

CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN THE ECOLOGICAL THOUGHTS OF KARL MARX AND LAO ZI

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ABSTRACT: *The global ecological crisis has posed unprecedented survival challenges to human being. Consequently, ecological issues have naturally become central concerns in philosophy. From the methodological perspective of constructive engagement in comparative philosophy, we have chosen to compare the ecological thoughts of two thinkers—Karl Marx and Lao Zi (老子)—who are separated by vast spans of time and cultural tradition. We argue that Karl Marx holds a mild anthropocentric ecological view, while Lao Zi holds a transcendental ecological view. In addressing ecological issues, Lao Zi's transcendental methodological guiding principles can provide negative methodological constraints for Karl Marx's constructive ideals, while Karl Marx's constructive ideals can supplement Lao Zi's transcendental methodological guiding principles with positive practical strategies. In this sense, both can jointly contribute philosophical wisdom to the resolution of contemporary ecological problems.*

Keywords: *constructive engagement, ecological thoughts, Karl Marx, Lao Zi*

Ecological issues primarily refer to the destructive impacts of human activities on the Earth's ecosystems. Typical ecological problems include global warming, ozone layer depletion and destruction, acid rain proliferation, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, desertification, air pollution, water pollution, marine pollution, and the transboundary movement of hazardous waste. With the aid of modern science, technology, and engineering, humans have significantly enhanced their ability to alter the external environment, leading to increasingly severe ecological problems. The global ecological crisis has posed unprecedented survival challenges to humans, thereby making ecological issues naturally central concerns in philosophy.

This paper seeks to discuss ecological issues from the methodological perspective of cross-traditional constructive engagement, comparing the ecological thoughts of two

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thinkers—Karl Marx (‘Marx’ for short) and Lao Zi—who are separated by vast spans of time and cultural tradition.¹ Marx espouses a mild anthropocentric ecological view, attributing ecological issues to social problems. In his view, to fundamentally resolve ecological problems, it is essential to reform social systems. In contrast, Lao Zi advocates a transcendental ecological view, offering a holistic, organic, and harmonious vision of the unity of humanity and nature from the macro perspective of the *dao* (道, way or the way things are/ultimate reality/the ultimate)² and all things. He contends that the root cause of ecological issues lies in excessive human interference with and exploitation of nature, and that the solution to ecological problems lies in humans returning to their natural essence.

Although ecological issues were not prominent during the times of Marx and Lao Zi, and their primary intellectual pursuits did not focus on ecological problems, we believe that through a reasonable interpretation of their texts, many valuable ecological insights can be unearthed, providing enlightenment for addressing the increasingly severe ecological challenges of today.

1. MARX’S ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT

For a long time, not only many followers of Marx but also numerous self-proclaimed Marxists have believed that Marx considered the infinite development of economy and technology as a natural law of history and advocated absolute control over nature. These views are seen as antithetical to ecological considerations. Since the 1970s, as environmental threats facing humanity have become more severe, Marx has been criticized by many ecological researchers. They argued that he simply accepted the 19th-century universal notion of absolute human dominion over nature. In their view, Marx’s acceptance of this idea inevitably led him to overlook the destructive characteristics inherent in modern industry and technology, which accompany large-scale production and consumption. John Passmore even asserted that: “Nothing could be more ecologically destructive than the Hegelian-Marxist doctrine” (Passmore 1974, 178). The poor performance of major Marxist-guided countries in addressing ecological issues in the 20th century has also cast doubt on Marx himself. However, since the late 1990s, scholars such as David Pepper (1993), James O’Connor (1998),

¹ There is an ongoing academic controversy regarding whether Lao Zi, generally regarded as the author of the *Dao-De-Jing* (which is therefore also named “*the Lao Zi*”), indeed wrote this classical Taoist text. It should be noted that, rather than taking a stance on this historical issue, we use the name Lao Zi merely for convenience, treating him as a proxy figure for the *Dao-De-Jing*, which facilitates more reflections and solutions to recent ecological problems in philosophical exploration.

² The English translation of terms and passages in *Dao-De-Jing* are from *The Annotated Critical Laozi—With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, trans. Ambrosio, Paul J. D’ & Ouyang, Xiao (Leiden: Brill, 2020) and *Chinese Philosophy A-Z*, Mou, Bo (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), and modified by this author on the basis of the Chinese original.

Paul Burkett (1999) and John Bellamy Foster (2000) have begun to elucidate the ecological thoughts present in Marx's works, thereby responding to the aforementioned criticisms to some extent.

What are the main contents of Marx's ecological thoughts? We believe this question can be examined from the following three aspects: (1) Marx's understanding of nature; (2) Marx's understanding of humanity; and (3) Marx's understanding of the relationship between nature and humanity.

1.1 "NATURE IN ITSELF" AND "HUMANIZED NATURE"

Marx refers to nature that has not been modified by human activity as "nature-in-itself". It serves as the foundation and prerequisite for human existence, existing as an external object that precedes humanity temporally. Although "nature-in-itself" holds ontological priority, Marx states that: "Nature, taken abstractly and in isolation, fixed as something separated from man, is nothing for man" (Karl 1987, 178). What Marx is primarily concerned with is nature in relation to humans, that is, "humanized nature" that has been transformed by human activity. Marx points out that: "The nature that develops in the history of humanity, i.e., in the process of the genesis of human society, is human's real nature; hence, the nature that is formed by industry—even though in an alienated form—is truly human, anthropological nature" (Karl 1987, 128). This nature is the result of human practical activity and a product of history. According to Marx, the external world apprehended by our senses "is not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society" (Karl 1976, 39). With the development of human history, the importance of "humanized nature" becomes increasingly prominent. Marx mentions that: "In all forms where landed property rules, the natural relation still predominant. In those where capital rules, the social, historically created element" (Karl 1993, 107). In modern society, pure "nature-in-itself" is hardly found; the objects we perceive around us—cities, villages, fields, and forests—bear the marks of human activity. "Humanized nature" related to human activity is the primary object of our cognition and practical activities. Marx concentrates on how the activities of successive generations of humans have created this "humanized nature" and how this "humanized nature" in turn constrains the practices of new generations. He ponders the question: How should humans, starting from this world of "humanized nature" created by human activity, transform "nature-in-itself" to meet human needs?

1.2 HUMAN AS NATURAL AND FREE BEING

In Marx's view, humans are natural beings, part of nature, and dependent on it for survival. At the same time, humans are also social beings, and their appropriation of

nature occurs within specific social relations. Humans engage in various forms of activity, such as theoretical, religious, and aesthetic activities, but Marx places the greatest emphasis on material production, or labor in the general sense. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx states:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature...By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. (Karl 1996, 187)

The importance of labor as material production lies not only in its provision of necessary means of subsistence and production but also in its reproduction of social relations among people and its role in shaping human development.

Freedom is Marx's fundamental value regarding humans. Humans should become the masters of their own fate and should not be enslaved by external entities, whether these are purely external natural forces or products and social relations created by humans themselves. Marx scorns the primitive state where humans are dominated by external natural forces. In his commentary "The British Rule in India", he remarks:

We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Kanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow. (Karl 1979, 132)

Likewise, he is deeply troubled by the condition under the capitalist system where humans are enslaved by the products and social relations they have created. He writes:

The social power, i.e., the multiplied productive force, which arises through the co-operation of different individuals as it is caused by the division of labour, appears to these individuals, since their co-operation is not voluntary but has come about naturally, not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them, of the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, which they thus are no longer able to control, which on the contrary passes through a peculiar series of phases and stages independent of the will and the action of man, nay even being the prime governor of these. (Karl 1976, 48)

The ideal state that Marx pursues is the conscious and planned control of external nature and human creations. He terms the condition where modern humans are enslaved by their own social relations and products as "alienation," the most prominent

manifestation of which is “commodity fetishism” and its most conspicuous form—“money fetishism”.

1.3 NATURE AS THE INORGANIC BODY OF HUMANS

Marx emphasizes that nature is the inorganic body of humans. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, he states:

Nature is man’s inorganic body—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man lives on nature—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature. (Karl 1975b, 276)

Nature as the inorganic body of humans includes not only nature-in-itself but also humanized nature. Marx believes that humanized nature are “products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of man’s will over Nature, or of man’s activity in Nature” (Karl 1987, 92). Marx predicts the possibility of the universal development of the individual human being, “the grasping of his own history as a process, and the recognition of nature (equally present as practical power over nature) as his real body” (Karl 1993, 542). In other words, the knowledge of nature is the knowledge of oneself. Since nature is human’s inorganic body, humans should not adopt an attitude of conqueror and ruler toward nature. The endless exploitation and reckless consumption of natural resources are akin to prematurely exhausting one’s own body. Therefore, a reasonable demand is that humans should cherish nature as they cherish their own bodies.

Furthermore, Marx argues that there exists a metabolic process (*Stoffwechsel*) between humans and nature, mediated by human labor. This process signifies both the humanization of nature and the naturalization of humans, establishing a material cycle between the two. Marx also emphasizes that this metabolic relationship manifests in different concrete forms across various historical periods. In pre-capitalist societies, the material exchange between humans and nature was narrow and local, with humans and nature existing in a primitive unity. Marx points out:

For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. (Karl 1993, 410)

Capitalism’s pursuit of unlimited self-expansion simultaneously destroys the organic body of humans extending working hours, increasing work intensity, and breaking

down boundaries between custom and nature, age and gender, day and night. On the other hand, it also destroys nature as humanity's inorganic body, leading to resource depletion, urban-rural divide, and disrupting the balance of material exchange between humans and nature. Marx argues: "At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy" (Karl 1980, 655). In this sense, Marx identifies the root cause of ecological problems in the capitalist mode of production, and thus, solving ecological problems requires transforming the mode of production.

In Marx's view, the antagonistic relationship between humans and nature can be reconciled in a communist society. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the young Marx proposes that communism is "the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man" (Karl 1975, 296). In *Capital*, this view, tinged with romanticism and humanism in his youth, is given a more concrete expression. Marx writes:

Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. (Karl 1998, 807)

In this respect, the resolution of ecological issues depends on the autonomous action of associated individuals to transform social relations. It is in this aspect that Marx's ecological thought provides theoretical support for various contemporary ecological movements.

In conclusion, regarding the relationship between humans and nature, Marx ultimately focuses on human freedom, attributing value priority to humans in his theoretical framework: Humans should master nature, and nature should be transformed to meet human needs, rather than humans passively accepting nature-in-itself. However, Marx's concept of mastering nature does not imply reckless exploitation. Marx also emphasizes that nature is humans' inorganic body, which essentially requires humans to continually improve their understanding of natural laws, thereby rationally regulating material exchange with nature. In this sense, Marx's notion of mastering nature is not an anti-ecological stance.

2. LAO ZI'S ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT

Ecological thoughts of *Dao-De-Jing* have attracted increasing attention from scholars against the background of the increasingly severe ecological crisis. Many scholars have endeavored to find a remedy for the ecological issues of modern society by taking Lao

Zi's view of *zi-ran* (自然, self-so or natural) as a clue since the 1980s. The research of Roger T. Ames (1986) and Chung-Ying Cheng (1986) is groundbreaking. After that, Xiaogan Liu particularly paid attention on how to apply the fundamental spirit of *zi-ran* to addressing the current environmental crisis. He believed that the premise was to acknowledge that “the spirit is still needed in modern society, and is even more necessary and urgent”, and it could “affect our perceptions and, at the same time, influence our actions” (Liu 2004, 3-12). In addition, the book *Daoism and Ecology* (2001) edited by N.J. Girardot, Xiaogan Liu, and James Miller, brings together research findings from many scholars, such as Sandra Wawrytko (2005), Alan Fox (2005), Eric Sean Nelson (2009) and Graham Parkes (2012). They have explored Lao Zi's ecological thought from various perspectives, including the concepts of *zi-ran* and *wu-wei* (無為, non-action), the relationship between the *dao* and *de* (德, virtue or manifestations of the *dao*), and the fundamental structure of the heaven and earth (*tian-di* 天地). Chinese scholars, such as Zhengrong She (1994), Peiyuan Meng (2004), Changhai Zhang (2004), Enlin Dong (2004), Chuanfang Luo (2005), Jianliang Xu (2007), Yangju Xie (2014), have also explored ecological thoughts of Lao Zi. Bing Wu (2023) conducted a comprehensive review of relevant research.

Combining the aforementioned research findings, we hold that ecological thoughts of Lao Zi can be interpreted from the following three aspects: (1) the *dao* and *wan-wu*; (2) the *su* (素, simple/plain/white) and *pu* (樸, simple/plain/unadorned/uncarved wood) of humanity; (3) *zi-ran* and *wu-wei*: the fundamental principles dealing with humans and all things.

2.1 THE *DAO* AND *WAN-WU*

In the context of *Dao-De-Jing*, the natural world including human beings generally refers to concepts like *tian* (天, heaven or nature-sky-heaven), heaven and earth, *wu* (物, things) and *wan-wu* (萬物, ten thousand of particular concrete things in the world). *Dao*, on the other hand, is the metaphysical basis of heaven and earth (usually refers to universe) and *wan-wu*. The relationship between the *dao* and *wan-wu* can be understood from the following three aspects.

Firstly, the *dao* is in a relationship of nurturing and sustaining with *wan-wu*. In the *Dao-De-Jing* (Chapter 42), it is stated that:

The *dao* generates the one.

The one generates the two [*yin* and *yang*].

The two generate the three [*yin*, *yang*, and *qi* (氣, concrete material force)].

The three generate ten thousand things.

All things carry *yin* and embrace *yang*, through *yin-yang* interaction and blending with *qi* they reach harmony. (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 42)³

The *dao* and *wan-wu* are connected through the term “generate” (*sheng* 生) in this context, which suggests that fertility is the fundamental function of the *dao*. Lao Zi often employs metaphors related to the feminine reproductive power to understand the *dao*. For instance, in Chapter 6 of the *Dao-De-Jing*, the *dao*’s profound and unfathomable nature is seen as embodying its inherent and inexplicable reproductive power. The autonomous union of the feminine and masculine ensures the continuation of life. This subtle maternity is the root and source of heaven and earth, the foundation upon which all things are born. It exists continually and uninterrupted, with infinite and inexhaustible effects. Chapter 52 also interprets the relationship between the *dao* and *wan-wu* through the metaphor of mother and child, that is “Get to the mother in order to know the sons. Return and hold on to the mother, (and) *mo* (沒, submerge/die/destroy) the body is in no danger” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 52).⁴ The *dao* and *wan-wu* form a kind of organic harmony. This implies a “stable, homeostatic order that arises out of the mutual adjustment of parts” (LaFargue 2001, 52). All things spontaneously coordinate with each other according to the *dao* to maintain balance, which is more stable than an order that is imposed by an dominating external force. The non-outward nature of circular movement of the *dao*, implying a fundamental operating mode of a return to the original root, demonstrates this stability.

Secondly, the *dao* assists in the growth of all things, internalizing vitality within them, and allowing all things to exhibit vibrant vitality. Lao Zi often takes water as a metaphor to interpret this point. In Chapter 4 of *Dao-De-Jing*, terms like *chong* (沖, surging/swash/empty), *yuan* (淵, abysmal), and *zhan* (湛, deep) all possess qualities of water, reflecting the continuous and deeply concealed vitality and dynamism in the process of the *dao*. It can also correspond to passages such as “The great *dao fan* (汜, flows unboundedly), and it can be left and right” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 34)⁵; “Great fullness resembles *chong*, and its use is not exhausted” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 45)⁶; and “Compared, the *dao* is to the human realm as stream valleys are to rivers and oceans” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 32)⁷; which employ metaphors of water, rivers, and seas.

Thirdly, the *dao* respects the intrinsic differences and diversity of all things. The fundamental principle of the *dao* is “Heaven and earth are not *ren* (仁, humanity or human-heartedness); they regard all things as straw dogs” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 5)⁸, which indicates that the *dao* nurtures all things impartially and selflessly, respecting

³ “道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。”

⁴ “既得其母，以知其子；既知其子，複守其母，終身不殆。”

⁵ “大道泛兮，其可左右。”

⁶ “大盈若沖，其用不窮。”

⁷ “譬道之在天下，猶川穀之與江海。”

⁸ “天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗。”

the intrinsic differences and diversity of all things, allowing them to grow and thrive on their own. This also corresponds to the admonitions in *Zhuang-Zi*, such as “the death of Hun Dun (渾沌)”, “the story of the Duke of Lu (魯侯) raising birds”, and “the story of Bo Le (伯樂) training horses”. The relationship between the *dao* and *wan-wu* can also be understood as “One-to-Many” relationship. The *dao* is both the basis of the natural flow of all things and inherent within the “Many” that is continuously generated and diverse. The world is presented as the totality of the *dao*, formed by the aggregation of innumerable specific individuals (Ames 2001, 265-274). All living things maintain their existence by adhering to specific habitats, according to their “species”, i.e. inborn nature. This diversity also suggests that all living things are confined to their ecological environments, and human beings are no exception.

In sum, Lao Zi’s understanding of the *dao* and *wan-wu* contains rich ecological implications, suggesting that fundamentally, all things can spontaneously maintain their dynamic balance and integrity. And he advocates that any specific, concrete perspective always has boundaries. Therefore, anthropocentrism is as finite for humans as the “turtle-centric” and “frog-centric” positions (Birdwhistell 2001, 30-31). Meanwhile, Human beings share activity and vitality with creatures, coexisting within this interconnected universe. We are both integral to nature and influenced by the surrounding natural environment. Therefore, we should engage with the natural world in a way that minimizes interference as much as possible. This not only contributes to optimizing and fulfilling the potential of all living things, but also improves the quality of our own life, creating a more comfortable living environment for ourselves.

2.2 THE *SU* AND *PU* OF HUMANITY

Lao Zi emphasizes *su* and *pu* of humanity. *Su* means undyed silk, and *pu* means uncarved wood. Therefore, these two terms both refer to the inherent qualities that have not been embellished or polished, representing the original prototype of life endowed by the *dao*. Those who can maintain the natural simplicity resemble infants, innocent and pure yet containing infinite richness and integrity. Lao Zi points out that the division of human essence and the loss of integrity are related to the blind pursuit of external knowledge and intelligence. The saying “*pu* is split and made into *qi* (器, utensil/instrument)” (“*pu-san-wei-qi* 樸散為器” *Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 28), refers to the increase of external and instrumental knowledge of humans beings, leading to a division from their inherent simplicity. The unlimited development of intelligence can affect our own life, so Lao Zi maintains a high level of vigilance regarding intellectual knowledge. Also, from the saying “no desires and no knowledge” (“*wu-yu-wu-zhi* 無欲無知” *Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 3), it can be seen that the utilization of intelligence and the growth of instrumental skills are both related to the increase of desires, utility, and enjoyment. “There is no greater disaster than desiring to obtain, and there is no greater

calamity than not knowing satisfaction” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 46).⁹ In this sense, he mentions, “the satisfaction of knowing satisfaction is lasting satisfaction” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 46)¹⁰, “knowing what is enough there won’t be disgrace, knowing when to stop there won’t be danger, and there can be long permanence” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 44)¹¹, and “one who knows what is enough is rich” (“*zhi-zu-zhe-fu* 知足者富” *Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 33). The development and utilization of nature should put the importance of contentment first. Applied to individual actions, Lao Zi believes one should “observing *su* and embracing *pu*, and be less concerned with yourself and minimize your desires” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 19)¹², advocating for people to return to simplicity and sincerity, striving to minimize their selfishness and desires. Except for limiting desires, Lao Zi also prescribes the ultimate practical aim for humanity, i.e. to return to the natural simplicity akin to that of infants. Lao Zi argues that individuals should return to their natural essence to preserve their original unity. The state, where all things in nature return to the stillness and original source, can be termed as *chang* (常, the constant). As a part of nature, human beings should also return to this natural state: by observing how the natural world *fu* (復, to return or resume), constantly “attaining *xu* (虛, vacuity/emptiness/void) *ji* (極, ultimate or unsurpassable) and preserving tranquility *du* (篤, sincere or unmatched)” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 16)¹³, and strives for completeness to exploit its richness and infinite potential.

We see that the powerful expansion of industry and technology worldwide has profoundly affected and reversed the passive stance of human beings towards the external nature, which all drove us to indulge in our desires excessively and pursue luxurious pleasures without restraint and limit. “These thought-patterns of contemporary people exaggerate the subject will, causing people to think that nature can be treated as subservient to the willful desire of humans and that nature would never respond negatively to these conditions” (Zhang&Li 2001, 364-365). In this sense, James Miller argues that, “the widespread failure of human beings to value their inner nature is a prime factor in the degeneration of our natural environment” (Miller 2001, 408). Therefore, in this regard, Lao Zi emphasizes moderation and appropriateness, advocating for individuals to return to their natural *su* and *pu* of humanity, and to appropriately restrain their desires. This undoubtedly contributes important philosophical resources to the resolution of contemporary ecological issues.

⁹ “禍莫大於不知足，咎莫大於欲得。”

¹⁰ “知足之足，長足矣。”

¹¹ “知足不辱，知止不殆，可以長久。”

¹² “見素抱樸，少私寡欲。”

¹³ “致虛極，守靜篤。”

2.3 ZI-RAN AND WU-WEI: THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES DEALING WITH HUMANS AND ALL THINGS

As a fundamental principle to harmonize the relationship between humans and all things, the concept of *zi-ran* was first explicitly raised by Lao Zi in the history of Chinese philosophy. *Zi-ran* appears five times in current version of *Dao-De-Jing*. Its fundamental meaning is “self-so”, emphasizing the inherent spontaneity, which can further be extended to “originally so”, “commonly so”, and “ought to be so” (Liu 2005, 89-90). All these four meanings emphasize the smoothness and stability of development.¹⁴

In Chapter 25 of the *Dao-De-Jing*, by enumerating “human being-earth-heaven-the *dao*” these five elements, it emphasizes the relationship between human beings and the world, revealing the optimal order of the universe (including human society and the natural world) affirmed by Lao Zi, who advocates that actions should harmonize with the *dao*, being natural and without deliberate interference. Therefore, *zi-ran* also refers to the requirements of the *dao* presenting to human beings. The central idea of the phrase “The human being models himself him/herself upon earth; earth models itself upon heaven; heaven models itself upon the *dao*, the *dao* models itself upon what is natural” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 25)¹⁵, can be distilled into that “The human being should act in the world just as how the *dao* operates in its own state”. In Chapter 51 of *Dao-De-Jing*, “(the *dao* and *de*) command nothing and always are self-so” (“*mo-zhi-ming-er-chang-zi-ran* 莫之命而常自然”), is the explanation of the process of the *dao* nurturing all things. The realization of the *dao* in all things goes through four stages. Firstly, all things are born out of the *dao* and depend on the *dao*. After that, all things acquire and rely on their nature to sustain their own existence, implying their own virtue. Then, they take on a specific physical form and occupy a certain space in the heavens and earth as specific entity. Fourthly and lastly, they come to completion by the environment. In this sense, the *dao* is the ultimate reason for the generation of all things, while *de* accounts for the generation of specific individual thing. Whether the *dao*, as the ultimate source of heaven, earth, and all things; or *de*, as the *dao*’s differentiation in the concrete world to nurture and support all things, both require adhering to the principle of “Generating without possessing. Acting without relying. Growing without

¹⁴ At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, a large influx of modern Western thought entered China. Then “nature” became widely used as the translation of *zi-ran*, along with connotations such as the natural world. For discussions on this topic, see Wang, Zhongjian 王中江(2015), “近代中國‘自然’觀念的誕生” [The Emergence of Modern Chinese Concept of “Nature”], in Fang Weigui 方維規 (ed.), 《思想與方法——近代中國的文化政治與知識建構》 [Thought and Method: Cultural Politics and Knowledge Construction in Modern China] (北京 Beijing: 北京大學出版社), 189-229.

¹⁵ “人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。”

dominating” (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 51)¹⁶. It indicates that the *dao* does not forcefully intervene the growth of all things but allows them to self-cultivate, self-transform and self-fulfill. “Command nothing” (“*mo-zhi-ming* 莫之命”) indicates that the process is pursued without deliberation or strong external intervention, and *chang* (常, the constant) indicates that it is the natural and essential state of the *dao*. Both these two chapters elucidate that the *dao*, as Lao Zi’s ultimate idea, is the beginning and foundation of the universe, and the principle it follows is natural. Therefore, *zi-ran*, as the core value in Lao Zi’s system, is the original and true state, as well as the highest standard of activity, advocated and praised by Lao Zi.

Wu-wei is the principle of practice to actualize the harmony between humans and all things. The concept of *zi-ran* affirms both the spontaneity and independence of all things, while also reminds them to exercise self-restrainedly to avoid disrupting the natural state of other things. *Wu-wei* is the practical principle of the value of *zi-ran*, and refers to how Lao Zi applies the value of *zi-ran* to human society. In terms of this, Lao Zi advocates “speaking less is self-so” (“*xi-yan-zi-ran* 希言自然”, *Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 23); “assist in bringing about the self-so(ness) of all thing” (“*fu-wan-wu-zhi-zi-ran* 輔萬物之自然”, *Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 64); and “the common people all say: ‘We are *zi-ran*’” (“*bai-xing-jie-wei-wo-zi-ran* 百姓皆謂我自然”, *Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 17). Lao Zi believes that in the best political order, common people could preserve and uphold their own nature, thereby furthering their self-development and perfection. The best ruler does not govern through authoritative commands but rather achieving his rule through subtle and easily acceptable approaches. It is worth noting that Lao Zi often associates terms like *shou* (守, preserve), *chi* (持, uphold), *fu* (輔, assist), *xing* (行, perform), *chu* (處, preside or take charge of), and *yong* (用, use) with the political actions of the sage. It implies that *wu-wei* does not truly refer to act nothing, but rather “act without apparent action, while there is nothing that was not done by it” (“*wu-wei-er-wu-bu-wei* 無為而無不為”, *Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 37), that is opposing forceful or direct external intervention. In this sense, Lao Zi provides a potential correction to the radical tendency of modern environmentalism. We should not excessively impose our personal will and objectives into addressing environmental issues, as this may disrupt and damage the normal functioning of nature. No Daoist, regardless of their beliefs, ever accepted goal-directed action as a valid means for solving problems. Nelson once interpreted Lao Zi’s principle of *wu-wei* as the fundamental principle of the ethics of environment, advocating that human beings should adopt a basic stance of being participants rather than controllers in ecological processes. Therefore, humans should harmonize with the environment and the inherent naturalness within organisms, nurturing those self-tendencies of organic life. By following and imitating natural changes of climate, ecosystems, and environment, all things can be allowed to manage themselves according to their natural tendencies,

¹⁶ “生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰。”

undergoing transformations in their own way to realize their inherent value (Nelson 2009, 305-308).

By prioritizing *zi-ran* as the highest value and *wu-wei* as the principle of practice, Lao Zi presents an ideal political community of “a small state with few people” (“*xiao-guo-gua-min* 小國寡民”, *Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 80). In Chapter 80 of *Dao-De-Jing*, Lao Zi depicts the social state where people have tasty food, beautiful clothes, comfortable homes, and joyous customs. He believes that although such a society may lack the excessive material needs such as contraptions with the power of tens and hundreds of people, ships and carriages, armory and weaponry; precisely because people are content with their existing material conditions and means of survival, they do not encounter the pollution brought about by civilization, leading to excessive desires, anxieties, and feelings of fear and loss. This peaceful social order does not require oppressive force to maintain. The ways of the people are simple and sincere as in the primitive society where matters are recorded by tying knots, and they can live in peace with each other simply by relying on their instinctual simplicity and honesty. The ideal society of “a small state with few people” presents a way of human life with minimal pressure on the ecological environment: firstly, the contentment, happiness, and minimal desires inherent in this way of life fundamentally shape people’s values of resource conservation and waste reduction. Secondly, harmonious interpersonal relationships helps to avoid wars, as people will not excessively exploit nature to manufacture and forge weapons. Issues such as nuclear pollution, metal pollution, and wastewater pollution brought about by modern warfare will not arise. Additionally, minimizing interactions between neighboring countries allows people to devote more time to interacting with nature, enjoying and experiencing the beauty of the natural environment, and minimize exploit, control, and destruction of nature.

In summary, the ecological thought of Lao Zi exhibits three important characteristics: firstly, he considers the *dao* as the metaphysical foundation for understanding *wan-wu*. Secondly, he emphasizes on the simplicity of human beings. Thirdly, he advocates for the highest value of *zi-ran* and the principle of practice of *wu-wei*.

3. CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF ECOLOGICAL THOUGHTS BETWEEN MARX AND LAO ZI

The constructive engagement account provides a fundamental methodological framework for cross-tradition philosophical engagement (Mou, 2020). It distinguishes three interrelated but distinct methodological concepts: the perspective method, the instrumental method, and the methodological guiding principle. These three methodological concepts delineate three basic levels for philosophically comparing the ecological thoughts of Marx and Lao Zi.

3.1 PERSPECTIVE METHOD

A perspective method provides a starting point and a viewpoint for examining a particular research object. In our view, Marx and Lao Zi's ecological thoughts can engage and converge through the perspective method in the following four aspects:

(1) The Root Causes of Ecological Problems. Marx perceives ecological crises as inherent contradictions within capitalism, describing how the intrinsic drive of the capitalist system—capital accumulation—erodes its own material environment and ultimately encounters natural limits. From Lao Zi's perspective, ecological issues stem from excessive human interference and utilization of nature. Broadly speaking, Lao Zi's explanation is individualistic, emphasizing that individual unnatural desires lead to ecological problems. In contrast, Marx's explanation is institutional, where specific forms of institutions facilitate the fulfillment of unnatural human desires and generate even more desires. These two explanations of the root causes of ecological problems can complement each other on different levels.

(2) The Agency for Solving Ecological Problems. In Marx's vision, unified individuals consciously regulate their material exchanges with nature. In other words, individuals are the primary force in solving ecological issues. When the constraining institution itself is unnatural, individuals can exercise their agency to create new institutions and regain control over them. In Lao Zi's view, however, the will and agency of individuals (or the common people) are not as crucial. He primarily addresses rulers and sages, who can implement natural politics and assist the growth of all things with a non-interfering attitude. This perspective of Lao Zi carries a potential risk: if the logic of the institution inherently leads to ecological destruction, a ruler with a non-interfering attitude would merely allow the institution to maintain the status quo, ultimately leading to negative outcomes. In such cases, Marx's perspective becomes essential, as individuals can take action to express their will rather than passively awaiting the arrival of a natural political system.

(3) Approaches to Solving Ecological Problems. Both Marx and Lao Zi pursue the unity of humanity and nature, but their methods of achieving this may be different. Marx advocates transforming nature to meet human needs for survival and development, ultimately creating a rational form of material exchange between humanity and nature. In contrast, Lao Zi's thought of non-action does not oppose human practical activities (unless taken to an extreme interpretation), but his envisioned ideal is not a world full of artificial objects but one with minimal human interference and alteration of nature. He believes that human wisdom leads to sharp tools (*li-qi* 利器) and skillful means (*ji-qiao* 伎巧), which are detrimental to the inner spiritual health of people. Knowledge represented by scientific understanding is external to natural human nature. This outward-directed knowledge fosters human

desires, causes mental distraction, and deviates from the *dao*, thus being limited and harmful. Lao Zi points out that inner intuitive self-reflection is the effective path to truth, enabling one to understand the principles of the world without leaving their home (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 47). This knowledge, aligned with the *dao*, seals off the apertures of desires, closes the gateways of craving, and contains brilliance without external interference, remaining concrete and embedded in worldly life (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 56). Although Marx and Lao Zi's attitudes towards nature and knowledge about nature appear to diverge, there exists an intrinsic complementarity. We believe that both Marx and Lao Zi emphasize human subjectivity, albeit from different angles: Marx emphasizes active subjectivity, where individuals should actively acquire knowledge about the world and change it accordingly, whereas Lao Zi emphasizes passive subjectivity, where individuals should acquire an understanding of the *dao* and avoid wanton interference in the world. In this sense, Lao Zi's passive subjectivity can serve as a pressure relief valve and brake for Marx's active subjectivity, reminding us to avoid extreme actions in specific ecological practices.

(4) Conceptions of an Ideal Society. Marx believes that through their practical activities, individuals can ultimately transcend the alienation between nature and humanity, creating a harmonious society. However, this expectation carries a romantic undertone, as it is a theoretical prediction derived from Marx's instrumental method—negative dialectics. Pursuing this goal through active subjectivity poses the risk of blind action, potentially resulting in a disparity between theory and practice. In contrast to Marx, Lao Zi's prescribed ecological practice is not a totally creative or reconstructive work, but rather an constructive imitation (more precisely in an aesthetic sense) of natural rhythms. In this sense, there is no need to “look forward” to envision a society beyond the state of alienation; the harmony between humanity and nature can be directly realized in an original, daily, and natural state of life. From an ecological perspective alone, Lao Zi's ideal society would undoubtedly be the optimal solution to ecological issues. However, the challenge lies in the fact that while modern individuals may appreciate the primitive state of ecology, no one can endure living in such a primitive ecological condition for long. Therefore, the optimal solution to ecological problems might not be to return to Lao Zi's envisioned ideal society but to find a balance between ecology and human needs.

3.2 INSTRUMENTAL METHOD

The “instrumental method” refers to the tools and means used to implement the perspective method, including instrumental concepts and interpretative resources. The dialectics of both Marx and Lao Zi play a crucial role in constructing their respective perspective methods.

Marx's instrumental method is derived from the dialectical approach of German classical philosophy. Its key points emphasize the dynamic process of change and development in things, as well as the dialectical mode of development characterized by the negation of negation, which inherently includes elements of alienation and its sublation. This particular instrumental method imbues Marx's thought with a historical vision. Although capitalism causes a dual alienation of humanity and nature, Marx does not entirely negate the historical role of capital. He acknowledges the function of capitalist production relations at specific historical stages from a dialectical and historical perspective. Under this instrumental method, the current state of alienation is not meaningless, as it prepares the necessary material prerequisites for a more perfect historical stage. Through the sublation of capitalist production relations, human society will reach a more complete form.

Lao Zi is generally regarded as a representative figure of traditional Chinese dialectical thinking, and his dialectics differ from Marx's negative dialectics. Lao Zi's dialectics can be summarized as a cyclical dialectic of mutual generation and opposition. The basic viewpoints can be encapsulated in four propositions: interdependence of opposites (including mutual generation), mutual transformation of opposites, mutual enhancement of opposites (or the illumination of opposites), and seeking the positive through the negative. These four propositions echo each other and contain two layers of meaning: opposite dependence and cyclical alternation. On one hand, every phenomenon forms under a state of opposing forces and moves towards the opposite direction in development. On the other hand, when any phenomenon reaches its peak, it begins to decline, yet within this decline lies the potential for a return to the correct path¹⁷. The profundity of Lao Zi's dialectics lies in his early insight into the paradoxes or antinomies in the development of human civilization. Although the "beneficial tools" and "skills" brought by the progress of civilization are indispensable for human society, they also entail many side effects, such as the expansion of desires and ecological destruction, from a dialectical perspective. In facing the current ecological crisis, applying the principles of naturalism and non-action in environmental governance could potentially transform the current unfavorable state into a favorable one.

3.3 METHODOLOGICAL GUIDING PRINCIPLE

The "methodological guiding principle" refers to the guiding principle that a perspective holder uses to view the relationship between his current perspective and other possible perspectives.

¹⁷ This is also summarized in the principle of "things revert to their extreme" ("wu-ji-ze-fan 物極則反") in He Guan Zi's "Circular Flow" (《鶡冠子·環流》).

Marx and Lao Zi both consider nature as an organic whole, with humans being a part of it. However, Marx highlights the position of humans within nature, emphasizing human priority in terms of value, while not entirely ignoring the intrinsic value of nature. His ecological thought can be described as a moderate anthropocentrism. However, due to historical constraints within the Marxist movement, this moderate respect for nature is often overlooked, leading to an extreme anthropocentrism. Under this extreme anthropocentrism, many large-scale ecological practices resulted in damage to the environment. Additionally, due to Marx's strong belief in human domination over nature (albeit in a reasonable manner) and his practice-oriented approach to solving ecological problems through institutional change, interpreters of Marx's ecological thought often fail to equally consider other ecological theories. These theories are often dismissed as superficial and not addressing the core issues. This closed methodological guiding principle has, to some extent, hindered the further development of Marx's ecological thought.

In contrast, Lao Zi's ecological thought denies the unique position of humans, advocating for the unity of heaven, earth, and humans within the Dao, and following the same natural principles. In this sense, Lao Zi is neither an anthropocentrist nor an ecocentrist, but holds a transcendent methodological guiding principle. From this principle, we can examine the reasonable aspects and limitations of various perspectives.

However, the transcendent guiding principle also has its limitations, as it does not offer constructive guidance for concrete practice. Practical action always requires choosing a certain perspective after weighing various factors, and action without any perspective is impossible. In this sense, Lao Zi's transcendent guiding principle aligns logically with his call for non-action in practical activities. We believe that Lao Zi's ecological thought can provide an aesthetic and regulative principle in the Kantian sense for contemplating ecological issues, but it cannot serve as a concrete guide for action. In terms of ecological issues, Marx's constructive thought and Lao Zi's regulative principle are not conflicting but are at different levels and are inherently complementary. The painful lessons from various large-scale ecological projects throughout history show that a constructive force regulated by Lao Zi's principle of natural non-action is always superior to blind construction lacking such regulative restraint. Providing regulative principles for various constructive ecological thoughts is the unique significance of Lao Zi's transcendental ecological thought.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper comprises three main sections: the first section analyzes Marx's ecological thought from the perspectives of nature, humanity, and the relationship between humans and nature; the second section examines Lao Zi's ecological thought from the

perspectives of “the *dao* and *wan-wu*,” “the *su* and *pu* of humanity,” and “*zi-ran* and *wu-wei*”; the third section applies the constructive-engagement account from comparative philosophy to explore the interaction and integration of Marx’s and Lao Zi’s ecological thoughts at three levels: the perspective method, the instrumental method, and the methodological guiding principle.

In conclusion, we contend that no single theory can independently provide a solution to the increasingly severe ecological problems of the modern world. Neither Marx nor Lao Zi alone can offer a comprehensive answer to ecological issues. However, through their constructive interaction and integration, we can draw upon their respective theoretical resources to collectively contribute to addressing contemporary ecological problems.

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