

CKTS NEWSLETTER

The Center of Korean Theological Studies
Drew University

Ever since my undergraduate days I have been deeply drawn to philosophical Taoism, sensing an ally in my own efforts to develop a more generous conception of nature and the sacred than that found in the Western monotheisms. Over the years I am often reminded that some of my most cherished philosophical ideas are already prefigured in Taoism and that my own perspective of ecstatic naturalism is really struggling toward a kind of Taoism for the West (if this doesn't sound hopelessly presumptuous!).

In particular, I find deep resonances in the idea that the true Tao is both unnameable and yet fully embedded within all of the things of the world.

In my own tradition of Unitarian

Universalism this belief has been beautifully represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson who speaks of the deep underlying current of the world as *natura naturans* or *nature naturing*. This concept, originally developed in the 12th century Latin West and resurrected by Spinoza, probes into the utter mystery of the abyss that envelopes all categorial structures no matter how robust. Contrasted to *nature naturing* is *natura naturata* or *nature natured* that roughly corresponds to the orders of creation. In a direct sense, both Taoism and ecstatic naturalism live out of this primal distinction between what can be called the unconscious of nature and the "the totality of the ten thousand things [to use Jae-shik Shin's translation]." Our native tendency as human beings is to struggle to fill in the Tao, or *nature naturing*, with content, almost always of a human shape, often tied to race, class, and gender structures. The historical tragedy of this is obvious: it erects militant barriers against the underlying sacred source of all that is and further isolates human beings from a wounded nature that groans under our own hand.

The Taoist concept of *ch'i* which Jung Young Lee translates as spirit, or breath, or wind, points to the utter mystery of *nature naturing* as the self-renewing

ground of the world. In the words of the German philosopher Schelling, this ground is "unruly," that is, it represents a kind of primal chaos that can only find order when it condenses itself into and as *nature natured*. Paradoxically, the Tao becomes more fully what it is when it becomes other to itself (a concept paralleled in Hegel's concept of *Geist* which empties itself into nature only to return to itself in the fulfillment of time). It is impossible to imagine the Tao without the world and it is equally impossible to imagine the world without the Tao. In Western terms we would call this a symmetrical ontological relation.

Insofar as Taoism would develop a concept of sin or estrangement it would have to center on the ways, perhaps

inevitable, in which we turn away from *ch'i* toward its manifestations which seem more manageable. After all, heaven and earth do represent different realms with different laws, even if they are fully correlated in the dimension of depth. Wisdom consists in the ability to become permeable to this depth dimension even while living out of the different manifest laws of the two spheres.

For the philosophical Taoist the entire universe is pervaded with *ch'i* and is thus an organic whole. It is no wonder that process theologians have been friendly to this aspect of Taoism as it reinforces their commitment to the idea that each item of the universe (actual occasions) is connected with each other (past) occasion. From the perspective of my ecstatic naturalism I have to confess that I find this idea to be an idealistic delusion, propped up by bad science and bad metaphysics. A more sober look at the world shows us that there are deep breaks within the finite continuities that we encounter. Try as we might we cannot wish them away. We reenact these breaks in our natural and human relationships and in the unending struggle between the unconscious and consciousness. As a simple example, just remember trying to fathom the wisdom of a dream that uses images and strange twists of language to compel

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consciousness toward an insight into its own blind spots. Most of us find dream interpretation to be profoundly difficult, and often rely on specialists to help us overcome the great divide between the unconscious and consciousness.

While I personally feel uncomfortable with the *yin* and *yang* distinction, perhaps because of lingering worries about embedded gender structures, I am deeply appreciative of the idea of a dialectical tension within the heart of the world. To be human is to live out of the ontological wound that emerges out of the ever-opening abyss that separates *nature naturing* from *nature natured*. For Taoism, as a nondualist perspective, my sense of separation would be alien, as it entails a kind of ontological divide between dimensions that are fully entwined within the Tao itself.

Perhaps my ecstatic naturalism is sadder than Taoism. When I look into the heart of the world I often see what Schopenhauer called the "irrational will to live." Because of this I am often suspicious of what seem to me to be romantic attempts to give nature a healing face, as if the utter vastness and complexity of the world could manifest *any* one feature. Put more strongly, we have to accept the fact that nature is both the great mother and a slaughter house, a realm of ecstatic transformation and a well of unbearable pain, a world of deception and a world of communication, and a haunting reminder of our utter smallness in the face of that which has no outer boundary.

Why then would one want to become an ecstatic naturalist when Taoism (and its process cousin) offers so much more? This is a vexing question, and one that I enter into in all seriousness. Isn't it the case that my metaphysical sadness is simply a hangover from our Western dualisms that separate the world into irreconcilable halves. Perhaps there is a lingering patriarchal dimension in my belief that we live out of a great wound (and here one is reminded of the wonderful story of Plato that tells of how the great patriarch Zeus cut the original humans in half because of their hubris). Or perhaps there is too much fascination with those places in nature where the breaks seem to overwhelm the healing energies.

But it is at this juncture that a more Western concept of *ch'i* comes to the fore within ecstatic naturalism. Nature's spirit is perennially available in the great abyss that opens up within our lives. In a very clear sense we can't even see this wound as a wound without the help of the spirit. Since this wound is different in kind from any other that we could encounter, it takes a

special kind of sight to enter into its recesses. For me it is not some ultimate network of organic relations that holds the world together, but the elusive, moving, healing, transforming energy-field of the spirit that lives as nature's most sacred manifestation. I am persuaded that all great religions emerge as a response to a kind of holy melancholy. Yet this melancholy does not have the last word. The spirit, which gives us this melancholy through its own uncanny logic, brings us past and through it toward a kind of metaphysical hope that continually emerges from the origins of the world.

Robert S. Corrington
Associate Prof. of Philosophical Theology

Jung Young Lee's Lecture
October 9, 1997
3:30 p.m. Craig Chapel
Drew University

This lecture is sponsored by the CKTS. The Center of Korean Theological Studies' Annual Symposium is renamed as "Jung Young Lee's Lecture" in honor of Prof. Lee at Drew by the CKTS since he died last year. CKTS has invited Dr. Robert C. Neville, Dean of Boston School of Theology, as the Keynote Speaker this year. There are many reasons to invite him for Jung Young Lee's Lecture. One of the reasons is that there is a coherence in focusing on East Asian traditions to reconstruct Christian Theology.

Two Drew faculties and Dr. Young-chan Ro will also be participated in this lecture for discuss and challenge to explore the works of the late Dr. Jung Young Lee from their own ways of theological and religious framework.

New Book

"East Wind"
CKTS Monograph

The First Monograph of CKTS: *East Wind: Taoist and Cosmological Implications of Christian Theology* is just published this summer. It will include nine articles and be distributed by the University of America Press.