



# ZHUANGZI'S ECOCENTRISM

In which way could the philosophy of Zhuangzi contribute to the right concept of a moral attitude towards nature?"

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## 1. Introduction

The world of today is facing human-caused environmental changes.<sup>1</sup> The effects of environmental changes include: "Species extinction (...) levels of soil nitrogen, phosphorus, calcium and pH, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, herbivores, pathogens, and predator densities, disturbance regimes, and climate change."<sup>2</sup> The effects are appearing on regional, continental and global scales. These effects fundamentally change the ecosystem. And a fundamental change in the ecosystem is not only a threat for the environment, but also for human well-being while they depend on the ecosystem for survival.<sup>3</sup>

In analysing these environmental changes, the conceptual attitude of humans towards nature is in the centre, because this attitude does or does not provide the right for changing the environment for the utility of humans.<sup>4</sup> Often the meta-concepts of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are used in discussions concerning the attitude of humans towards nature. Anthropocentrism separates humans and nature and evaluates humans as the most significant, while ecocentrism argues that humans and nature are both part of the ecosystem.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that the attitude of anthropocentrism provides the right for the environmental changes. In order to carry out the right moral judgement towards nature in the context of environmental change, humans should hold an attitude of ecocentrism towards nature. Ecocentrism does not provide the right for environmental change while this attitude towards nature evaluates humans and nature as equal.<sup>6</sup> Nature has intrinsic value and is therefore not to be used for the utility of humans.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi is an inspiration for ecocentrism. His attitude towards nature is that humans and nature are not separated, but that humans and nature should live in harmony.<sup>7</sup> However, the classifications of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are modern constructions and did not exist during Zhuangzi's time. Nevertheless, I will argue that Zhuangzi's ancient philosophy can be classified as a form of ecocentrism.

The ecocentric attitude towards nature should also be recognized worldwide because environmental changes are taking place on a global scale. A global ecological system can only be evaluated with a global common ground. It is therefore important to create the foundation for this

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<sup>1</sup> Tilman, David, and Clarence Lehman. "Human-caused environmental change: Impacts on plant diversity and evolution." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 98.10 (2001): p. 5435.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 536

<sup>3</sup> Diaz, Sandra, et al. "Biodiversity loss threatens human well-being.." *PLOS Biology* 4.8 (2006): 179.

<sup>4</sup> Ip, Po-Keung. "Taoism and the foundations of environmental ethics." *Environmental Ethics* 5.4 (1983): p. 335.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdeau, Ph. "The man– nature relationship and environmental ethics." *Journal of environmental radioactivity* 72.1 (2004): p. 9-15., 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Ip, op. cit., p. 342

<sup>7</sup> Cheng, Chung-ying. "On the Environmental Ethics of the Tao and the Ch'i." *Environmental Ethics* 8.4 (1986): p. 369.

attitude worldwide. To search for common ground in different philosophies would make this possible.

<sup>8</sup> To study the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi as a western student is therefore important as a project from the broader prospective of a globally recognized attitude towards nature.

I use the Western concepts of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in order to be able to evaluate the contribution of the philosophy of Zhuangzi for the attitude of humans towards nature. First I describe and evaluate the concepts of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in Western context. While there is a need for another philosophy to balance the ecocentric movement in the West I secondly describe the philosophy of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi and interpret this as ecocentrism. I will argue that his philosophy of harmony can act as a balance for the modern ecocentric attitude towards nature. Finally, I evaluate the shared common ground of ecocentrism in the West and China as a starting point for a shared global common attitude towards nature.

I choose Zhuangzi because of his representative function in Chinese (and therefore Asian) philosophy. Together with Lao Tzu, Zhuangzi built the foundation of Taoist philosophy which is the most influential philosophy in ancient China together with Buddhism and Confucianism. Zhuangzi lived around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the same period as Aristotle in Greece. This period in China was marked by thoughts about the Tao. Tao is the natural path which derives from nature.<sup>9</sup> The philosophy of Zhuangzi is collected in his famous book 'Zhuangzi' which is known for its literary achievements. His fables are full of romantic expressions, realistic descriptions and original language.<sup>10</sup>

### **1.1 Outline**

In this thesis I will develop a right concept of a moral attitude towards nature. The research question is therefore: "In which way could the philosophy of Zhuangzi contribute to the right concept of a moral attitude towards nature?" The first sub-question is if the attitude towards nature could be self-evident. The answer is yes, because moral intuitions are self-evident if they are clear, reflected, consistent and open for consensus. Humans should live in harmony with nature, while we observe that they are a part of the ecosystem.

The second sub-question is if anthropocentrism matches this self-evident intuition about nature. The answer is no, because this attitude towards nature provides the right for overexploitation of nature which could lead to environmental changes and is therefore not reflected enough. There is in this way the need for an attitude towards nature that gives intrinsic value to nature, which gives right for overexploitation of the nature.

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdeau, op. cit. p, 13

<sup>9</sup> Hansen, Chad. "Zhuangzi." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Fall 2015 Edition. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*. Web 11 Jan. 2017

<sup>10</sup> Zhuangzi. "Zhuangzi." Changsha: Hunan People Press, 1999: p. 63

The third sub question is if the modern movement of ecocentrism (from for example Arne Naess) matches this self-evident intuition about the attitude towards nature. The answer is ambiguous, but Naess needs another philosophy in order to be consistent with his ideas. The modern movement of ecocentrism builds his philosophy with a romanticized view on nature which does not match reality.

The fourth sub-question is if Zhuangzi is able to fulfil the moral intuition about nature. The answer is yes, while it is able to complete the modern ecocentric movement. This is because the ancient philosophy of Zhuangzi derives from reality. The view that derives from reality should be an attitude of non-action in face of nature, while this provides nature with the right to follow its own creative autonomy.

The conclusion follows that the ecocentric philosophy of Zhuangzi is the right concept of a moral attitude towards nature. It matches the self-evident moral intuitions of a conceptual attitude towards nature. It does not evaluate humans as superior to their environment which provides a right to change the environment. But it gives intrinsic value to all members of the ecosystem which does not give humans the right for environmental changes. Therefore, this attitude towards nature is the right moral attitude. Zhuangzi's ecocentrism enriches the modern ecocentric movement with holding them back from romanticization of nature and therefore, ecological models. Moreover, while this right moral concept of an attitude towards nature is evaluating the global ecosystem, the Chinese philosophy of harmony with nature forms together with the Western modern ecocentrism movement a global shared common ground for this right concept of a moral attitude towards nature on global scale.

## 2. Moral intuitive attitude towards nature

In this chapter I will defend, on behalf of my intuition, that we should live in harmony with nature. In the first paragraph I start with moral intuitionism in general. Moral intuitions do not need argumentation and are self-evident when they are clear, reflected, coherent, consistent and open for consensus. In the second paragraph I argue that the intuitive attitude of harmony towards nature follows these requirements.

### 2.1 Moral intuitionism

The classical intuitionist opinion states that basic moral proposition is self-evident. Self-evidence means that there is no need for an argument. Argumentation is knowledge that is derived from sensation or understanding. The difference is that intuition has the object of self-evident proposition, while an argument derives from deductive argumentation. It is the same with the property of certain things, for example: objects that are coloured or straight. An intellectual intuition is close to this observed property of a subject. This observation does not derive from certain characteristics, but is an immediate experience which makes this observation true without an argumentation. Intuitions are similar to this experience, but this experience is a fact while an intuition is an immediate understanding.<sup>11</sup>

Through this immediate understanding, intuition creates self-evident truths, general and abstract ideas. To differentiate a self-evident proposition, the criteria of Henry Sidgwick are relevant.<sup>12</sup> To make sure that a proposition is self-evident, it has to contain certain requirements: “(1) it must be clear and distinct (2) be ascertained by careful reflection (3) be consistent with other self-evident truths and (4) attract general consensus”.<sup>13</sup> These criteria prevents from claiming every intuition is immediately a self-evident truth.

### 2.2 Self-evident attitude towards nature

The self-evidence of intuition can be applied in a moral attitude towards nature. In my intuition humans should live in harmony with nature. This is a clear intuition that I follow with a careful reflection. Harmony with nature follows logically the observation that humans are dependent of nature. Humans are part of the ecosystem which consists of humans, animals, plants and non-living materials. This ecosystem is a complex system that works together with all components and provides

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<sup>11</sup> Stratton-Lake, Philip. “Intuitionism in Ethic.” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Winter 2016 Edition. The Stanford Encyclopedia Online. Web. 22 Jan. 2017. <  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/intuitionism-ethics/>>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

in this way a place for every living and non-living. Every part of the ecosystem is therefore important, because every part works together in complex relations. Humans need the ecosystem for survival, because it provides humans everything they need. While humans are in the top of the ecosystem, they highly depend on the ecosystem's services from the other layers. Therefore, human's attitude towards nature is a living in harmony with the ecosystem through the observation that humans depend on the environment.

### ***2.3 Conclusion***

Moral intuitions form the foundation of the attitude towards nature. Intuitions are immediately created feelings which contain self-evident truth. This self-evident truth is discriminated by a feeling through clearness, reflection, coherence and consensus. My intuition about nature is that we should hold an attitude of harmony towards nature. This intuition is clear and reflected, and will be made coherent and will find consensus in this thesis. In the next section I will discuss if the concept of an anthropocentric attitude towards nature follows these requirements.

### 3. Anthropocentrism attitude towards nature

In this chapter I will deal with the anthropocentric attitude towards nature. First, humans are in the centre and nature exists for human use. This tendency provides the legitimacy for the overexploitation of nature which can lead to environmental change. Second, also the more enlightened version, thought more complex, does not provide an answer for the problems we are facing today. Therefore, we have to look for a different attitude towards nature that matches with our ethical intuitions about nature.

#### 3.1 Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is the view that nature has no intrinsic value on its own, but has instrumental value for human desires. Humans are seen as most significant and at the centre of the world. Nature is driven by mechanical laws and can be exploited for the utility of man. There is a clear separation between the human world and the nonhuman world. Nature is something external and not internal. There is a gap between object and subject.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the time this anthropocentrism is seen as a product of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment philosophers René Descartes and Immanuel Kant are defenders of the uniqueness of the human rationality over nature. Pang explains: “Kant’s uncompromising elevation of rational persons over irrational things sets the tone for justifying humanity’s subjugation of the nonhuman natural world as an inferior, value-free physical whole determined entirely by mechanical and scientific laws.”<sup>15</sup> And Philippe Bourdeau argues that: “Descartes, who considered animals as non-sentient mechanical beings, clearly proclaimed the duality of body and [the rational] soul”.<sup>16</sup> The nonhuman world is mechanical and humans are superior because of their ratio which justifies the separation between the human and nonhuman world.

Eric Sean Nelson claims in contrast that “the domination of nature under instrumental reason did not begin in modernity and with the enlightenment.”<sup>17</sup> In ancient China there already was visible ecological damage: “Observed degradation associated with the growth of mass agriculture, deforestation, the control of rivers, overgrazing, and so on, which can be appropriately described as ‘environmental issues’ are a point of departure”<sup>18</sup> for Zhuangzi’s philosophy. (I will deal with

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<sup>14</sup> Ip, op. cit., p. 341

<sup>15</sup> Pang-White, Ann A. "Nature, Interthing Intersubjectivity, and the Environment: A Comparative Analysis of Kant and Daoism." *Dao* 8.1 (2009): p. 62

<sup>16</sup> Bourdeau, op. cit., p. 11

<sup>17</sup> Nelson, Eric Sean. "Responding with Dao: Early Daoist ethics and the environment." *Philosophy East and West* 59.3 (2009): p. 295

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 296



Zhuangzi's philosophy in detail later.) Therefore, Zhuangzi provides an answer against this instrumental vision of nature.

To conclude, anthropocentrism is the view that there is something (for example rationality) that separates man from nature, which gives man the right to overexploit nature if that is for man's utility. This instrumental vision of nature could be seen as a product of Western Enlightenment, but human domination over nature is found in all cultures throughout human history. Nevertheless, the strict dualistic division of nature and humans is culturally strong connected with the West since Enlightenment.<sup>19</sup>

### ***3.2 The consequence of anthropocentrism***

I want to argue that the concept of anthropocentrism provides the right for environmental change. According to anthropocentrism, nature exists for humans to exploit and has no intrinsic value on its own. This instrumental value of nature provides the rational principle for domination and overexploitation which can lead to environmental change.

Cheng also argues for this, when he links this explicitly to the Enlightenment. "For modern Western man after Descartes, the nonhuman world is to be rationally studied, researched, and then scientifically manipulated and exploited for the maximum utility of serving man. This will to conquer and dominate nature is, of course, premised on the externality of nature to man."<sup>20</sup> The split between the human and non-human worlds provides the right for overexploitation which can cause environmental changes.

### ***3.3 Enlightened anthropocentrism***

The meta-concept of anthropocentrism provides the right for overexploitation which leads to environmental change. If this anthropocentric attitude towards nature provides the legitimately the for changing the environmental, then we should not hold this attitude towards nature. However, to provide an answer towards environmental issues there is also an 'enlightened' version of anthropocentrism. This version states that humans should protect the environment in order to sustain the life of future generations. It is for the benefit of humans that nature is protected and this protection only extends as far as it is useful for humans.<sup>21</sup>

I argue that this enlightened form of anthropocentrism is as concept not enlightened enough to evaluate this attitude as the right attitude towards nature. Around this view there are many difficult questions. "How many of these generations should be taken into account? Do they have moral

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<sup>19</sup> Guha, Ramachandra. "Radical Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Perspective." New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993: p. 549

<sup>20</sup> Cheng, op. cit., p. 353-354

<sup>21</sup> Bourdeau, op. cit., p. 12

standing even though they do not yet exist? Can someone represent their interests? Is there an implicit social contract between past, present and future generations?"<sup>22</sup>. Moral questions are always complicated, so I argue we ought to choose an option that does not further complicate the situation. This is in line with Occam's Razor. "Occam's Razor would suggest that a learning algorithm should choose its hypothesis among those that are consistent with the sample and have minimum complexity."<sup>23</sup> In order to be able to deal ethically with environmental changes the concept of enlightened anthropocentrism creates more questions than answers.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

The anthropocentric attitude towards nature is problematic. While humans are placed in the centre of attention, nature is there only for the utility of humans. This instrumental view on nature does not necessarily cause environmental problems, but provides a legitimisation for it. Also the enlightened anthropocentric attitude towards nature provides this legitimisation, but takes the interests of future human generations into account. This could provide a reason for sustainable attitude towards nature, however it is not clear how to interpret this concept exactly. Therefore, we need a philosophy which breaks the barrier between humans and nature and reconnects humans and the nonhuman world. "We need a philosophy which can attribute values to nonhuman objects independently of human needs. That is, nonhuman beings should be regarded as having intrinsic values of their own rather than having only extrinsic or instrumental values. Moreover, we also need a philosophy which can tell us that we are part of a universe whose parts mutually nourish, support, and fulfill each other."<sup>24</sup> To be in harmony with nature is the right moral attitude towards nature considered by moral intuitions. Anthropocentrism does not match this desire for harmony in the ecosystem and is therefore as concept not reflected enough. In the next section I will describe an ecocentric attitude towards nature, and answer if this matches the moral intuitive attitude towards nature which we are looking for.

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<sup>22</sup> Bourdeau, op. Cit., p. 12-13

<sup>23</sup> Blumer, Alselt, et al. "Occam's razor." *Information Processing Letters* 24.6 (1987): 378.

<sup>24</sup> Ip, op. cit., p. 342

#### 4. Modern ecocentric attitude towards nature

In this chapter I will deal with the ecocentric attitude towards nature. First, humans and nature are equal, and nature has its own intrinsic value. Arne Naess states that man and nature are not essentially different. Second, this modern attitude towards nature matches the intuitional attitude towards nature, but the view on nature is romanticized and therefore there is the need of a more balanced ecocentrism.

##### 4.1 Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism argues that not only all living beings, but also all non-living beings should be considered. The term ecocentrism refers to the idea that we should include the whole ecosystem and the whole nature into our moral system. "Nature is a kind of subject with teleology, creativity, intelligence and a capacity to value. Value is the inherent property of evolutionary nature. Instrumental value, intrinsic value and systemic value exist objectively in nature."<sup>25</sup> Intrinsic value of nature exists independent from human's utility and nature even more, nature has its own value in creativity and intelligence. In other words, nature is an end in itself and cannot be used instrumentally.<sup>26</sup>

Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher and an advocate of ecocentrism, states that "the value of non-human beings is independent of their utility to man. Biological diversity, for example, has an intrinsic value (...) and man has no right to reduce this richness except to satisfy his vital needs."<sup>27</sup> Naess holds that humans are a part of nature and the relationships with all the other parts of the environment make humans who they are. In essence there is no separation between nature and humans. Everything is matter and flows. This concept makes sure that humans do not change the environment, while ecocentrism does not provide them with the right to do so. Humans and nature are both part of the same whole and are therefore bound together, there is no division between humans and nature.<sup>28</sup>

##### 4.2 The assumption of modern ecocentrism

This ecocentric attitude towards nature, as described above, can provide a rigid and absolutist interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Modern ecocentrism, and the philosophy of Naess, are built on a romanticized observation of nature and not always on reality.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Yang, Tongjin. "Towards an egalitarian global environmental ethics." *Environmental ethics and international policy* 8 (2006): p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> Pang, op. cit., 76

<sup>27</sup> Bourdeau, op. cit., p. 13

<sup>28</sup> ibid., p. 13

<sup>29</sup> Pang, op. cit., p. 76

<sup>30</sup> Guha, op. cit., p. 559

"[the attitude towards] nature was not based on visionary deep ecology theory [ecocentrism], but was a result of pre-scientific observations (...) [which assert] that deep ecology's romanticized images of these societies tell more about the Western commentator and his desires."<sup>31</sup> This romanticization can lead to "inadvertent imposition of unsound environmental judgment on nature that is detrimental to both humans and nature"<sup>32</sup>. An example is the "oversimplified predator-prey distinction"<sup>33</sup> of the '50s: "only later through new evidence (...) newer ecological models see the existence of predators as a necessary part of a healthy ecological community and "this has resulted in a reversal of earlier environmental sentiment against predators""<sup>34</sup>. This shows that an attitude towards nature needs to rely on careful observations regarding nature. Romanticizing of the nature does not help the interpretation of nature further.

### ***4.3 Conclusion***

For ecocentrism humans and nonhumans have both intrinsic value. This equality derives from the fact that every being is part of the ecosystem and therefore humans should hold an attitude of harmony towards nature. Nature is autonomous and creative. The defender Arne Naess states that biological diversity has intrinsic value and is there not for the utility of man. The interpretation of nature in modern ecocentrism can end up rigid and absolutistic while it tends to romanticize nature as underlying assumption, a more balanced ecocentrism is therefore desirable. Ecocentrism matches the intuitive attitude towards nature, is clear, reflected, but not coherent enough yet. In the next section a different interpretation of ecocentrism will appear in form of the ancient philosophy of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi.

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<sup>31</sup> Kane, Virginia M. "Taoism and Contemporary Environmental Literature." (2001): p. 67

<sup>32</sup> Pang, op. cit., p. 76

<sup>33</sup> ibid., p. 76

<sup>34</sup> ibid, p. 76

## 5. Zhuangzi's ecocentric attitude towards nature

The ecocentrism of Zhuangzi is a balanced ecocentric attitude towards nature. Zhuangzi's philosophy can be interpreted as self-transformation which creates interpenetration, creative spontaneity and harmonization. I will discuss each of these concepts in turn. First, I will discuss self-transformation. Transformations are typical of the natural world. Next, I will discuss creative spontaneity. Humans should hold an attitude of non-action towards nature, because the creativity of nature has to flow spontaneously. Then, I will discuss interpenetration. Nature is one interconnected and interdependent whole. Finally, I will discuss harmonization. Interdependence, creativity and transformation find their roots in a relationship of harmony. Zhuangzi matches with this harmony approach the moral intuition and can be described as ecocentrism. The concept of non-action in face of nature completes the modern ecocentrism movement with coherence in the right moral attitude towards nature.

### 5.1 Self-Transformation

Zhuangzi describes reality as the Tao. The Tao is "a reality which has its substance (...) it has its own source and root (...) it begets the heaven and the earth (...) existing since time immemorial."<sup>35</sup> This means that the Tao exists in and of itself and has given birth to heaven, earth and everything in the world and it will continue forever.<sup>36</sup> The Tao sustains the world, it provides it with power.<sup>37</sup> This Tao is presented and sustained in a process of transformations. Transformations are not captured by simple linear cause and effect relationships, instead there are many levels and dimensions that are all simultaneously related to each other.<sup>38</sup> Humans and nature are impartial, because of the Tao. Therefore, beings are equal through the process of self- and mutual-transformations. Every being is unique through the process of transformation, but they are also related to each other through the process of transformation.<sup>39</sup> Transformation creates a changing natural world. There is a constant fluidity in the world, which it makes so that there is no fixed teleology. There is constant transformation.<sup>40</sup>

### 5.2 Creative Spontaneity

The Tao-reality is a creative process that creates life and nourishes it. Transformations of the Tao causes creativity. This process is not linear, but is an ongoing interaction with all the parts that it

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<sup>35</sup> Zhuangzi, op. cit., p. 89

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 48

<sup>37</sup> Ip, op. cit., p. 339

<sup>38</sup> Cheng, op. cit., p. 368

<sup>39</sup> Ip, op. cit., p. 339

<sup>40</sup> Nelson, op. cit., p. 298

involves. Non-action of the Tao is ultimately the reason for this creativity. Non-action means that there can be unlimited expression of processes and forms in life.<sup>41</sup> The Tao acts in accordance with its own nature. Humans are one with nature and non-action will follow automatically out of this unity.<sup>42</sup> This non-action means “a careful balance of action and non-action”<sup>43</sup>. A careful balance of action and non-action implies that: “Since our ecological models continue to evolve (...) [they require] a reverence for nature’s autonomy.”<sup>44</sup> The right attitude towards nature holds non-action in face of nature which is the right understanding of nature’s autonomy in order to interpret the nature in a correct way.

### ***5.3 Interpenetration***

The whole nature is interdependent, interacting and interpenetrating. Humans and their environment are always interacting. Because of the transformations there is no separation between the different parts that form the whole of nature. There is no distinction between things. In other words, all things are uniform. The process of creativity is therefore also only possible because of the interpenetration.<sup>45</sup>

This interpenetration shows from a philosophical perspective (which ecology does in science) that life is part of a complex ecosystem. “Every member of this intricately integrated complex is, in a very real sense, ecologically equal because each member depends on all others for survival, sustenance, and fulfillment.”<sup>46</sup> Humans and nature are equal because they depend on each other and form an interpenetrated whole.<sup>47</sup>

### ***5.4 Harmonization***

All elements of the ecosystem are in a relationship of harmony. All parts of nature are equal because of their interpenetration and because of their interdependence there should be inherent harmony. While the transformations take place on different levels, there has to be harmony within the different levels while they all interact with each other. In this way the creativity of the Tao can freely flow in harmony.<sup>48</sup>

### ***5.5 Conclusion***

Nature for Zhuangzi is “more than the visible, more than the tangible, more than the external, more than a matter of quantified period of time or a spread of space. It has a deep structure as well as a

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<sup>41</sup> Cheng, op. cit., p. 357

<sup>42</sup> Ip, op. cit., p. 340

<sup>43</sup> Pang, op. cit., p. 77

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 67

<sup>45</sup> Cheng, op. cit., p. 368

<sup>46</sup> Ip, op. cit., p. 343

<sup>47</sup> ibid, p. 342-343

<sup>48</sup> Cheng, op. cit., p. 369

deep process, as the concept of Tao indicates.”<sup>49</sup> The Tao is the depersonalized concept of nature.<sup>50</sup> This Tao is the source of life through constant transformations. These transformations create creativity, what makes that humans need to hold an attitude of non-action in the face of nature because nature is autonomous. Nature transforms and humans transform in a relationship of harmony. Therefore, humans and nature are equal partners and both partners need each other. This interpenetration does not lead to one undifferentiated whole. The whole is unique through a process of creativity in self-transformation.<sup>51</sup>

Zhuangzi’s attitude towards nature can be described as ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism gives special attention to humans, which is not the case in Zhuangzi’s philosophy. His philosophy explains that humans are a part of nature and are not separated. All the components of nature depend on each other and fulfill each other. Intrinsic value is given to every part of the ecosystem, living and nonliving.<sup>52</sup> Therefore humans should live in harmony with nature. This matches the moral intuitional attitude towards nature and in addition to modern ecocentrism this ecocentrism is more consistent. Zhuangzi’s attitude of non-action gives autonomy to nature and provides ecocentrism with a conceptual balance between action and non-action. Nature is creative and follows its own path, ecological models of humans do often not involve this careful balance. If nature is romanticized, people will interpret nature with incorrect observations which lead to premature ecological models of nature. Moral intuitions towards nature form the attitude towards nature, attention for nature’s creativity and autonomy is the basis for a right moral attitude towards nature. Zhuangzi enriched the concept of ecocentrism with the attitude of non-action in face of nature. In this way ecocentrism is clear, reflected and consistent.

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, p. 353

<sup>50</sup> *Ip*, *op. cit.*, p. 338

<sup>51</sup> Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 306-308

<sup>52</sup> *Ip*, *op. cit.*, p. 342

## 6. Conclusion

In this thesis I answered the question of what attitude towards nature is the right moral concept. I answered this question in four parts. First, I dealt with the self-evident moral conceptual attitude towards nature, which derives from my intuition about nature. Second, I explained that anthropocentrism does not match this moral intuition. Third, ecocentrism matches this moral intuition, but in observation the nature it misses consistence, because the attitude towards nature is romanticized. Fourth, Zhuangzi provides ecocentrism with a consistent attitude towards nature. In order to conclude I will first summarize the line argumentation and conclude with the possibility of global common ground consensus of the attitude towards nature.

First, moral intuitions form the foundation of the attitude towards nature. Intuitions immediately create feelings which contain self-evident truth. This self-evident truth is discriminated by a feeling through clearness, reflection, coherence and consensus. It is intuitively correct to hold an attitude of harmony in face of nature. This concept is clear, reflected, consistent and will find consensus.

Second, the concept of anthropocentrism is clear and distinct, but not “ascertained by careful reflection”, so it does not match the intuitive attitude towards nature. Anthropocentrism provides the right for overexploitation which can lead to environmental change. And the enlightened anthropocentrism generates more questions than answers. This creates the need for a different conceptual attitude towards nature that is more reflected.

Thirdly, modern ecocentrism does match this requirement of reflectiveness, but is not consistent enough. Ecocentrism as attitude towards nature does not evaluate humans as superior to nature, but gives nature and humans the same value as they are both part of the same ecosystem. However, the underlying assumption of nature is romanticized and can lead to rigid interpretations of the ecosystem. Modern ecocentrism matches the intuitive attitude of harmony towards nature, is clear, reflected, but not fully coherent. A more coherent ecocentrism is desirable.

Fourthly, the ancient ecocentrism of Zhuangzi is clear, reflected and moreover, coherent. Therefore, the philosophy of Zhuangzi is able to match the concept of an intuitive harmonious attitude towards nature. The concepts of self-transformation, creative spontaneity, interpenetration and harmonization in the philosophy of Zhuangzi explain his attitude towards nature. This attitude towards nature can be described as ecocentrism while humans are interdependent from nature and do therefore not receive special attention. While ecocentrism is a modern term, the idea behind it is clearly not new; Zhuangzi already had this idea when he gave intrinsic value to nature. This ancient ecocentric attitude towards nature is able to provide the modern movement a balanced consistent concept of nature while it agrees with the foundations of ecocentrism. Zhuangzi sees the nature as creative and autonomous, what he has in common with modern ecocentrism, but he draws this line of



argumentation further when he introduces the concept of non-action. Non-action in face of nature means that humans need to give nature autonomy and balance action and non-action. This conceptual attitude will help to evolve realistic ecology instead of building it on romanticized assumptions. Zhuangzi's philosophy makes ecocentrism as a concept more consistent. Ecocentrism matches the moral intuitive attitude towards nature, is clear, reflected, consistent and lastly, as conclusion, I will explore the possibility of general consensus with modern Western ecocentrism and the ancient Chinese philosophy of Zhuangzi.

### ***5.1 Global ecocentric consensus***

To conclude, the ecocentric attitude towards nature of Zhuangzi is able to "attract general consensus". The right moral concept of an attitude towards nature is global. The ecosystem is a global issue. Nature does not respect cultural borders. The world has to deal with this issue together. To have a shared concept of a moral attitude towards nature, "human beings must reach some value consensus and cooperate with each other at the personal, national, regional, multinational and global levels".<sup>53</sup> An attitude towards nature is, therefore, typically a shared moral judgement with a global perspective.

Humans all over the world have a different attitude towards nature. Culturally anthropocentrism is strongly rooted in Western society since the Enlightenment. Humans have the right to dominate nature according to this attitude. As argued before, this can lead to environmental changes, which is undesirable. Ecocentrism, however, is more embedded in non-Western traditions. The Taoist philosophy, used in this thesis, is an example for that. Also Buddhism, Native American religions and "marginalized values of modern civilization (such as romanticism [for example ecocentrism], organism and transcendentalism)"<sup>54</sup> pay more attention to nature.<sup>55</sup>

If we have concluded that ecocentrism is the right attitude towards nature, the world should share this attitude towards nature while the ecosystem is appearing globally. Therefore, we need to search for global consensus. The idea of an overlapping consensus as common ground is the idea of John Rawls in his realistic utopia of a pluralistic society. This states that "no particular religious, philosophical or moral doctrine can claim that only its moral values and norms are relevant and binding."<sup>56</sup> Georges Enderle reasons that this "also applies in ecological issues".<sup>57</sup> So we need to search for this overlapping consensus. One important remark is that this consensus should find

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<sup>53</sup> Yang, op. cit., p. 24

<sup>54</sup> Guha, op. cit., p. 549

<sup>55</sup> ibid, 549

<sup>56</sup> Enderle, Georges. "In search of a common ethical ground: Corporate environmental responsibility from the perspective of Christian environmental stewardship." *Journal of Business Ethics* 16.2 (1997): p. 174

<sup>57</sup> ibid., p. 174

maximum support because otherwise not all the players are involved and the concept does not function well while it needs to connect everyone together.<sup>58</sup>

The concept of ecocentrism is not only the right moral attitude towards nature, but is also able find this global consensus. The modern ecocentric movement is mainly taking place in the West, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess is an influential defender of ecocentrism. However, the ecocentrism movement could be enriched with the philosophy of Zhuangzi, they both share the same common ground. Nature and humans are both part of the same ecosystem and interdepend on each other. Nature has intrinsic value which is separated from human's utility. In this thesis I found therefore common ground in Western and Chinese philosophy. This shared consensus between the West and the East is the first important step, while it includes recognition of a big part of the world population, towards a global conceptual consensus in an attitude towards nature. Ecocentrism is in this consensus the right attitude towards nature as is argued. Therefore, ecocentrism matches the moral intuitive attitude towards nature, is clear, reflected, consistent and is able to generate consensus and is in this way the right moral attitude towards nature.

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 174

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## 8. Summary

In this thesis I answered the question of what attitude towards nature is the right moral concept. I answered this question in five parts.

First, moral intuitions form the foundation of the attitude towards nature. Intuitions immediately create feelings which contain self-evident truth. This self-evident truth is discriminated by a feeling through clearness, reflection, coherence and consensus. It is intuitively correct to hold an attitude of harmony in face of nature. This concept is clear, reflected, consistent and will find consensus.

Second, the concept of anthropocentrism is clear and distinct, but not “ascertained by careful reflection”, so it does not match the intuitive attitude towards nature. Anthropocentrism provides the right for overexploitation which can lead to environmental change. And the enlightened anthropocentrism generates more questions than answers. This creates the need for a different conceptual attitude towards nature that is more reflected.

Third, modern ecocentrism does match this requirement of reflectiveness, but is not consistent enough. Ecocentrism as attitude towards nature does not evaluate humans as superior to nature, but gives nature and humans the same value as they are both part of the same ecosystem. However, the underlying assumption of nature is romanticized and can lead to rigid interpretations of the ecosystem. Modern ecocentrism matches the intuitive attitude of harmony towards nature, is clear, reflected, but not fully coherent. A more coherent ecocentrism is desirable.

Fourth, the ancient ecocentrism of Zhuangzi is clear, reflected and moreover, coherent. Therefore, the philosophy of Zhuangzi is able to match the concept of an intuitive harmonious attitude towards nature. The concepts of self-transformation, creative spontaneity, interpenetration and harmonization in the philosophy of Zhuangzi explain his attitude towards nature. This attitude towards nature can be described as ecocentrism while humans are interdependent from nature and do therefore not receive special attention. While ecocentrism is a modern term, the idea behind it is clearly not new; Zhuangzi already had this idea when he gave intrinsic value to nature. This ancient ecocentric attitude towards nature is able to provide the modern movement a balanced consistent concept of nature while it agrees with the foundations of ecocentrism. Zhuangzi sees the nature as creative and autonomous, what he has in common with modern ecocentrism, but he draws this line of argumentation further when he introduces the concept of non-action. Non-action in face of nature means that humans need to give nature autonomy and balance action and non-action. This conceptual attitude will help to evolve realistic ecology instead of building it on romanticized assumptions. Zhuangzi's philosophy makes ecocentrism as a concept more consistent.

Fifth, the concept of ecocentrism is not only the right moral attitude towards nature, but is also able to find this global consensus. The modern ecocentric movement is mainly taking place in the West, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess is an influential defender of ecocentrism. However, the ecocentrism movement could be enriched with the philosophy of Zhuangzi, they both share the same common ground. Nature and humans are both part of the same ecosystem and interdepend on each other. Nature has intrinsic value which is separated from human's utility. In this thesis I found therefore common ground in Western and Chinese philosophy. This shared consensus between the West and the East is the first important step, while it includes recognition of a big part of the world population, towards a global conceptual consensus in an attitude towards nature. Ecocentrism is in this consensus the right attitude towards nature as is argued. Therefore, ecocentrism matches the moral intuitive attitude towards nature, is clear, reflected, consistent and is able to generate consensus and is in this way the right moral attitude towards nature.

To conclude, ecocentrism matches the moral intuitive attitude towards nature, is clear, reflected, consistent and is open for consensus with modern Western ecocentrism and the ancient Chinese philosophy of Zhuangzi.

## 9. Appendix: form of fraude (Dutch)

### VERKLARING KENNISNEMING REGELS M.B.T. PLAGIAAT

#### Fraude en plagiaat

Wetenschappelijke integriteit vormt de basis van het academisch bedrijf. De Universiteit Utrecht vat iedere vorm van wetenschappelijke misleiding daarom op als een zeer ernstig vergrijp. De Universiteit Utrecht verwacht dat elke student de normen en waarden inzake wetenschappelijke integriteit kent en in acht neemt.

De belangrijkste vormen van misleiding die deze integriteit aantasten zijn fraude en plagiaat. Plagiaat is het overnemen van andermans werk zonder behoorlijke verwijzing en is een vorm van fraude. Hieronder volgt nadere uitleg wat er onder fraude en plagiaat wordt verstaan en een aantal concrete voorbeelden daarvan. Let wel: dit is geen uitputtende lijst!

Bij constatering van fraude of plagiaat kan de examencommissie van de opleiding sancties opleggen. De sterkste sanctie die de examencommissie kan opleggen is het indienen van een verzoek aan het College van Bestuur om een student van de opleiding te laten verwijderen.

#### Plagiaat

Plagiaat is het overnemen van stukken, gedachten, redeneringen van anderen en deze laten doorgaan voor eigen werk. Je moet altijd nauwkeurig aangeven aan wie ideeën en inzichten zijn ontleend, en voortdurend bedacht zijn op het verschil tussen citeren, parafraseren en plagiëren. Niet alleen bij het gebruik van gedrukte bronnen, maar zeker ook bij het gebruik van informatie die van het internet wordt gehaald, dien je zorgvuldig te werk te gaan bij het vermelden van de informatiebronnen.

De volgende zaken worden in elk geval als plagiaat aangemerkt:

- het knippen en plakken van tekst van digitale bronnen zoals encyclopedieën of digitale tijdschriften zonder aanhalingstekens en verwijzing;
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- het overnemen van gedrukt materiaal zoals boeken, tijdschriften of encyclopedieën zonder aanhalingstekens en verwijzing;
- het opnemen van een vertaling van bovengenoemde teksten zonder aanhalingstekens en verwijzing;
- het parafraseren van bovengenoemde teksten zonder (deugdelijke) verwijzing: parafrasen moeten als zodanig gemarkeerd zijn (door de tekst uitdrukkelijk te verbinden met de oorspronkelijke auteur in tekst of noot), zodat niet de indruk wordt gewekt dat het gaat om eigen gedachtengoed van de student;
- het overnemen van beeld-, geluids- of testmateriaal van anderen zonder verwijzing en zodoende laten doorgaan voor eigen werk;
- het zonder bronvermelding opnieuw inleveren van eerder door de student gemaakt eigen werk en dit laten doorgaan voor in het kader van de cursus vervaardigd oorspronkelijk werk, tenzij dit in de cursus of door de docent uitdrukkelijk is toegestaan;
- het overnemen van werk van andere studenten en dit laten doorgaan voor eigen werk. Indien dit gebeurt met toestemming van de andere student is de laatste medeplichtig aan plagiaat;
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In de Onderwijs- en Examenregeling (artikel 5.15) is vastgelegd wat de formele gang van zaken is als er een vermoeden van fraude/plagiaat is, en welke sancties er opgelegd kunnen worden.

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Het niet indienen of ondertekenen van het formulier betekent overigens niet dat er geen sancties kunnen worden genomen als blijkt dat er sprake is van plagiaat in het werkstuk.