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ASIAN NATURALISM:
AN OLD VISION FOR A NEW WORLD

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ABSTRACT: Naturalism is a pan-Asian view of the world and way of life. Unlike the atheistic naturalism in the West, Asian naturalism, which rests upon an organic view of the world as represented by key concepts such as the Dao, Heaven, and Emptiness, is basically spiritual. Going beyond the traditional Western antithesis of naturalism and supernaturalism, matter and spirit, it can even be called “supernatural naturalism.” As a living example of Asian naturalism, this article examines the ethics of threefold reverence: reverence toward Heaven, all human beings, and all beings, animate and inanimate. Threefold reverence constitutes the cardinal teaching of Cheondogyo or the Eastern Learning, a native Korean religio-philosophical movement which arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The ecological-environmental crisis of our age cannot be overcome without a fundamental change in our attitude toward nature. Recovering humanity’s primal sense of reverence toward all beings in nature is a vital part of this change.

INTRODUCTION

In his great work, *Science and Civilization in China*, Joseph Needham characterized the Chinese world view as “organic naturalism,”¹ a naturalism that differs from the mechanistic view of the world which has dominated the Western approach to nature since the rise of modern science. Organic naturalism is a holistic way of understanding reality, according to which things in the world are not separate entities but are internally related to form organic patterns and unity; there is a fundamental “continuity of being” not only between individual entities but also between different categories and layers of being. All forms of existence are regarded as visible manifestations of the single primordial vital force called *yuan-qi* which constantly transforms itself into different modalities.

I would not hesitate to call this dynamic holistic view of the world a “pan-Asian” (East Asian) world view that has dominated the Asian mind in nearly every aspect of life—from religion and philosophy to medicine, art, and architecture—not only in the high cultures of Asian countries but also in the daily lives of ordinary people. It is still a living tradition in Asian countries, considerably weakened as it has been under the influence of the modern scientific and technological way of thinking.

In this paper I will examine the nature of this Asian naturalism, its fundamental spirit and characteristics in contrast to the naturalism in the West. I will then introduce the ethics of “threefold reverence” (*samgyeong*) formulated by Haeweol (1827–1898), the third patriarch of Cheondogyo, a native Korean religio-philosophical tradition, as a prime living example of Asian naturalism. My paper concludes with some observations on the need and possibility of constructing a new metaphysics of Asian naturalism for today.

NATURALISM EAST AND WEST

Organic naturalism is by no means a monopoly of the Asian mind; it was a dominant view of nature in the West before the rise of the modern scientific world view. But nowhere has its influence been as pervasive and lasting as in East Asian cultures, and there is something unique in it which from the beginning distinguishes it from its Western counterpart. The Greeks viewed the world with its ceaseless motion as alive, that is, animated by the world-soul, and as intelligent and rational because of its orderly and regular movement, attributing this to a cosmic mind or intelligence. But the East Asian organic naturalism did not conceive of such cosmic intelligence; the world was regarded as essentially self-organizing and self-regulating.

The cosmic mind was initially thought by the Greeks to be inherent in nature, but later came to be regarded as outside of it under the Christian influence with the idea of a supernatural deity. The Western world eventually came to dispense with the idea of cosmic intelligence altogether as superfluous. The idea of God as cosmic intelligence and law-giver initially played a significant role in developing modern science, but the idea of a supernatural God who can at the same time intervene in the process of the world against the laws of nature enacted by himself was totally unacceptable for the scientific mind seeking mechanistic explanation of the natural world. As a consequence, naturalism, as a philosophical position which seeks to understand all phenomena and events occurring in the world without any reference to divine causality, came to be virtually synonymous with atheism in the West.

It is now widely recognized that the biblical belief in God as the supernatural creator of the world, with its sharp distinction between God and the world, formed an important ideological background for the desacralized view of the world in the modern West. By separating divinity from nature, and thus allowing the very possibility of understanding the natural world without reference to its supernatural author, Christianity ironically paved the way for its own demise in the modern world. In the ancient world dominated by the worship of the mysterious

forces of nature and the magical efforts to influence them, the Christian faith in God cleared the ground for the rise of a purely naturalistic understanding of the world, resulting in the thorough disenchantment of the world such as we witness today. Is it a mere coincidence that “atheism” in its authentic sense, with all its negative connotations and consequences—skepticism, nihilism, and the sense of the meaninglessness of the universe and human life, and so on—first arose in the Christian West?

It is also a well-known fact that the Western intellectual tradition has long been dominated by a series of dualistic oppositions created by the biblical notion of the creator God: the transcendent and the immanent, the sacred and the profane, nature and grace, reason and revelation, church and state, and religion and culture—which in turn have been closely related to the dualism of spirit and matter, the soul and the body, the masculine and the feminine, and so on. These oppositions were basically alien to Asian thought and culture in general, which not only had no idea of supernatural deity in the first place but, more fundamentally, had no dual origin analogous to that in the West, the so-called Hellenic and the Hebraic.

Having no concept of divine revelation in the first place and hence no split between reason and revelation, Asian religions have been basically philosophical religions and Asian philosophies religious philosophies. Thus naturalism has not been defined in Asian tradition in terms of its opposition to supernaturalism. Asian naturalism is accordingly not antagonistic to religious spirituality at all. Simply stated, there is a “sacred depth” to nature² in Asian naturalism, hence a religious or spiritual naturalism. Just as the Asian concept of “nothingness” (*wu*; Kor.: *mu*) goes beyond the Western antithesis of being and non-being, Asian naturalism defies the opposition of theism and atheism predicated upon the sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural, and the spiritual and the material, in the Western tradition.

This is borne out by the fact that matter itself has not been understood in the Asian naturalistic tradition as purely “material,” or the spirit purely as “spiritual” either for that matter. The best evidence for this is the concept of *qi/ch'i* (Kor.: *gi*), the vital force or energy—the key concept underlying Asian organismic view of the world and one of the common vocabularies in daily use in Asian countries, but often very elusive for the Western mind to grasp, because it does not fit nicely into either of the two categories, spirit and matter. Asian naturalistic world view has never been dominated by the dualism of spirit and matter that has defined the Western attitude toward the material world and spirituality. Unlike “Europeans who could only think in terms either of Democritean mechanical materialism or of Platonic theological spiritualism,”³ Asian naturalism understood the world and the human being in a holistic way. Far from viewing the material world as purely inert and passive, and hence as the object that can be made completely transparent to human mind and mastered by it, Asian naturalistic mind always regarded the world of nature as inexhaustibly vibrant and creative, and full of spiritual meaning and message for humans to read. Accordingly, the metaphysical depreciation of

the material world and the human body is essentially foreign to Asian naturalistic spirituality, which is very much “earthly” and “bodily.”

Nature is simply everything in Asian naturalism, and there is no other reality which is responsible for its existence and operation. The modern East Asian word for nature, *ziran* (Kor.: *jayeon*), which literally means “so of itself,” was originally not used as a noun referring to the natural world but as an adjectival and adverbial term referring to the spontaneous way nature works by its own power and principle, with no further cause beyond it. The Asian mind did not recognize the need to postulate cosmic intelligence in order to account for its harmonious order. The world is simply self-organizing and self-regulating, having no creator or the law-giver.

This does not suggest, however, as some erroneously believe, that the Asian mind lacked any metaphysical interest in exploring the ultimate ground of reality—the search for the *arche* of the natural world or its *prima causa*. The biblical notion of creation Asian naturalism certainly did not have, but it did not avoid metaphysical speculation on the ultimate reality of the world; it is only that it was sought within nature itself. This distinguishes Asian naturalism from Christian supernaturalism, on the one hand, and from the atheistic and anti-metaphysical naturalism of the West, on the other hand.

THE DAO AND HEAVEN

The first concept that comes to our mind in this regard is the famous term Dao (Kor.: *do*). It literally means “way,” and it has often been rendered as the Way in the West. While certainly legitimate in denoting the aspect of the Dao as the way nature works spontaneously, it does not, on the other hand, do full justice to its metaphysical dimension. For the Dao, like the Hindu concept of Brahman, has at the same time the ontological meaning as the ultimate reality of the world—the source from which the myriad things of the universe originate and to which they return. Thus I regard the Dao as a metaphysical concept without any reservation, notwithstanding some tendency to interpret it otherwise today. Eternal and infinite, the Dao is self-subsisting, having “its own source: and “its own root.”⁴ Formless and nameless, it is not a being but rather “nothingness”—not as pure nonbeing, but as the ever-creative matrix of the infinite varieties of beings in the world.

The Dao is not the creator of the world in the sense of making the world as its handiwork, nor is it understood as its law-giver who is responsible for its rational order. As mentioned before, the world is basically self-organizing for the Daoist; the very word Dao refers to this self-organizing power of the world. As such, it is thoroughly immanent in the changing world and does not constitute a “separate” reality distinguished from it by its immutable eternity. Much like Spinoza’s *natura naturans*, the Dao is not merely immanent in the world, but the world is its manifestation. Thus it is present even in the most insignificant things of the world, such as tiles and feces, as *Zhuangzi* says. Daoism is unabashedly “pantheistic” in this respect, if we may still use a theistic term.

There is no concept of creation *ex nihilo* in Daoism, and in Asian tradition as a whole for that matter; the nothingness (*wu*; Kor.: *mu*) of the Dao refers to the inexhaustible creative matrix of the universe, not the pure and simple nonexistence of the world. The world is not created *ex nihilo* but formed out of the primeval chaos (*hun-dun*; Kor.: *hondon*) of the Dao as the primordial vital force (*yuan-qi*; Kor.: *weon'gi*) of the universe. This means that there is no absolute beginning of things nor their absolute end; they only change forms. Everything in the world is explained in terms of the ceaseless movement of the primordial vital force *yuan-qi*, the ever-shifting interplay of its two polar powers, *yin* and *yang*, and by its condensation and dilution.

Unlike God, whose will as the law-giver of the universe has been rationalized in the Western tradition through the concept of divine logos or reason, Dao's operation is considered essentially "dark" and mysterious, escaping our rational comprehension. Our intellect and discursive thought are said to be unable to plumb its infinite depth and creativity nor capture its lively movement. Using Bertrand Russell's expression, "the combination of mathematics and theology"⁵ did not have a parallel in Asian naturalistic tradition. It did not particularly strike the Asian mind that nature has a mathematical structure—a rational order intelligible to human mind. While this may have had negative effect for Asian naturalism to develop modern physics operating with mathematical formulations, at the same time it prevented the Asian mind from viewing the natural world as a closed system strictly governed by causal laws. Full of inexhaustible vitality and shrouded in the mystery of the inscrutable Dao, nature was never viewed by the Asian mind as fully transparent to human intellect and amenable to its rational comprehension through quantifying and mechanistic approach. The Daoist universe is not a closed system. Ever-creative and open, new things and unpredictable events can always happen in it. Surely the world is orderly for the Daoist as well, but its order is by no means considered pre-given or predetermined; it is emergent with the spontaneous movement of the Dao itself.

An essentially similar view of the world emerges when we examine another key concept in the Asian naturalistic tradition, namely Heaven (*tian*; Kor.: *cheon*), a term equally at home in Daoism and Confucianism. Often virtually synonymous with the Dao, Heaven also refers to the invisible and infinite source of the universe from which "ten thousand things" originate, each with its proper nature, and to which they all return in due time, following the Heaven's way (*tian-dao*; Kor.: *cheondo*) or its principle (*tian-li*; Kor.: *cheolli*). The *Zhuangzi* calls it the Gate of Heaven (*tian-men*; Kor.: *cheonmun*)⁶—the "absolute nonbeing" (*wu-you*) as the creative matrix of all beings like the Dao. Although often conceived at the popular level as possessing human will like a personal God, the more philosophical mind, whether Daoist or Confucian, has always understood Heaven in transpersonal and cosmic terms.

One crucial element, however, that distinguishes the Confucian view of Heaven and the Dao from the Daoist, comes from the fact that the former extends the way of

Heaven and the Dao beyond the natural world to embrace the human realm as well, its moral and social order. It is this holistic vision, in which nature and culture, and the way of nature and the way of humans, are not separate but form a single order, that is characteristic of the Confucian view of reality. Nevertheless we should not overlook the fact that the Confucian view is equally naturalistic in that it seeks to ground human order upon the natural order. One could say that nature is human and morality natural in Confucianism—the Confucian way to secure ontological foundation for moral order. After all, Heaven, like the Dao, is the all-comprehensive ultimate reality which defies the distinction of nature and culture, the natural order and the human order.

Heaven's way or principle is considered perfectly immanent in the natural world as well as in the human nature endowed by Heaven—hence the complete unity of Heaven and humans (*cheonin habil*) as the Confucian ideal of sagehood, which is to be attained through a perfect realization of one's own nature. This in turn is believed to lead to the realization of the natures of other people as well as other things. This cosmic ideal of human perfection represents the Confucian spirituality as its highest, which, along with the Daoist ideal of nonaction, has inspired the Asian mind for thousands of years. And it has not completely lost its appeal among Asian peoples even today. The content of morality may change according to the circumstances; but it remains the unchanging core of the Confucian naturalistic vision that morality should be securely grounded upon nature, inner and outer, given by Heaven and the Dao.

Although the Confucian tradition did much to “rationalize” the concepts of Heaven and the Dao by moralizing them, the Asian mind, including the Confucian, has always held deep reverence (*gyeong*) toward the Dao and Heaven and their ways. As the ultimate reality of the universe, they are considered essentially mysterious and beyond our full comprehension. Ontologically, they are thoroughly immanent in the world, but epistemologically transcendent in that our mind is not capable of fully understanding their ways and our language can never capture their infinite depth and creativity. As the famous first line of the *Daodejing* declares—“the Dao that can be spoken of is not the constant Dao”—the Asian mind never forgot the ineffable nature of the Dao and Heaven. In this respect, the Asian thought and its spirituality can certainly be designated “mystical.” Ever mindful of the fundamental inadequacy of human language and discursive thought to grasp the reality of the world, Asian philosophy can hardly be characterized as logocentric. In Asian naturalism language and reality never enjoyed an intimate marriage as in Western philosophy—at least in its classical tradition, before the barrage of today's fashionable antirationalism.

One may even say that the Asian naturalistic mind and spirituality had an infinite “faith” in nature with its sacred dimension, but not in its own rational capacity to grasp the ultimate reality. Deeply aware of the alienating and reifying nature of human language and intellect, and their inherent limitations in grasping the infinite world of the Dao, the highest aspiration of Asian naturalistic mind has always been

directly to embody a perfect unity with the Dao or Heaven in one's own being—not to be engaged in philosophical discussions about them as the object of intellectual concern. The Dao is primarily to be lived, not studied, in Asian naturalism. This accounts for its ultimate practical, spiritual, and mystical character.

One final consideration. If nature is everything in Asian naturalism, some ultimate but speculative questions may be raised regarding this naturalistic outlook: Can we ask in Asian naturalism why the world is as it is? Whence its order and regular patterns? Yes, we can ask, and the answer is that everything is “natural” in the sense that it follows the spontaneous operation of the Dao or Heaven; but the order is not considered preordained or predetermined but emergent with the natural movement of the Dao itself. Can we then ask why the Dao is as it is, particularly its ordering nature? No, because the Dao is considered ultimate, with no further reason or reality behind or beyond it, like the God in Christianity except that the Dao or Heaven is considered thoroughly immanent in the world and constantly changing with it, or even prior to its formation, due to its dynamic creativity. Further yet, can we ask in Asian naturalism why the world exists in the first place—the famous question of Leibniz, why is there something rather than nothing? Yes, we can, but the Asian naturalistic answer would be that everything originates from the Dao or Heaven, and we cannot further ask why the Dao exists in the first place, because it is considered primordial and self-existing like God in Christian theology, except that Asian naturalism did not have the notion of necessary being or develop the ontological proof for the existence of the Dao!

BUDDHISM AND NATURALISM

One may argue that Buddhism, another important strand of the East Asian religio-philosophical tradition, does not share the naturalistic view of the world outlined above. It may appear that Buddhism, with its doctrine of karmic retribution and “world-denying” attitude, is basically incompatible with the calm and yet cheerful naturalistic affirmation of the world and human life. On closer examination, however, it turns out that Buddhist thought never seriously challenged or went out of the boundary of the naturalistic outlook we have outlined above. On the contrary, Buddhism, at least in its Sinicized Mahāyāna form, has essentially moved within the naturalistic framework broadly considered. Three points of their basic consonance should be pointed out here.

To be noted first is the fact that the Mahāyāna Buddhist vision of the world is not predicated upon a dualistic view of reality such as we find in the Theravāda concept of *nirvāṇa* as opposed to *saṃsāra*. In the Mahāyāna vision, *nirvāṇa* does not form a separate order of reality apart *saṃsāra*, the world of birth-and-death, and liberation is to be sought in the very midst of the ordinary world. The Mahāyāna ontology recognizes only one world, as naturalism does, not two separate realms of reality. Depending on how we view it—through wisdom or ignorance—the world appears either as it is in its true empty nature (*tathatā*, Suchness) or in its delusory aspect. In other words, the world of birth-and-death, correctly viewed, is

none other than the world of liberation. Hence the famous Mahāyāna dictum that *saṃsāra* is none other than *nirvāṇa*, and *nirvāṇa* none other than *saṃsāra*. What this suggests is that East Asian Buddhism, like Confucianism and Daoism, is essentially a “world-affirming” religion seeking redemption *in* the material world, not *from* it as in Theravāda Buddhism or other schools of soul-oriented Indian philosophy. As is well known, Chan (Kor.: Seon; Jap.: Zen) Buddhism, commonly regarded as the flower of Chinese Buddhism formed under the influence of Daoist philosophy, best represents this “worldly” spirituality.

Secondly, East Asian Buddhism shares with Daoism and Confucianism the holistic and organismic “process” view of the world, according to which each and every entity in it is intrinsically related to others. The Buddhist theory behind this view is the famous doctrine of dependent-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), according to which things in the world are without exception dependent upon each other, and nothing can exist as an independent substance with its own distinct and fixed nature (*svabhāva*). The native Chinese naturalistic vision of the world and the Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy share a dynamic view of reality which sees the world as ceaselessly changing—a flow of cosmic energy where things do not constitute separate individual entities but are in constant transformation in mutual dependence. True, Buddhism does not talk about such cosmic energy, but it is equally naturalistic in that it does not seek any other reality separate from the changing world itself. From the interdependent nature of things the Buddhist wisdom derived its core insight into the nature of reality: Emptiness (*śūnyatā*; Kor.: *gong*) as the true nature of things lacking fixed natures corresponding to their names and concepts. Once we realize that things lack their own being and nature, we can affirm and enjoy the myriad things of the world as they are in their rich diversity. Emptiness is not a desolate world devoid of forms but an exuberant display of multifarious forms and characteristics. Once desubstantialized by our insight into their Emptiness, they reappear as subtle beings (*myoyu*) in a plethora of forms and names. This is the philosophical background for East Asian arts such as landscape painting and poetry inspired by the Daoist and Zen naturalistic spirit.

Thirdly, closely related to the above, the Mahāyāna Buddhist theory of causality, which does not recognize the existence of individual entities separate from other entities, is basically consonant with the Chinese indigenous organic naturalism in that both represent a holistic and non-atomistic understanding of reality, according to which things are not grasped merely in their linear causal relationships but viewed as interrelated from the beginning in such a way that they respond and resonate with each other in systemic patterns forming organic unity. The Huayan vision of reality which sees “one in all, and all in one” is typical of this holistic understanding of the world.

Lastly and most importantly, all three philosophical traditions—Daoist, Confucian, and the Buddhist—converge in pointing out the inherent limitations of human language and discriminative thought in revealing the nature of the ultimate reality, whether it is called the Dao, Heaven or Emptiness. Thoroughly and universally

immanent in the world, humans can never depart from it even for a moment. Yet our intellect and discursive thought are considered unable to grasp its subtlety and depth. Accordingly, the highest goal of life for Asian naturalism has been to realize and embody a perfect unity with the ultimate reality in one's own being and life through a direct intuitive access to it without conceptual mediation. In other words, all three traditions espouse mystical approach to the ultimate reality as the last resort, which they regard as lying beyond our linguistic construction.

In view of these basic agreements between Mahāyāna Buddhist view of the world and the naturalistic philosophy of Daoism and Confucianism, it is not without reason that in East Asian cultures, people have had no qualms about following all three religions at the same time—an unintelligible anomaly for the Western mind. Some thinkers even went as far as asserting their essential unity.

HAEWOL'S ETHICS OF THREEFOLD REVERENCE

I have thus far broadly outlined what I believe to be the fundamental spirit of East Asian organic naturalism, a holistic vision of the world which cannot be understood in terms of the dichotomy of naturalism and supernaturalism, theism and atheism, in the Western tradition. It has its own spirituality which is not predicated upon the antagonism of spirit and matter, so characteristic of Western and Indian spirituality, and its own form of redemption which does not seek the liberation from the world but a perfect unity with the Dao and Heaven as manifested in the way of nature. As mentioned before, this naturalism is pan-Asian. Accordingly I did not dwell on the differences found among East Asian philosophical schools and traditions; nor was it my intention to highlight the peculiar characteristics of Korean philosophical thought in particular. Let me, however, conclude this paper with a brief discussion of the case of *Cheondogyo*, literally the "Way of Heaven," a native Korean religion that arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as a typical and yet highly creative exemplification of the spirit of Asian naturalism still well and alive today.

As indicated by its name consisting of two Chinese words, "Heaven" (*Cheon*) and "Dao" (*Do*), its fundamental spirit is naturalistic through and through, yet its practice very revolutionary. Of particular interest to us is its idea of threefold reverence (*samgyeong*) formulated by Haewol (Choe Si-hyeong, 1827–1898), the second patriarch of the *Donghak* (Eastern Learning), the original name of *Cheondogyo*. Threefold reverence represents reverence for Heaven, reverence for human beings, and reverence for all things, animate as well as inanimate.

In view of our discussion of the fundamental spirit of Asian naturalism thus far, Haewol's teaching of threefold reverence should not need much explanation. The idea of revering Heaven was a commonplace in Haewol's times, as it still is today. More significant was his emphasis on revering human beings and its inseparability from revering Heaven, as epitomized by his teaching of "serving humans like Heaven" (*sain yeocheon*), one of the cardinal teachings of *Cheondogyo*. The idea of serving all human beings like Heaven, regardless of their gender, class, and age,

was truly revolutionary in the heavily class-oriented Korean society of Haeweol's times, as was demonstrated by the massive peasant uprising of 1884 that occurred under the influence of Eastern Learning. Yet even more striking and revolutionary from today's perspective was Haeweol's idea of universal reverence toward all things, animate and inanimate. Let me elaborate on this.

Haeweol declared, "we cannot reach the ultimate of the Way and its virtue by merely revering human beings."⁷ This may well be, as far as I am aware, the first open declaration in human history of the need for our moral obligation to go beyond anthropocentric boundary. It is premised upon the holistic view that Heaven, as the source of the primordial vital energy of the universe, constitutes the cosmic womb from which all beings, including inanimate things, originate. Hence his remark that I and others, as well as I and all things, are of the same womb, that is, of one family.

The world as envisaged by Haeweol is filled with "one chaotic and primordial vital energy" of Heaven.⁸ It is a vast organic community of beings sharing the same energy originating from Heaven. "Each and every thing is Heaven, and each and every affair Heaven," says Haeweol.⁹ It is this "pantheistic" vision that underlies his teaching of universal reverence toward all things, even toward inanimate beings. Permeated by the same primordial energy of Heaven, everything that exists in this vast organismic world is considered sacred and nothing insignificant. Haeweol would have readily endorsed our contemporary idea of the "intrinsic value" of all living beings, but he would have extended it further to embrace even inanimate beings. He would have undoubtedly sided with Albert Schweitzer's ethics of reverence (*Ehrfurcht*) toward all living beings, but he would have pushed it further to include inorganic beings as well. For all things, animate and inanimate are "alive" in his eyes because they all partake of the sacred energy emanating from Heaven.

Haeweol's universal reverence is directed above all to the earth. There is an interesting episode about this. Once he happened to hear a child passing by him fast on his wooden clogs. Frightened at the sharp sound of them striking the ground, he jumped to his feet. Stroking his chest, the story goes, he uttered: "At the sound of this child's wooden clogs, I felt pain in my chest."¹⁰ He then told people to cherish the earth like the skin of their mother. In a similar vein, he taught people not to throw water wildly on the ground, or to spit or blow their noses on it. This reminds us of the well-known story of a native American tribal chief who refused to sell his land to a white man, saying that we cannot buy or sell our mother's skin. The earth was for Haeweol literally "Mother Earth," to be treated with care and caution. Never perceived merely as the resource for human life, not to mention a great mass of inert matter, the earth was for Haeweol an organic body full of vital energy ceaselessly producing the myriad forms of life, all sacred.

Haeweol literally regarded grains as the milk from the earth. Not surprisingly, he taught people not merely to be grateful to earth, but to revere heaven and earth as their parents. The simple ritual of *sikko*, "announcing eating" to heaven and earth, which he enjoined his disciples to practice before eating, was a ritual expression

of this feeling of gratitude and reverence toward heaven and earth as our living parents.¹¹ If you know the principle of *sikko*, says Haeweol,¹² a perfect knowledge of the Way (*dotong*) is there. Eating was a sacramental act for Haewol.

This was so not just for human act of eating alone. For Haeweol, the whole world of living beings formed a vast sacramental community of “Heaven eating Heaven” (*icheon sikchoen*)—his version of our idea of the food chain or the web of life in which organic beings live on other organic beings. Since all beings are manifestations of Heaven’s vital energy and live by eating other beings, “Heaven eating Heaven” was literally true for Haeweol. He observes that beings of the same species live by solidarity and mutual support, whereas beings of different species live by eating other species. Human prejudice, Haeweol points out, may tell us that the idea of Heaven eating Heavens is not rational; we may think that everything exists for humans! From Heaven’s universal perspective, however, Heaven eating Heaven is the way Heaven nourishes all beings without discrimination, says Haeweol.¹³ Nature is for him a truly cosmic community of universal love, a community of mutual giving of life. To quote Gary Snyder: “To acknowledge that each of us at the table will eventually be part of the meal is not just being ‘realistic.’ It is allowing the sacred to enter and accepting the sacramental aspect of our shaky temporary personal being.”¹⁴

Haeweol lived in an age when the environmental crisis was not a major threat to our way of life, and it may be anachronistic to talk about his “environmental ethics.” If he were living today, however, and joined our conversations on environmental ethics, he would warn us that our environmental problem is not just an ethical issue. His idea of universal reverence goes far beyond moral approach to environmental problems. He would argue that without a profound sense of reverence toward all beings in nature, overcoming our deep-rooted anthropocentrism is not possible. Unless humans learn to be humble enough to revere even insignificant objects in nature as sacred manifestations of Heaven’s primordial energy, Haeweol would say that ethical approaches to our environmental crisis will meet with only a limited success, if any. If what deep ecologists are saying is correct, the colossal disaster we are heading for can no longer be adequately dealt with on technological and resource-managerial level. It calls for our radical change of heart, along with an equally radical change in our way of life. Recovering the primal sense of nature’s sacred depth and “re-enchanting” the world would constitute the essential precondition for this, and a serious engagement with the age-old Asian naturalistic vision would be an important step toward it.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS: TOWARD A NEW METAPHYSICS OF ASIAN NATURALISM

One of the main causes of the spiritual plight of modern men and women stems from their failure to find human meaning in a radically despirited world. How to reclaim the right—virtually relinquished by modern philosophy—to interpret the world, and that in such a way as to find spiritual meaning in nature, constitutes in

my mind the central challenge for the world philosophical community today. The whole Romantic enterprise which arose to heal the rupture between subject and object in the Enlightenment thought was a heroic attempt to do that. In Carlyle's word, it represented a "naturalistic supernaturalism" which sought to naturalize the supernatural and humanize the divine.¹⁵ Yet the Romantic movement, as well as other reactions against modern industrial-technological civilization, have all been powerless to stem the tide of history. Nevertheless, we cannot give up such attempts without making philosophy virtually inconsequential today. We have to keep asking whether or not there still is a way nature can "speak" to us. Can nature be "human" again and send spiritual message to us? Conversely, can humans be "natural" again and humbly dwell in the world of "earth, sky, gods, and mortals," as Heidegger's Fourfold would have it?

Nothing is further from my intention than to propose Asian naturalism, or Haeweol's ethics of universal reverence for that matter, as a panacea for today's spiritual plight and civilizational crisis. Nor do I mean to ignore a host of serious philosophical issues confronting naturalism, Eastern or Western. To name a few: how does one secure universal human dignity and rights if humans are thoroughly "natural" and immanent in nature? How can we ground human free will and moral responsibility upon the naturalistic ontology? Can evolutionary theory of moral values, for instance, provide a satisfactory answer to these questions? And, closely related to them, how can we resolve the mind-body problem without the unhappy consequences entailed by various forms of naturalistic reductionism and determinism?

While it would undoubtedly be too facile a view to assume that Asian organic naturalism is exempt from these problems altogether, it is on the other hand worth pondering why Asian naturalism did not engender such problems in the first place. According to Asian naturalism, there is a fundamental continuity of being between the human mind and the material world—a primordial unity of man and nature in the depth of their being. For they are equally manifestations of the Dao or Heaven. The holistic vision of Asian naturalism could never conceive the human being as disembodied spirit or self; the dichotomy of subject and object, with the dualistic split of spirit and matter, was essentially foreign to it. From Asian naturalistic perspective, the epistemological turn of the modern Western philosophy has to be regarded as highly unnatural and unfortunate. Good or ill, Asian naturalism did not produce a thinker like Descartes, who led Western thought into the philosophy of overblown subjectivity (*res cogitans*) on the one hand, and paved the way to the purely materialistic and mechanistic understanding of the world (*res extensa*), on the other hand.

Let us not forget the fact that Asian naturalistic philosophies have fared remarkably well for more than two millennia without being trapped by the unfortunate choice between mechanical materialism and theological spiritualism, or between spiritually sterile naturalism and irrational supernaturalism, which has played such an important role in shaping the Western intellectual tradition and bringing about today's global crisis, spiritual and environmental.

Disenchanted with the Christian supernaturalism, many in the West have already “turned East,” especially to Zen and Daoism, in their spiritual quest; and many Christian theologians are grappling with their own understanding of the Christian message in the face of the challenge from Eastern religions. The combined practice of Western medicine and the *qi*-oriented Chinese medicine is becoming a more commonplace and accepted as desirable—at least in Asian countries—apart from the popularity of acupuncture in the West, although the full integration of the two medical traditions at the theoretical level still has a long way to go.

Most significantly, the post-Cartesian and post-Newtonian science already transcended the atomistic, mechanistic, and deterministic understanding of the world that has long dominated the modern way of thinking. Relativity theory, quantum theory, chaos theory, Gaia theory, systems theory, and more recently, ecology as a new field of scientific concern are transforming our understanding of the material world in the direction of a relational and holistic view of reality, stimulating a new interest in Asian organismic view of the world. Many in the world’s scientific community have turned their attention to what they consider as significant agreement in the ontological vision between traditional Asian philosophies and the post-Newtonian science. What Clarke observes on Daoism seems to be valid for Asian naturalism in general: “Daoism, with its dynamic conception of nature as movement, flow and change, its emphasis on energy (*qi*) rather than substance, its grasp of the web of interconnections that bind together all phenomena both human and cosmic, and its rejection of rigid laws and absolute boundaries, is especially close in spirit to modern physics, in spite of differences in empirical detail, methodology and overall aims.”¹⁶

Isn’t it time now for philosophical communities to take Asia’s age-old holistic vision more seriously at philosophical level rather than leaving it to the hands of Sinologists or the historians of Asian philosophy, and to reexamine the fundamental presuppositions with which they have been working? More positively and ambitiously, if Asian naturalism is going to remain more than a source of poetic inspiration or mystical insights, it cannot neglect the effort to develop itself through continuous theoretical elaboration and cogent argument, in active dialogue not only with other philosophical thoughts as well as modern science. In other words, a new “metaphysics of Asian naturalism” is called for—new beyond the modern Cartesian split and the self-destructive postmodernist philosophy. It is noteworthy that already some works have already been done to construct a systematic and general view of the world and the human life from the perspective of Asian naturalism, especially the Daoist. Although not a systematic metaphysical work, Fritjof Capra’s *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* is pioneering in this direction.

On the other hand, quite different from this constructive effort for a new metaphysics of Asian naturalism, many comparative studies have been made focusing on the anti-rationalistic spirit of Asian naturalism, especially the Daoist and Buddhist, and its similarity to Heidegger’s “mystical” thought and Derrida’s

philosophy of deconstruction. Here the central question is whether or not it is still legitimate and possible to pursue a metaphysics of Asian naturalism in this age of the “end of philosophy.” If a metaphysics of Asian naturalism is desirable, how can we do it in this age of metaphysical skepticism?—the skepticism which derives not only from the cognitive retreat of modern philosophy before science, but more radically from the loss of faith in the ability of human reason and language to grasp reality.

At the heart of the matter stands the problem of language in general as a philosophical problem, not just the metaphysical language alone. A new metaphysics of Asian naturalism can no longer simply disregard recent postmodernist assault on language and continue its business as usual. For skepticism concerning the representational value of language is raised not only by postmodernist philosophers, but also by the classical Daoist and Buddhist philosophers themselves. I have myself underscored the ineffable nature of the ultimate reality in Asian naturalism, its anti-rationalistic and mystical dimension, often exaggerated as it is. Thus the question: “What must be the nature of philosophical discourse that wants to announce the inability of thought and language to re-present reality?”¹⁷ Or, the question Caputo raised regarding Heidegger’s thought may as well be valid for Asian naturalist thought: “What interest can philosophy have in a thinker who thinks at the end of philosophy, who has moved beyond the sphere of influence of philosophical principles into the neighborhood of mystics and poets?”¹⁸

While I cannot go into a detailed examination of this important issue here, one thing though remains certain in my understanding of Asian naturalism: whatever affinities one may find between the Daoist and Buddhist approaches to reality and Heidegger’s “mystical” thought or Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction,¹⁹ the negative view of language and philosophical discourse in Asian naturalism always presupposed and claimed—not just postulated—a direct intuitive knowledge of the metaphysical absolute, a privileged access to the ultimate reality through “a transformed mode of experiencing the world.”²⁰ To live and act in perfect accord with this intuitive knowledge is considered the highest form of spirituality in Asian naturalism. This is why Asian naturalism always understood all philosophical discourses as essentially heuristic, or as “skilful means” (*upāya*) in Buddhist terminology.

Whatever noble motivations or profound insights a philosophy may have, it cannot simply remain satisfied with negative discourses alone, nor can it afford to indulge in an endless play of signifiers without the signified. With due regard for and full awareness of the fundamental limitations of conceptual knowledge in grasping reality, a new metaphysics of Asian naturalism nonetheless has to find some way to secure the legitimate place for metaphysical discourse. One way to do this is to take recourse to the well-known theory of two levels of truth in Mahāyāna philosophy of Emptiness and the Indian Advaita Vedānta philosophy: the higher level of truth or the supreme truth, and the lower level of truth or the conventional truth.²¹ According to this theory, all philosophical discourses, including the Buddhist and the Advaita Vedānta, belong to the level of conventional truth. They

are to be taken merely as pointers to, rather than signifiers of, the ultimate truth, which is considered essentially ineffable. As far as the highest truth is concerned, all languages—philosophical or ordinary, representational or metaphorical, apophatic or kataphatic, subversive or constructive—are viewed as heuristic in Asian naturalism. It is in this spirit that the metaphysical discourse of Asian naturalism is to be undertaken in the future, as it was in the past. For, as Nāgārjuna reminds us, there is simply no way for us to arrive at the supreme truth without recourse to conventional truth. We should not overlook the fact that the Asian naturalist philosophers of the past did not abstain from rational argument at all, although its ultimate purpose was to disclose the reality beyond language.

A new metaphysics of Asian naturalism should not regard it as self-defeating or betraying its own spirit to make the effort to corroborate its vision of the world through rational argument and theoretical elaboration. Granted that philosophy can neither replace the living experience of the ultimate truth nor claim to do so, it still cannot relinquish what has been its prerogative from of old, namely the reflective activity a step removed from the stream of life, in order to construct a model understanding of the world in all its dimensions. In this age of global reign of instrumental reason, this constructive task is more urgently called for in Asian naturalism particularly.

If the present global crisis should in essence be attributed to human alienation from the world of nature, it is incumbent upon today's philosophers to formulate a new vision of the world which, boldly transcending the outdated dichotomy—still shackling our mind nonetheless—of matter and spirit, body and mind, fact and value, and science and spirituality, and overcoming the metaphysical timidity prevalent in the contemporary philosophical world, can lead to the “humanization” (or spiritualization) of nature and the “naturalization” of humans (or spirituality). For this, I believe, the holistic vision of Asian naturalism provides an important source of insight and inspiration.

Let me conclude with a reminder once again that naturalism has been more than a philosophical vision in Asia. It has been, and still is, a way of life for ordinary people today, seriously challenged and eclipsed as it has been by the onslaught of various other ways of thinking and forms of life in modern times. It is up to philosophers to capitalize on this in whatever way they can, before it is too late.

NOTES

1. In this paper I will be using this term in a more general sense than Needham does in his work; Needham seems to have particularly Leibnizian and Whiteheadian organicism in mind. I use the word “organicistic” to refer to the relational and holistic understanding of the world instead of viewing it as consisting of separate individual entities causally related in linear fashion.
2. See Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

3. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 302.
4. Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 81
5. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 37.
6. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 257.
7. *Cheondogyo Gyeongjeon* (Seoul: Cheondogyo Jungangchongbu Chulpanbu, 1992), p. 358.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 305.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 364.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 305–306
11. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 364–365.
14. Quoted from David Landis Barnhill, “Great Earth *Saṅgha*: Gary Snyder’s View of Nature as Community,” in *Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. M. E. Tucker and D. R. Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 1997), p. 189.
15. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1971), p. 68.
16. J. J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 75.
17. David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), p. 255.
18. John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), p. 258.
19. See Clarke’s summary review of this issue with regard to the Daoist Philosophy, *The Tao of the West*, pp. 166–193; regarding the Buddhist philosophy of Emptiness and Derrida, see Loy’s critical discussion in his *Nonduality*, pp. 248–260.
20. Loy, *Nonduality*, p. 249. I agree with Loy that this is a decisive difference between the Buddhist philosophy of Emptiness and Derrida. The same observation can be made with regard to the Daoist philosophy.
21. I took this insight from Loy’s *Nonduality*, pp. 248–260.