

The Wholeness of Nature and the Roots of Civilization

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Previous understandings of organicity have been based on a simplistic approach, treating it as an antithesis to inorganic or mechanical property, resulting in an evolutionary series of understandings of the world as being “inorganic – organic – animate – intelligent...”. This is actually an extension of the recent mechanistic worldview, which overcomes the simplistic thinking and reveals the deep organic nature of the world, presenting a completely different picture of the universe. I have pointed out the universality of organicity and its fundamental status for the universe in an earlier paper entitled “On deep-seated organic property of universe”.² In this paper I present a brief tracing of ideas according to the historical existence of the theory itself, with the ultimate aim of recovering or reconstructing an ancient organic relationship between man and nature in a new context according to the logic of the dialectics of the so-called circle of ideas of Hegel.

I. The “Personhood” of Nature

In Chapter 4, Book V of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle discusses six meanings of the word “nature”³: (1) the genesis of growing things; (2) the seed of a growing thing; (3) the root of the movement of a natural thing; (4) the primary matter; (5) the essence of natural things; (6) the essence of anything. Later people divided them into two main categories according to their nature: the invisible nature as essence, basis and initial motive, which is the main one, because there are five meanings belonging to that aspect; and the other category includes things that exist in such a way, i.e., primary materials, which can also be called natural things. Therefore, Aristotle concludes, “Nature in its fundamental and strict sense is the essence of things, which has in itself the source of movement; for prime matter is called nature because it is qualified to receive it (movement), and the processes of generation and growth are called nature because they are movements carried out thereby.” These two types of meanings are the basis of all subsequent interpretations of Western natural philosophical thought. Accordingly, at least it can be said that in Aristotle’s time the basic usage of the word *physis* was the nature, essence, and origin of things, that is, the intrinsic reason why things are as they are, and not primarily nature understood as a natural thing or as a collection of natural things in more recent times. This statement is also based on Heraclitus’ famous aphorism “Nature loves to hide (*physis kruptesthai*)

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² LIU, Xiaoting. On deep-seated organic property of universe, *BIOCOSMOLOGY-NEO-ARISTOTELISM*, 2018 (3&4): 367–379.

³ Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated into Chinese by Li Zhen. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2020: 107–109.

philei)”⁴. It follows that the concept of nature in modern times is fundamentally a deviation from Aristotelian thought, and that the main appeal of popular philosophical exploration of nature is the attempt to show or recover nature as nature and way through the study of the natural world. And this, as we have seen today, is undoubtedly similar to a quest for trifles rather than the core and a search for fish by climbing the tree.

However, if we examine it more closely, we will find that the concept or meaning of nature was already “incomplete” or changed in Aristotle’s time. Since the Greek philosophy of nature was born out of the early Greek mythology, the personification of nature in Greek mythology was Artemis or Isis of the temple of Ephesus, who was also a god of poetry. She suggests at least two things: (1) that nature was originally personified; and (2) that nature was feminine.⁵

Regarding the understanding of the personification of nature, the heaven in ancient China and the Brahman in ancient India are basically the same, and they are mostly feminine. In China, the Chinese philosophy of the Earth Mother, represented by Lao Tzu, has retained most of these ideas, and the Chinese folklore also refers to the Heavenly God and the Earth Mother,⁶ and the Chinese still often use the term “Mother Earth” in their spoken language. The Gaia hypothesis, which has become popular in recent years, is also derived from the mother figure of ancient Greek mythology. However, some of these meanings were obscured in the 500–300 B.C.E., or what Jaspers calls the Axial Period. Among them, (1) in Greece was the philosophy of nature, which emphasized that the essence of things is in the things themselves, without external search, and that everything that goes against this path is surplus; (2) in China was the civilization of ritual and music, that is, the culture of human decency; (3) in India was mainly Buddhism, because Buddhism advocated atheism. To sum up, it can be considered that this is a spiritual rupture in the history of human thought from mythology, witch-history and religion into natural philosophy. This rupture made nature lose her mystery and infinite charm for the first time.

The loss of the divine blessing led to the isolation of the two meanings of Greek nature, which were “dismembered” and then absorbed by the powerful Judeo-Christianity in the interface with the ancient Roman culture, because the Judeo-Christianity retained the power of transcendental personification and holistic thought. The idea of nature as nature and way was absorbed in a Platonic way by the personalized God of early Christianity, who became part of the Creator and brought nature back and

⁴ Hadot, Pierre. *Le Voile d’Isis: Essai sur l’histoire de l’idée de Nature*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004: 22.

⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

⁶ LIU, Xiaoting. Why is the Earth? Chinese Earth-Mother philosophy in the bio-cosmological perspective. Presented at World Congress: Bio-cosmology and Cancer, Cracow, Poland, July 14–17, 2017.

completed its supremacy; and the material of created meanings became the apparent nature before people's eyes, which in turn provided the exact object for later modern natural scientific research and contemplation. The emergence of deism or pantheism in the late Middle Ages attempted to remedy or even bridge the rift between the two kinds of nature by means of the "Book of Nature", which was an attempt to pull back or fill the nature "possessed" by God to the side of the natural object, or, as it were the attempt to raise the status of nature, to ontologize nature. This trend, together with the contemporaneous Renaissance's reverence for experience, sensuality, and worldly pleasure, served as a factor in the dual liberation of humanity and nature, and served as the ideological pavement for the subsequent scientific revolution.

II. On the "unity" of nature

If mythology embodies the image of a personified nature, and ancient natural philosophy shows the majesty of nature as a way and inherent quality, then what has been played since the modern scientific revolution is a song of materialized nature, and the so-called modern natural science is the science of natural things. This nature is not the nature in Greek sense, and this science is not the science in Greek sense either, otherwise it would not be called "scientific revolution", because the systematization of modern science, the completion of the industrial revolution, the transformation of social institutions, the shaping of industrial man or citizenship, and in short, the realization of modernization and globalization, are all based on the materialization of nature.

However, because of the medieval positioning of nature in its general sense of createdness, and man's "qualification" as an image and "agent" of God by virtue of his divine "personality," it is as if man has acquired the perspective and some of the power of God, and thus "reigns" over all things. In this way, when natural scientists claim that their conclusions about nature are the laws or the essence of nature itself, the essence, though mainly a combination of natural objects, confirms the centrality of man in the universe in terms of value and cognition. Especially after Descartes' "I think" and Kant's "man legislates for nature", the anthropocentric worldview was firmly established, and God was banished from the realm of knowledge. This worldview not only created a disconnection between the mechanical nature and the organic nature, but also deepened the gap between thing-in-itself and the subject's representation in the understanding of nature. As a result, instead of being liberated, nature has been subjected to greater enslavement, dismemberment, and destruction. Therefore, this worldview has become the direct ideological source of modern global problems such as ecology and the environment. So, unity or division? This is the major watershed between modern thought and ancient thought. In this regard, Heidegger, in his book *Identity and Difference*, firmly points out that

Parmenides especially emphasizes the principle of unity over the principle of being,⁷ in order to guarantee the co-existential oneness of being, which is the original root of all Western thought. This was later named by Leibniz as “pre-determined harmony”, because what was cut off in the first place was the organic quality of nature itself as a whole and of man and nature as one.

In addition, ecological philosophical research over the past half century has shown that humans are not the creators of ecology but the fruits of it. Therefore, in order to fundamentally realize the protection of the natural environment or ecology, there are still two ideological gaps that must be crossed: first, if nature has no personality, it is difficult to speak of ethics; second, ecological ethics or ecological morality based on anthropocentrism cannot protect ecology in the final or fundamental sense, and even the term “ecological ethics” itself is anthropocentric. The above discussion shows that for the former, one can go back to Greek mythology to awaken the personhood of nature, while for the latter, one needs to go back to Parmenides to claim the supreme unity and reconstruct a complete nature. In this way, we see that the understanding of nature goes far beyond Aristotle’s two directions, and that there are two other, more original directions, which are the more distant and fundamental basis for the organic character of nature.

It is no coincidence that the understanding of nature by Laozi, the founder of ancient Chinese Taoism, contains not only the direction of nature as a way and inherent quality, as expressed in the statement that “Tao follows nature” (Chapter 25), but also the direction of personification, and moreover the direction of unity or wholeness. For the latter, there are various expressions in the book *Laozi*, such as the following statements: “There are things that are mixed, first born of heaven and earth, ...which can be the mother of heaven and earth.” (Chapter 25) “Non-being is the name of the beginning of heaven and earth.” (Chapter 1) “The Tao gives birth to one, one to two, two to three, and three to all things.” (Chapter 42) “The net of heaven is wide, but it does not leak.” Chapter 73) Even Xunzi, a Confucianist, said, “The Way of Nature is constant, and it neither exists for Yao nor perishes for Jie.” (*Treatise on Nature*) This idea was universal rather than individual in ancient China. These discourses speak of both the fundamental nature of the Tao and the unity and wholeness of a world in which the Tao is the supreme, highlighting the holistic and even criterion character of nature.⁸ Accordingly, one can speculate why Heidegger still holds Laozi in particular in high esteem today in the 20th century, presumably for the same reason as for Parmenides or Heraclitus – in order to find a new or second

⁷Heidegger, Martin. *Identitit und Differenz, Gesamtausgabe*. Bd. 11. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006: 37–39.)

⁸ LIU, Xiaogan. On the systematic meaning of Laozi's nature. *Religion and Philosophy* (6th collection). Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2017: 97–108. In this article, the author presents various meanings of Laozi's “nature”, especially the holistic and systemic meaning of nature, and elevates it to the highest meaning of “the natural order in human civilized society”.

beginning for philosophy or human civilization.⁹ I have pointed out in another paper that the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and the recent global environmental and ecological catastrophes can be seen as nodes corresponding to the reality Heidegger spoke of. This will not be repeated here.

III. Faith toward Nature

The foregoing has shown that in order to get out of anthropocentrism, it is necessary to go beyond the value relationship and even the ethical relationship between man and nature and rise to a relationship of faith. Since the Greek nature originally had the meaning of personality, and nature as a way and inherent quality is self-caused, just like the attributes of God in Judaism or *Di* or heaven in ancient China, it can be believed according to the mainstream model of faith. In particular, it is possible to believe in nature according to the way of the Abrahamic faiths or the way of the faiths of the ancient civilizations – they had most of their contents in agreement at one time, because the Abrahamic faiths were originated from more ancient forms of faith. Perhaps that is the only way the problem can be solved. But for this, in the modern age of flourishing material civilization, it is almost impossible without good reasons and arguments. Now, we have basically filled the missing logical loop by memorializing nature and archaeology of civilization, making this choice a new possibility. Other than that, no other approach that has been available can withstand the ideological impact of industrial civilization. This is not the promotion of any superstition or ignorance, but a sound conclusion with a nature of negation of negation based on a comprehensive understanding of the existence of the contemporary universe, life and civilization, just as an old man also has compassion and reverence for life, but on a different level from a child.

Thus, it can be seen that nature, as a four-dimensional being of nature, material, personification and unity, is also “four in one”. The material is the “object” for human use, the personification is the emotional and ethical basis for the interdependence between man and nature, and the ontology and self-causation are for man to follow and believe in as a basis. In the end, not only our bodies, but also our minds themselves are “natural”. This means that “nature” has a very complex and holistic connotation. This is the root of the true concept of nature that has shifted human civilization from industrial civilization to ecological civilization today. For this reason, we must dispel the notion that the ideas of the ancients were foolish, backward and superficial, and carefully sort out the sources of the history of ideas, draw on them extensively, practice them, and take practical action to build a complete and healthy civilization.

⁹ May, Reinhard. *Heidegger and East Asian Thought*. Translated into Chinese by Zhang Zhiqiang. Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2003: 225. (Based on May, Reinhard. *Heidegger's hidden sources: East Asian influences on his work*. Translated, with a complementary essay, by Graham Parkes. London: Routledge, 1996.)

Since we lack a systematic and in-depth examination of South Asian thought on nature, which is still abundantly documented, we can only describe it in a brief way at the end to illustrate my view. In Sanskrit, *Prakriti* is the word that stands for Nature in English and *ziran* in Chinese. In ancient Indian texts such as the *Vedas*, *Puran*, and Hindu epics, there are rich ideas on nature, especially in the *Vedas*, where all things in nature are considered as gods, such as fire, water, air, sun, moon, etc., maintaining their sacredness and mystery. Among them, the Sankhya philosophy, a school of ancient Indian philosophy, is the most systematic in its ideas about nature. According to Sankhya philosophy, everything outside the soul is nature, and the term nature includes sixteen elements such as intelligence, self, mind, earth, water, fire, and air. Nature has three matching things which are attributes of *satwo*, *raja*, and *tamo*, and everything that happens in the world is caused by the inconsistent matching of these three attributes. However, things happen inside nature, but nature itself does not change. The yogic philosophy of later generations derives its view on nature from the Sankhya philosophy. As we can see from the description here, ancient South Asian thought about nature exhibits a richer and more integrated nature and what Husserl called the “living world” of phenomenology, which is a completely different perspective from the world of science today, and many of its rationales still need to be sorted out, in order to provide the contemporary revival of natural philosophy with a more distant and richer ideological message from the beginning of civilization.

The basic task of the new contemporary philosophy of natural history is to break through the barrier of nature formed by modern science through theoretical work, to reveal the rich mystery of nature itself, that is, the co-identity of man and nature, and to protect the dignity of nature and mutual co-identity through practice and action, and to promote the return of human beings to the embrace of nature with a sound mind. Perhaps, only a human civilization based on this is a true ecological civilization, because in the end, nature is not only the whole universe, but also our ecosphere, wisdom circle and the home of human beings. The co-identity of human and nature is the same community of life because humanity without nature does not exist at all, and nature without human beings is nothing.