

Routledge Explorations in Environmental Studies

**DAOISM AND
ENVIRONMENTAL
PHILOSOPHY**
NOURISHING LIFE

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Book Description

Daoism and Environmental Philosophy explores ethics and the philosophy of nature in the Daodejing, the Zhuangzi, and related texts to elucidate their potential significance in our contemporary environmental crisis.

This book traces early Daoist depictions of practices of embodied emptying and forgetting and communicative strategies of undoing the fixations of words, things, and the bodily self. These are aspects of an ethics of embracing plainness and simplicity, nourishing the asymmetrically differentiated yet shared elemental body of life of the myriad things, and being responsively attuned in encountering and responding to things. These critical and transformative dimensions of early Daoism provide exemplary models and insights for cultivating a more expansive ecological ethos, environmental culture of nature, and political ecology.

This work will be of interest to students and scholars interested in philosophy, environmental ethics and philosophy, religious studies, and intellectual history.

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Biography

Eric S. Nelson is Professor of Humanities at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He works on Chinese, German, and Jewish philosophy. He is the author of *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (SUNY Press, 2020) and *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought* (Bloomsbury, 2017). He has published over seventy-five articles and book chapters and is the editor of *Interpreting Dilthey: Critical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). He co-edited with François Raffoul the *Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger* (Bloomsbury, expanded paperback edition 2016) and *Rethinking Facticity* (SUNY Press, 2008); with John Drabinski, *Between Levinas and Heidegger* (SUNY Press, 2014); with Giuseppe D'Anna and Helmut Johach, *Anthropologie und Geschichte: Studien zu Wilhelm Dilthey aus Anlass seines 100. Todestages* (Königshausen & Neumann, 2013); and with Antje Kapust and Kent Still, *Addressing Levinas* (Northwestern University Press, 2005).

1 Introduction: early Daoist ethics and the philosophy of nature

Abstract

This initial chapter outlines the point of departure, contexts, and questions of the subsequent chapters of this work, offering a preliminary sketch of the idea and varieties of Daoism and relativizing the overly static distinction between philosophical and religious Daoism. It proposes elucidating the varieties of early Daoist discourses in a philosophical way to reimagine a Daoist-inflected environmental philosophy and political ecology of nourishing life, attunement and responsive action, and emptiness on the basis of early Daoist sources in relation to our present interpretive and social-political situation and in response to contemporary ecological crisis-tendencies.

2 Nourishing life, cultivating nature, and environmental philosophy

Abstract

Life and nature transpire just as they are of their own accord. This raises questions of what sorts of relations humans should have with this happening: how should one regard the functioning of the life that one is? The second chapter outlines examples, models, and strategies of nurturing life and cultivating nature in the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and related sources to examine their potential significance for responding to contemporary environmental crises and developing an ecologically-oriented *ethos* and culture of nature.

3 Wuwei, responsive attunement, and generative nature

Abstract

The present chapter provides an overview of early conceptions of *wuwei*, focusing in particular on Daoist interpretations expressed in the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* and their potential significance as an ecological *ethos* and model for *praxis*. The “non-action” of *wuwei* is reimaged in this context as a cultivated responsive attunement in the midst of things and the generative transpiring of nature in contrast to neutral indifference, action-minimalism, or pure spontaneity.

4 Emptying ecology: nothingness, language, and encountering things

Abstract

Previous chapters elucidated nurturing life, cooperating with natural tendencies, and recognizing the intrinsic value of things in their own singular moment of life. They also began to articulate the uses of the “not” in *wu-* expressions, strategies of emptying and

unfixing entangling fixations, and indicative concepts such as emptiness, nothingness, and uselessness that play crucial roles in early Daoist discourses. The current chapter clarifies these apparently negative expressions and strategies in relation to how they release things and their contemporary ecological significance.

5 Early Daoist biopolitics and a new Daoist political ecology

Abstract

This chapter investigates a number of early Daoist and related models of biopolitics and their potential for a contemporary critical political ecology and anarchic and democratic forms of ecopolitics. While there are interpretations that support authoritarianism and the laissez faire-like organization of society consisting of individual pursuits, I consider the extent to which other anarchic, democratic, and progressive ecopolitical examples and models are suggested in early Daoist portrayals of anti-politics, nurturing and responsively attuned sage-kings, and simplified self-organizing communities.

6 Epilogue: emptying ecology and Chan Buddhism

Abstract

Chan/Zen Buddhist lineages share a number of historical connections and philosophical and stylistic affinities with early and medieval Daoism. The Chan conception of emptiness expresses a practice of emptying that has significant implications for an imperfectionist ethics without fixated norms and principles and suggestive for an environmental ethics that calls for the dereification and liberation of things. Given the risks of an ethically questionable reification and essentialism of words and practices, in which one no longer hears or responds ethically to others, Chan Buddhism can contest fixation and domination. In affinity with Daoist strategies, it indicates ways of placing such structures and its own self-reification into question. The apparent ethical skepticism, iconoclasm, and antinomianism of Daoist and Chan Buddhist discourses can be a point of departure for ethics and ecology if such expressions do not only skeptically destabilize conventional morality but performatively enact a *dao* of responsiveness through exposing oneself and things to their own emptiness.