A Comparative Study of Taoist and Heideggerian Concepts of Nature From Perspectives of Technology and Deep Ecology

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With the theory of existentialism, hermeneutics and phenomenology, this paper carries out profound exploration in a comparative study of Heidegger and Taoist’s concept of nature and the significance of understanding it. It not only plays an important role in comparison and analogy of eastern culture and western culture in the aspect of civilization and cultural communication, but also helps to take advantage of their theories to support the environmental-friendly movement. Moreover, the text also investigates some controversy in this field and how to solve the problems as well as the meaning of solutions. Both of the theories are significant for deep ecology for their opposing modern technology’s generally reductionistic and materialistic view of nature.

Keywords: technology, deep ecology environmentalists, “wu-wei”, Sein, Tao

Introduction

This research aims to present a comparative study of the concepts of nature embraced by Heidegger and the Taoists from the perspectives of technology and deep ecology. Special emphasis will be placed on the technological factors in the comparative study of Taoist and Heideggerian concepts of nature, and on the solutions of some controversial issues in this field from examining the history of explanation or critical interpretation on concepts like Tao and Nature and the root cause of these interpretations. It’s based on the closely and intensive reading both philosopher’s texts and analysis on some extensive examples in the ecological criticism history.

To support the above thesis, special attention will be given to the following questions:

1) The exploration of the meaning when understanding the major concepts like Sein, Being, Etre and their accurate Chinese translation versions. The difficulties exist when translating and understanding Heidegger’s Sein and trying to carry out dialogue with Germany thinking.

2) How do Heidegger and the Taoists understand nature, being, and modern technology? How do their conceptions relate to the anthropocentric and instrumental tendencies in Western metaphysics?

3) Are the Heideggerian and Taoist approaches to preserving nature axiological or ontological? And why?

4) How do the Heideggerian and Taoist defense of the integrity of natural beings provide the basis for preventing nature from being exploited by modern technologies? And what are the significances of the Heideggerian and Taoist theories for ecocritics, especially in terms of Hong Kong’s green movement?

5) The possibilities of carrying out true philosophic dialogue and interaction with German philosophy and how to reach such a target.
Research Status

First, many environmentalists have examined Asian cultures, particularly Taoism, in search of fresh perspectives like modern technology for dealing with the current environmental problems. In one form or another, all mainstream environmentalists, deep ecologists and ecofeminists relate Taoist thought to their respective theories.

Second, Martin Heidegger’s works have ever been and will still be used successfully in ecological philosophies. Heidegger’s account has been particularly attractive to many deep ecologists, in part because his view of Western history as a history of decline from a great beginning corresponds in certain ways to the view that alienated, self-destructive Western mankind has lost its original sense of unity and harmony with nature due to the abuse of modern technology.

Research Methodology

The research will use the comparative dialogue approach as an anticipation of a global intellectual dialogue, synthesis, and amalgamation. It will be based on Taoist texts and Heidegger’s texts as possible sources of inspiration for supporters of deep ecology movement who have strong philosophical interests. A global ethic drawing on universal concepts versus Western philosophical dominance will be proposed, and concepts from other cultures in place of indigenous ideology and concepts will be borrowed.

The principle of criticism of phenomenology will be employed and Heidegger’s philosophic essence will be extracted with an aim to developing a better understanding of and the appreciation for nature’s processes. On the other hand, Taoism and contemporary ecological theories will be forwarded as they contain complete and elaborated explanations of ideas or processes that are new to western culture. Tao Te Ching’s holism and the concept of “wu-wei” (non-action) will be furnished to help understand the contemporary ecological paradigm’s interrelatedness that western thought cannot. The concept of wu-wei also helps convey a certain approach or perspective. Incorporating wu-wei into ecological perspectives will engender a compassionate relationship with nature. Meanwhile, there is positive value in Taoist imagery as a tool to grasp novel ecological insights, and an unmistakable challenge in the Taoist placement of humanity within the boundaries of nature.

Moreover, medio-translatology comparison methods for the modern Chinese translation versions and western translation versions of Tao and Nature will be adopted during the process of exhausting the possible meanings of these concepts. Accordingly, comparison between Chinese and western translation of Heidegger’s concept of Nature and Being will be also made for making clear the difference between Taoist Nature and Heideggerian Nature.

Literature Review

(1) Close relationship between Taoist and Heideggerian concepts of nature in the aspect of technology.

Dasein in Heidegger’s theory means in fact Human, so we may try to return to You (有) in Chinese tradition, which needs to be researched at a more profound angle. How to differentiate and analyze various misunderstandings on Sein, Being, or You (有). For example, through analysis on the representative of Feng Youlan’s analysis on Laotze’s You (有) in his New Chinese Philosophy History, we found Sein is the abstraction of You and the abstraction is just a restoration of You’s meaning. In Chinese, the Being (万物的存在) has never been really regarded as an independent thing and the thing itself hasn’t got really respected. However, the emphasis on Non-You (No Occupation) is just the most important characteristic of Taoist’s essence.
Heidegger and Laotze, the icon of Taoism, rather than speak of nature, speak of Sein and Tao which resist the Western metaphysical conceptualization of “nature” understood as creation or as the raw material of culture and technology.

Both Heidegger and Taoists tell us to return to something more original, such as heaven and earth or earth and sky (“in dwelling be close to the land”). Taoist thought depicts the course of nature as following an aesthetic order rather than a scientific one, which is similar to Heidegger’s anti-technological attitude.

Heidegger puts together nature, truth and human agency in an integral whole. Heidegger’s notion of humans “being-in-the-world” retains a sense of the idealist separation between nature and humanity, and places primary emphasis on the existential meaning rather than the equipment of technology. Similarly, Taoists are idealist for deeming nature and human as integrated with rather than separated from each other.

Heidegger and Taoists differ in starting points, terminal points, ways and modes, but their differences are not sufficient to obstruct their dialogue. On the contrary, they provide fresh topics for our dialogue and lead to valuable results. Sein and Taist’s wu-wei both mean Let it be, or let the things be come themselves.

Heidegger’s Sein offers itself to itself through Dasein or realize itself, and accordingly, You (有) has itself through human, so the problems of Sein or Being don’t mean tracing any beings back to a supreme being, a metaphysical God.

(2) Taoist and Heideggerian theories of nature compared with Western traditional ecologic ethics.

Western traditional culture emphasizes that human beings make the rules for the nature, while Taoism implies a position called “biocentric pluralism” in recent environmental ethics. Taoism is profoundly ecological in its theoretical disposition, but in practice Taoism does not conform easily to Western notions of what this should entail. A Taoist model of nature can critique the metaphysical assumptions in evolutionary ecoscience and in technological science. Accordingly it helps the West value nature.

On the other hand, Heidegger calls for preventing nature from being exploited by modern technologies. He criticizes technological modernity’s domineering attitude toward nature and envisions a postmodern era in which people would “let things be”. Heidegger presents dwelling as a non-technological understanding of the world, and maintains that the modern devastation of nature is the result of the predominance of our modern “technological” understanding of the world, which manifests itself as an estrangement from the world, an existential sense of homelessness. In his later writings on “dwelling”, Heidegger presents an account of a wholesome “non-technological” understanding of the world, claiming that technological man has lost his connection with the ground beneath his feet, that human being has lost his rootedness in the world.

(3) Taoist and Heideggerian theories of nature are of great significance to deep ecology for their close relationship in their attitude to technology.

Taoism, Heideggerian theory and deep ecology are all likely to reduce or eliminate technology that could adversely affect the environment.

Heidegger defined “nature” in an ontologically more satisfying manner. He can be viewed as anti-naturalistic only in the sense of opposing modern technology’s generally reductionistic and materialistic view of nature, a view also opposed by deep ecologists. Heidegger and deep ecologists believe that only a basic shift in human being’s self-understanding and its attitude toward nature can prevent social and ecological catastrophe. For Heidegger and deep ecologists, existing authentically does not mean achieving ever greater technical power and security at the expense of everyone and everything else, but rather existing in a manner that lets things manifest themselves in ways that are appropriate to the things themselves.
Deep ecology has drawn a lot of benefits from Heidegger’s condemnation of technological modernity’s heedless exploitation of the nature. Heidegger warns against adopting uncritically the powerful, but limited understanding of nature provided by modern science, including the science of ecology.

Heidegger is among the few leading European thinkers in the twentieth-century who have condemned the destruction of the nature at the hands of modern economy. Heidegger’s later writings sought to redefine humankind and nature so as to envision an alternative to industrial ideologies that justify treating humans and nonhumans alike as commodities.

(4) Controversy over the value of the Taoist and Heideggerian theory of nature for ecology.

Numerous critics have presented objections to any correlation of contemporary environmental ethics and ancient Chinese philosophy.

Rolston, Larson, and Bird, for instance, criticize the use of Chinese concepts such as Tao Te Ching, and wu-wei in describing contemporary ecological theory.

As regards Heidegger’s theory of nature, having become aware of the reactionary aspect of Heidegger’s thought, most deep ecologists have stopped citing him as an intellectual predecessor. Moreover, they have become much more cognizant of the fact that a totalizing critique of modernity could inadvertently lend support to incipient forms of ecofascism.

Unlike most deep ecologists, Heidegger did not appeal to the science of ecology either to justify his critique of industrial modernity or to articulate his vision of a postmodern world. Though admitting that scientific findings are valid in the appropriate domain, he insisted that as a positivism, science arrogantly overreaches itself.

Heidegger abjured all forms of “naturalism”, and did not promote nature worship of any sort, which leads some deep ecologists to suspect the value of his theory despite many indications that his thought had a green dimension. He adhered to the humanity-nature dualism and anthropocentrism that have helped human to generate the ecological crisis. His apparent anti-naturalistic anthropocentrism would seem difficult to reconcile with deep ecology’s apparent naturalism.

Conclusions

(1) Heidegger and Taoism understand the nature as a mode of being or Tao, a resistance of western conception as raw material of technology.

(2) Taoist belongs to “biocentric pluralism”, while western traditional culture thought nature is derivative and equipmental from human. Heidegger advocated a poetic dwelling, which is a non-technological understanding of the world, an existential sense of being human.

(3) Taoist and Heideggerian theories of nature are significant for deep ecology for their opposing modern technology’s generally reductionistic and materialistic view of nature. Deep ecology benefited much from Heidegger’s condemnation of technological modernity and destruction of the nature at the hands of modern economy.

(4) Although there are controversies over the value of Taoist and Heideggerian theories of nature for ecology, more and more ecologists are likely to take advantage of the critical meaning of their theories.

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