **powerful rationality**, that indiscriminately dominates and makes use of reality according to its desires, and the “subject” is none other than a metaphysical expression of the **powerful rationality**.⁶ According to Heidegger’s interpretation, Descartes is responsible for the appearance of **powerful rationality**, or the making of human beings as subjects. With Descartes, human beings came to

⁴ Song Hang-yong, *ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵ Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1972), pp. 98-103, footnote 10; Heidegger, “Durch Descartes und seit Descartes wird aber in der Metaphysik der Mensch, genauer das menschliche ‘Ich,’ in vorwärtender Weise zum ‘Subjekt’.” in *Nietzsche: Der europäische Nihilismus*, GA 48 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1986), p. 181.

⁶ Heidegger, “Wissenschaft und Besinnung,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen; Gunther Neske, 1978), pp. 41-66.

understand themselves subjects, which led to the formation of modern anthropocentrism. “Hidden at the bottom of anthropocentrism are ill-founded epistemological arguments and mistaken dualistic metaphysics. Anthropocentrism commits the logical fallacy of deducing the erroneous conclusion that humans are the metaphysical center from the premise that human beings are the subjects, or the center, of the awareness of the world.”⁷ This logical fallacy, rather than remaining within the sphere of logic, led to the current environment and living conditions.

Such environmental problems, however, cannot be resolved simply with such slogans as “Let’s protect the environment!” or “Return to nature!” Because these issues are linked to living conditions, finding solutions require a more in-depth and fundamental approach to the problem. While it is important to reevaluate scientific technology, it is the modification of the human attitude towards the world that has become a fundamentally important issue. Without a change in worldview, the problem cannot be solved.

How, then, does the worldview need to be changed? “Based on the observation that the dominant metaphysics of anthropocentrism, founded on the [methodological individualism](#), is the primary culprit that brought about the ecological crisis, deep ecology takes the position of metaphysical holism. Human beings are not fundamentally independent of nature but are a part of nature.... Deep ecology denies reality of individuals traditionally signified in the Western philosophy. In a system made up of a category in its entirety, no entity exists outside a web of relations.”⁸ What deep ecology calls for is a shift to a worldview that affirms metaphysical holism, denies the reality of independent entities, and perceives all things as existing in a network of relations. Fritjof Capra also clearly makes a similar proposition. Capra calls the new paradigm of worldview that we should pursue, and are pursuing, as a holistic or an ecological worldview, which sees the world not as an aggregate of separate parts but as an integrated whole. According to Capra, ecological perception helps us to realize that all phenomena are basically interdependent and that the individual and society are both deeply related in nature’s adaptation process.⁹

Anyone who has studied Daoism knows that such a worldview is very similar to the Daoist worldview. Hence, those concerned about environmental problems expect a viable solution from Eastern thought that is holistic, organic, and focuses on the perspective of “saving life.”

⁷ Bak I-mun, *Munmyeong-ui wigi-wa munhwa-ui jeonhwan* (The Crisis of Civilization and Changes in Culture) (Seoul: Mineumsa, 1996), p. 51.

⁸ Han Myeon-hui, *Hwan-gyeong cheolhak-ui saegyegwan-gwa yulli—in-ganjungsimjuui dae saengtaejungsimjuui*, 철학연구회, <<철학연구>>제35집(1994) p. 339.

⁹ Fritjof Capra, “Saengtaehakjeok saegyegwan-ui gibbon wolli (The Basic Principles of the Ecological Worldview)” *Gaegan gwahak sasang* (Scientific Thought Quarterly) (1994 fall), p. 201.

The Law of Identity in Essentialism, the Law of Nonidentity in Deconstructionism, and the Environment

Accepting, as many scholars do, Western anthropocentrism, the mechanistic worldview, or the progress-oriented worldview as the principal causes that led to current environmental problems, I would like to go further and focus on the worldview or logic that led us to this destructive path.

Bak I-mun writes “The cause of the crisis confronting humanity today can be traced to the ‘Western’ worldview characterized by dualistic metaphysics and anthropocentric values rooted in modern civilization. Accordingly, to guarantee the future of humanity, the worldview must change to the Eastern/ecological worldview that can be described as monistic metaphysics and nature-centered values.”¹⁰ Here, both the phrases “monistic metaphysics” and “nature-centered values” suggest Daoist philosophy.

If Daoism can be an alternative worldview for resolving environmental issues, it must first be clarified which elements of Daoism could be adopted for the alternative worldview. The metaphysical monism and nature-centered values of Daoism are generally identified as these elements. One can question however whether Daoism is, indeed, monistic metaphysics. A common dictionary definition of monism is a worldview that accepts as the essence of reality the oneness of the world. While for Democritus, that oneness is based on matter, while for Hegel, it is the spirit, such as God, the *Weltgeist*, and other spiritual principles. In any case, monism explains the world in terms of a single essence, be it matter, the mind, or spirit. Because of the organic worldview in Laozi and Zhuangzi’s philosophy, many scholars view Daoism as metaphysical monism, and understand the Dao as a kind of substance or entity.

Advocating that we look at environmental issues from the Daoist perspective instead of anthropocentric perspective, Yi Gang-su makes the following point: “Environment pollution is a product of the self-centered viewpoint espoused by humanity.... To resolve environmental issues, we must look at things for what they are or in other words from the perspective of the Dao. It is because the Dao is the true substance of all things.”¹¹ The argument is that by understanding the Dao as the essence or the substance and only by looking at the world from the perspective of the essence, where the world becomes one, we can escape anthropocentrism or the obsession with progress.

¹⁰ Bak I-mun, *Munmyeong-ui mirae-wa saengtaehakjeok saegyegwan* (The Future of Civilization and the Ecological Worldview) (Seoul: Dangdae Publishing Co., 1998), p. 9.

¹¹ Yi Gang-su, “Nojang cheolhak-ui jayeon-gwan” (The View of Nature in Laozi and Zhuangzi’s Philosophy), *Dongyang sasang-gwa hwan-gyeong munjae*, p. 91.

Could dualism, rather than monism, be the root cause of the environmental damage? If so, can environmental issues be resolved by replacing dualism with monism? Dualism or monism aside, the current state of environmental crisis caused by human “domination” of nature is inevitable when there is a belief in the ultimate essence, or entity. Perhaps, even the question of separation between human beings and nature needs to go beyond dualism or monism. The supposed causes of the destruction of environment — anthropocentrism, a blind faith in progress, or the myth of efficiency — are inevitable characteristics of holding to some principle, regardless of whether it is dualism nor monism. The scientific civilization that has led to the destruction of the environment refers specifically to the modern scientific civilization, which is sustained by metaphysics, a theory of substance which is in turn sustained by the law of identity, or the philosophical position of essentialism. The theory of identity, the linchpin of the modern view of substance (self identity, *causa sui*), can be symbolically expressed as “A=A.” To elaborate, symbol A is different from B, C, D, E, and so on. In other words, A has inherent and exclusive properties of A that are different from B, C, D, or E, and the inherent and exclusive properties make “the thing” different from “other things,” carving out its own unique existence. This “inherent and exclusive property” is what we call “essence”: human essence, so-and-so’s essence, the world’s essence, and so on. However, because this essence is the ontological basis of a “being,” it is, in terms of value, good or at least neutral. Accordingly, it becomes the ontological duty for all beings with their own inherent and exclusive essence to affirm and extend that essence. But, the duty of affirming and extending essence necessarily requires “efficiency.” One must reach (more quickly and accurately) and extend (more quickly, strongly and widely) essence more efficiently. The virtues that support efficiency are the virtues of the essentialist modern philosophy in effect for a long time. That we accept as desirable the virtues of diligence, heat, fullness, civilization, activity, labor, construction, strength, masculinity, and affirmation, rather than laziness, coldness, emptiness, barbarism, passivity, rest, destruction, weakness, femininity, and negation has to do with the essentialist philosophy based on the law of identity. It is because these “desirable virtues” are much more efficient in the affirmation and extension of essence. On the other hand, the “undesirable virtues” are not efficient in carrying out the ontological duty. Such essentialism applies equally to monism, dualism, idealism and materialism. Insofar as these schools of thought see the world as substance, none is free from the essentialism of the law of identity. It is this philosophical common factor that led both Descartes¹², the idealist who founded modern philosophy, and Engels,¹³ one of the representative materialists, to

¹² For by them I perceived it to be possible to arrive at knowledge highly useful in life.... [W]e might also apply them in the same way to all the uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature. Descartes, *Bangbeop seoseol (The Discourse on Method)*, trans. Kim Hyeong-hyo (Seoul: The Samsung Foundation of Culture, 1983), p. 107..

¹³ The animal *merely* uses nature; man by his labor makes it serve his ends. Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of*

see nature as something to be conquered and used by man. It is in the same philosophical vein that even Confucianism with its brand of essentialism, notably in the teachings of *Xunzi*, sees nature as something to be cultivated and used for human purposes. Within essentialist philosophy, all things—entities, species, beings, and man from nature—are “distinguished” from each other based on their “essence”. Because essence is characterized by “exclusivity” and “peculiarity,” essentialism inevitably leads to [division and differentiation](#).¹⁴ This “separation” is most efficiently and succinctly hypothesized by the term “definition,” which appears—not surprisingly considering the philosophical implications—in a far advanced form in the West than in the East, and in Confucianism, Moism, or Chinese logicians, with its essentialism than in Daoism [with its deconstructionist thought](#). In sum, contrary to the popular view that anthropocentrism or dualist metaphysics is responsible for the destruction of the environment, it is essentialist thinking based on the law of identity that is more responsible for the environmental problems. Such a view manifested itself in the view of substance, and its attendant duty to efficiently affirm and extend the essence manifested in the separation of human beings and nature, or anthropocentrism, leading to the destruction of nature.

If we were to look for ways to resolve environmental issues based on the above diagnoses, the solution would have to be founded on a worldview that is different from that of substance, not just going beyond monism or dualism. Once the essentialist view of substance is abandoned, what appears is [relatedness](#). In other words, the solution of the problems lies in denying all forms of “center” and shifting to a worldview in which all beings are ontologically related to one another.

All would agree that many scholars find Eastern thought, in particular Daoist philosophy, an alternative thought by which solutions to environmental issues can be found. Nevertheless, I have said again and again that any essentialist thought based on the law of identity, or a philosophy of substance, necessarily entails “[differentiation](#)” and a concept of the “center.” If, however, the Dao, the highest category in Daoist thought, also turns out to be a “substance” or “essence,” then fundamentally Daoism cannot be a new alternative in resolving environmental issues.

Fortunately, however, according to my view, the Dao of Laozi is not a substance or essence. If Daoism is to become an alternative philosophy for resolving environmental issues, the relevant aspect of Daoism is not the naturalist or the anti-civilization aspect but the worldview that basically sees the world in terms of relations.

Nature (International Publishers Co., 1968). Requoted from 馮友蘭, 『中國哲學史新編』 (A New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy), vol.1 (北京: 人民出版社, 1982), p. 204. .

¹⁴ Overcoming this division is one of the important tasks for modern philosophy. Hegel’s alienation is a notion that negatively expresses this division.

The “Dao” and “Relations” in the Teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi

There is no “substance” or “essence” in Laozi’s Dao. Instead, there are “relations” among opposing elements and motion toward the opposite direction in the Dao.

For Laozi, the world is comprised of mutually opposing elements (being and nonbeing, highness and lowness, musical notes and tones, length and shortness, difficulty and ease, and before and after),¹⁵ which exist in a blended state with the power of motion called “opposites” (*ban*) as the medium,¹⁶ and the principle, law, or fact, that the world exists as such is expressed as the Dao.¹⁷ In other words, for Laozi, all things of the world do not rise deductively from the source called the “Dao,” rather they exist in the form of opposing elements in relation to one another.¹⁸ Hence, to put it differently, there is no essential content in the Dao because it is both the ontological mode and the principle of the universe as a whole (nature). For this reason, Laozi describes the Dao as “that which is empty” in *The Daodejing*. The Dao, at a cursory look, “appears to exist” but does not exist as “something”; it seems “like the source or essence of all things” but it is not.¹⁹ Summed up thus, “relatedness” in Daoism is for Laozi the “coexistence of being and nonbeing (*yumusangsaeng*)”²⁰ In other words, being and nonbeing have their ontological basis in relation to each other, existing mutually dependent on each other. This is a completely different view from the Cartesian worldview in which the two irreducible substances, the mind and matter, have their own ontological basis for being. For Descartes, the mind exists on its the immanent ontological basis, that is the thinking essence, and matter exists on its own immanent ontological basis, which is the essence called “extension.” This Cartesian view of existence is radically different from the notion of “coexistence of being and nonbeing” that has its ontological basis on the relation to the other.

How, then, did the Dao of Laozi and Zhuangzi’s philosophies come to be understood in terms of substance or essence? The source of this misunderstanding comes from both traditional Chinese philosophy and modern Western philosophy. In China, the universe was thought to have originated from the Dao in the cosmogony of the Han dynasty, when interest in the origin of the

¹⁵ 故有無相生，難易相成，長短相形，高下相盈，音聲相和，前後相隨，恒也。 *The Daodejing*, ch. 2.

¹⁶ 反者，道之動。 *The Daodejing*, ch. 40.

¹⁷ 吾不知其名，強字之曰道。 *The Daodejing*, ch. 25.

¹⁸ In fact, Laozi was more interested in the ontological mode of the universe rather than its genesis or composition.

¹⁹ 道，沖而用之，或不盈，淵兮似萬物之宗，... 湛兮似或存，吾不知誰之子，象帝之先。 *The Daodejing*, ch. 4.

²⁰ Those who interpret Laozi’s philosophy from the view of essence or substance focus on “existence comes from nonexistence(有生於無),” but this notion of existence, similarly, implies that “nonexistence comes from existence.(無生於有)” For detailed explanation on this point, refer to Choi Jin-seok, *Noja-ui moksori-ro deunneun dodeokgyeong* (The *Daodejing* heard through Laozi’s Voice), (Seoul: Sonamoo Publishing Co., 2001), pp. 322-327.

universe was keen, and the metaphysical school in the Wei-Jin period (particularly in the philosophy of Wangbi) began interpreting the Dao as the original substance (nonbeing, *mu*) in the effort to find the basis for social phenomena. Recently, the Dao came to be perceived as an essence after being influenced by modern Western philosophy, which accepts the existence of essence as a fact. Only now, the dispute is over whether that essence is spiritual or material. However, whether the Dao is the original substance or essence is of no significance in the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, rather the significance of the Dao is as the most basic principle or mode of existence of the world. According to Laozi, no being has an exclusive and original essence as an ontological basis; rather, all things have their counterparts as ontological bases. Moreover, the state of being of any entity becomes significant only in the “process” of change towards the opposing direction.²¹ Accordingly, in Daoist philosophy there can be no ontological “center,” and everything exists within a web of relations. The unity of the universe is guaranteed not by all disparate matters headed toward one original source, but rather by the fact that all things are not differentiated within the web of relations. In such a view, there is no grounds for anthropocentrism.

Wisdom in the Korean Daoist Tradition: Yi Chung-ik's *Damno*

Daoist philosophy in Korea follows similar trends as that of China. During the Joseon dynasty when Confucianism was the governing ideology, Laozi and Zhuangzi's teachings were interpreted by Neo-Confucian scholars. These scholars, who used Confucianism as the framework for interpretation, did not grasp the deconstructionist nature of Laozi.

According to the joint thesis presented by Song Hang-ryong and Jo Min-hwan, works in the Joseon dynasty such as Yi I's *Suneo* (Pure Words), Bak Se-dang's *Sinju dodeokgyeong* (A New Annotated Edition of the *Daodejing*) and *Namhwagyeong juhae* (Annotated Interpretation of *Nanhuajing*), Seo Myeong-ung's *Dodeokjigwi* (Essence of *Daodejing*), Hong Suk-ju's *Jeongno* (Reforming Laozi), Han Won-jin's *Jangjabyeonhae* (Interpretation of Zhuangzi), and Yi Chung-ik's *Damno* (Discourse on Laozi) contain the view that because Daoism and Confucianism have similar systems, the two schools can coexist. In the abstract of the thesis co-authored by Song and Jo,²² we can see the trends in interpreting Daoist philosophy in the Joseon dynasty:

The following common aspects appear in the understanding of Laozi and Zhuangzi

²¹ 曲則全，枉則直，窪則盈，弊則新，少則得，多則惑 *The Daodejing*, ch. 22.

²² “Joseonjo noja juyeokseo yeon-gu” (The Joseon Dynasty's Annotated Notes on Laozi and Zhuangzi), *Dongyang cheolhak yeon-gu* (Eastern Philosophy Research), vol. 26.

in the annotated notes on the two philosophers written in the Joseon dynasty. Firstly, they use the methods of understanding both Laozi and Zhuangzi from the Confucian perspective. Such understanding shows that it is wrong to reject the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi as nihilism or a heresy. Ultimately, this understanding shows that although there is some degree of difference between Confucian philosophy and Daoist philosophy, both schools teach people about disciplining the mind and body (*sugichiin*) and about governing by caring for the people (*aeminchiguk*). Secondly, understanding the Dao of Laozi as the *taegeuk* (the Great Ultimate) or *li* (reason), the Confucian scholars think the cosmogonic aspect of Laozi's Dao in terms of the relation between the Great Ultimate and *yin* and *yang*. In order to avoid rejecting Laozi's teachings as a heresy, it is important to first consider the connection, or relation, between the Dao mentioned in Laozi and the Dao, or the Great Ultimate, in Confucianism. The second understanding holds the position that the Dao in Laozi is not different from the Dao of Confucianism. Thirdly, the relationship between the Dao and virtue, the Dao and name, **non-action** and **nothing undone**, and being and nonbeing in Laozi is generally understood to be similar to that between **the thing** and its function in Neo-Confucianism. In other words, it contains the view **of the thing and its function coming from the same origin**. This view leads to the conclusion that the Dao is not distinct from virtue, name, as being and nonbeing are not either. There are several points of similarity in the understanding of Daoism among the Confucian scholars of the Joseon dynasty, but overall, they all use the Confucian perspective as the method of understanding Laozi and Zhuangzi.

Song and Jo's thesis is very detailed as well as persuasive. However, Yi Chung-ik's commentaries on Laozi and Zhuangzi contain an interpretation and worldview different from other scholars of the time, meriting a special attention. The thinkers of the time besides Yi Chung-ik understand Laozi's philosophy to have recognized the ultimate substance, that is, the original substance or essence, and the fact that various phenomena exist on the basis of the ultimate substance. For instance, that Yi I includes the Dao and virtue under *li* (*taegeuk, the Great Ultimate*), and *yin-yang* as well as the **manifestation of *qi* (*chunggi*)** as being under *qi* shows his understanding of Laozi. Bak Se-dang, using the *li* theory of the Song dynasty, understands Laozi's Dao in terms of **"the theory of matter and its function."** Also, Seo Yeong-ung, echoing Zhou Dun-yi's *Taijitushuo* (Diagram of the Great Ultimate) and *Yiching* (The Book of Changes), interprets Laozi's Dao as the Great Ultimate. Although Hong Suk-ju seems to show a unique understanding of the Dao of Laozi by equating it as

“nature” rather than “the Great Ultimate” or “*li*” like his contemporaries, he does not speak of the “Dao” beyond the Confucian category of the “Dao.” For example, when he interprets the first chapter of Laozi, Hong refers to the Dao as the Great Ultimate in *The Book of Changes*, or as the reality of the infinite asserted by Zhou Dun-yi, concluding that both Confucius and Laozi speak of the same Dao. All of these commentators see Laozi and Zhuangzi within the metaphysical framework of Confucian school. In other words, they are working within the essentialist framework of the law of identity that accepts the existence of an original substance, basis, or essence. Yi Chung-ik’s interpretation, however, differs radically from those of his contemporaries mentioned above.

Sim Gyeong-ho’s article²³ states “As a scholar belonging to the Gang-hwa school, Yi Chung-ik (1744-1816) was basically influenced by the teachings of Wang Yang-ming, but he was also fascinated by Buddhism and Laozi.” What is of interest here is his “fascination with Buddhism. In China, Laozi’s deconstructive philosophy was first interpreted, influenced by Han cosmogony or the theory of substance of Wei-Jin period, as essentialism or a theory of original substance, and later reinterpreted deconstructively by a philosopher named Ku Yeo-hae, after being influenced by Buddhism, a model of a deconstructive worldview. Similarly in Korea, the teachings of Laozi was first interpreted in terms of a substance or essence in the Neo-Confucian tradition during the Joseon dynasty, but reinterpreted deconstructively by Yi Chung-ik who was influenced by Buddhism. This is a very interesting point of commonality.

In order for Laozi to be interpreted deconstructively, “Dao” should not be understood as an essence like the Great Ultimate or *li*. If the Dao is misinterpreted as an essence, often the nonfinite property of the “Dao” and “nonbeing” are linked together, “being” and “nonbeing” are sequentialized either ontologically or logically, which leads to the understanding that “being” came from “nonbeing” and that all things came to be from “being.” However, if Daoist philosophy is to be understood deconstructively, there cannot be any ontological or logical gradation between “being” and “nonbeing.” In this respect, Yi Chung-ik is on the right track.

This point is clearly stated in Yi’s “Huseo” (Afterward), which he wrote to explain why he wrote *Damro* (Discourse on Laozi). He wrote, “Without being there is no nonbeing, without nonbeing no being.... Although different in name, both being and nonbeing are of the same source. For there is nonbeing then there is being, and there is neither difference nor rank between the origin of the universe and the mother of all things.”²⁴ Yi Chung-ik makes the following criticism about

²³ “Sukwon Yi Chung-ik-ui *Damro*-e gwanhayeo” (On Yi Chung-ik’s Discourses on Laozi), *Hanguk dogyo munhwa-ui chojeom* (Focus of Korean Daoist Culture), ed. Yi Jong-eun (Seoul: The Asian Culture Press, 2000), p. 437.

²⁴ 非有，無以形無，非無，無以形有也....有與無，名異而同出。有無即有有，而天地之始與萬物之母，非有異同，非有先後也。「後序」

those who, following a downward vertical evolutionary scheme, interpret “being comes from nonbeing” simply to mean that all things come from nonbeing: “To state it differently, if the statement ‘all things originate from being, and being from nonbeing’ is understood as meaning that nonbeing has a priority over being, this is a result of failing to [properly understand the statement](#). If saying that ‘by being all things come to be’ would be considered improper, then why do people say in the phrase above that ‘by nonbeing being come to be’? [This is generally a logic reasoning the genesis of something from that which already exists.](#)”²⁵ Clearly, Yi Chung-ik, unlike the essentialists, does not accept the [Absolute Nothing](#) found in the theory of original substance. For Yi, being and nonbeing are simply the logical bases of being and not the explanatory concepts for cosmogony. For Yi, the Dao is not a transcendental entity that brings into being all matter, while being completely disconnected to all things in the realm of phenomena. This point becomes clear in his following statement: “The universe does not come to be by itself. Then what caused it to be? Was it the Dao? No. Dao refers to that very movement which follows the movement of the universe. Indeed, if there is no universe, then there cannot be the name Dao.... The universe as a mass cannot be represented, thus the words “Dao” and “[Spirit \(sin\)](#)” are used as its metaphors. The designations “Dao” and “[Spirit](#)” can truly combine the movement and changes of the universe. However, the universe cannot come to be by that which exists outside of it.”²⁶ It is apparent that for Yi Chung-ik, the Dao in Laozi is neither the original source of the universe nor essence; rather, it is the condition or principle for the movement of the universe and nature.

In this view of the Dao, there is no room for such concepts as “essence,” “cause,” or “substance.” Hence, in Yi Chung-ik’s interpretation, all belief in the center is abandoned, all views of substance are deconstructed, and finally, what is left are only “relations” with the ontological basis on the other. This is a model case that corresponds to what was discussed earlier in the paper about the need to get away from essentialist or substantialist views of the world that gives rise to anthropocentrism and shift to a completely different worldview, which is relational, that is, deconstructive. By interpreting Laozi in this way, Yi Chung-ik, in some sense, not only restores Laozi’s original intent but also provides an answer to the environmental issues we now face two hundred years later.

Conclusion

²⁵ 又曰：萬物生於有，有生於無。似若無先於有者，此不能弘通文句之過也。如謂有有生萬物。人知其不，何獨於上句必曰有無能生有乎？此蓋因既生而原始之論也。「後序」

²⁶ 天地不自生，孰生之與？道生之與？非也。道者，循天地之運，而名其所由行者曰道。苟無天地，道之名，無緣立也.... 蓋以天地塊然不可以狀，故以道與神喻之。道與神之名，固足以該天地之運變，然亦非能處天地之外而生天生地者也。『談老』，ch. 7.

In this paper I have reviewed various existing arguments that the causes of the present environmental disaster are anthropocentrism and Western dualism and accepted the assertion that to resolve environmental issues, a new worldview is necessary. Moreover, I argued that if Daoist philosophy is a good candidate for the this new worldview, it is not because Daoism has naturalist and anti-civilizational tendencies, but because it has, instead of an essentialist idea of an original substance, a “[network of relations.](#)” In other words, I proposed that the new worldview to save the environment needs to go beyond monism and dualism; rather, what is more important is whether it is essentialism based on the law of identity or anti-essentialism based on the law of nonidentity. In the end, I proposed the philosophy of Yi Chung-ik, a Korean philosopher who lived two hundred years ago, as an alternative worldview to save the environment.

Given more time, I would have liked to discuss the relationship between the logical-metaphysical link of the law of identity/essentialism and the practical link between extending essence/dominating nature. In other words, it would be useful to discuss how is it possible to translate a metaphysical system into practice; however, given the scope of this paper, this will have to be deferred to another occasion.

The ontology of relations rejects any idea of a center. While the idea of a center guarantees efficiency, linear progress, and unity, it also discards many things, like an animal with blinders on. What is discarded eventually builds up and threatens the life of the very agent, the animal with blinders. Although [the idea of relations is a vague concept to work with](#), understanding the self in relation to other things reduces the amount of things discarded and is more humane.

Key Words

The Law of Identity/The Law of Nonidentity, Essentialism/Deconstructionism, Differentiation and Center, Relations and Coexistence, Dao, Environment, Daoism,

Abstract

It is often said that anthropocentrism or dualist metaphysics is responsible for the destruction of the environment; however, essentialist thinking based on the law of identity is more responsible for the environmental problems. The solution of the problems lies in denying all forms of “differentiation” and “center” and shifting to a Daoist worldview in which all beings are ontologically related to and dependent on one another. We can find this in the ideas of Yi Chung-ik (1744 ~ 1816), a Korean philosopher from the Joseon dynasty.

Glossary

Yiching ^(Ch.) 易經

yin (Ch.) 陰

aeminchiguk 愛民台國

ban 反

chunggi 沖氣

Damro 談老

Dao (Ch.) 道

Daodejing (Ch.) 道德經

Dodeokjigwi 道壽旨歸

Huseo 後序

Jangjabyeonhae 莊子辨解

Jeongro 訂老

Laozi (Ch.) 老子

li 理

Namhwagyeong juhae 南華經註解

qi (Ch.) 氣

sin 神

Sinju dodeokgyeong 新註道德經

sinseon 神山

sugichiin 修己治人

Suneo 醇言

taegeuk 太極

Taijitushuo ^(Ch.) 太極圖說

yang ^(Ch.) 陽

yumusangsaeng 有無相生

Zhuangzi (Ch.) 莊子

(Ch.: Chinese)