

# Study on Taoist Ecological Ethics Thoughts and Its Modern Enlightenment

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**Abstract**—The rapid development of science and technology in today's world has enabled us to enjoy unprecedented achievements of material civilization. However, at the same time, the development of science and technology has brought us a series of problems. Among them, the ecological environment has become the most serious problem in the world, and the ecological crisis has become more and more serious. The report of the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly states that the government should speed up the reform of the ecological civilization system and build a wild China, which fully reflect the seriousness and urgency of ecological problems. Looking back at Chinese traditional culture, Taoism contains rich ecological thoughts. The excavation of its ecological ethics thought has important modern enlightenment for us to deal with the ecological crisis.

**Keywords**—Taoism; ecological crisis; ecological ethics; modern enlightenment

## I. INTRODUCTION

People's attitudes towards nature change from the initial fear of nature to the later worship, and then to the final conquest of nature with the value orientation of "anthropocentrism". After human industrialization, productivity has been improved and material life has been enriched. Nature has become tools and objects for human beings to meet their own needs. However, such development has brought nature's revenge, and the increasingly severe ecological crisis has forced human beings to reflect on their own development mode and original development thinking. As early as the 1980s, western countries began to reflect on the original concept of development and put forward the concept of sustainable development. Because of the late start of industrialization in China, the confrontation between ecological and industrial development has appeared relatively late. However, the environmental problems have become increasingly prominent, which have become important problems restricting the development of China. In the late 1990s, the concept of scientific development concept was put forward to coordinate the harmonious development of man and nature, and to advocate the sustainable road of harmonious development between man and nature. Not only at the national level, but also on the issue of exploring the relationship between man and nature, it has aroused strong resonance in academic circles. In the exploration of this issue, more and more overseas scholars pay their attention to

ancient Chinese traditional culture, especially Taoist thought, which is favored by foreign scholars. The concepts of universal equality, abstinent contentment, understanding the eternal law and harmony and so on advocated by Taoism provide us with correct ideas in dealing with ecological problems. As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, Taoist thought contains profound ecological wisdom, which is a collection of ancient Chinese consciousness of ecological environment and traditional environment.

## II. THE THOUGHT OF UNIVERSAL EQUALITY

In Taoism's view, people and all things are the products of "Tao". Although they are different in the way of existence and form of expression, they belong to "Tao" in essence. Therefore, in Taoism's view, people and all things should be equal. This is Zhuangzi's idea of "levelling all things".

Taoism put forward the ecological ethical natural values that "nothing is precious or cheap, and everything is equal." In Taoism's view, nothing is precious or cheap. (Zhuangzi Qiushui) This axiology holds that everything in the universe has its own independent and irreplaceable intrinsic value, and they are realizing it in accordance with the operation law of Tao. From the absolute sense of the origin of value that all things are based on, the value of everything is equal without distinction between big and small. In the relative sense of the nature, form and function of each thing, the differences are also relative. These differences can't explain the magnitude of the value of things, nor can they be the reason for denying the unique value of a thing. Therefore, from the perspective of ecosystem holism, human beings are equal to all things in the world, and human beings should treat all things in the world equally.

On the level of "Tao", all things are created by "Tao". "Tao" is the foundation of everything in the world, and the source of the world. Everything in the world is the product of natural operation and inaction. Tao is the universal characteristic of all things. For this reason, all things have their own value and existence significance. On the "Tao" level, all things have the same value and play an irreplaceable role. There is no distinction between value and nobility, but the way of existence and the role of value are different. All things should be treated equally without distinction in status. From this point of view, it is similar to modern ecological ethics.

Lao Zi once said, "Tao is great; the heaven is great; the earth is great; the King is also great; there are the great four in the universe; and the King is one of them." (Translated by Lin Yutang) From this, we can see that Lao Zi regards man, heaven, earth, and Tao as the same, and classifies man as one of the four great. That is to say, he regards man and all things as the same status. There is no difference between them. They are part of "Great Four", that is, part of the universe.

Zhuang Zi always believed that all things not only came from "Tao", but also returned to "Tao" at last. He looked at the relationship among all things from the "Tao" level. Zhuang Zi believed that all things in nature were in the same position, and played the same role. The criterion of Zhuang Zi's value evaluation is not to distinguish usefulness from uselessness subjectively, nor to distinguish the high from the low. In his view, all things in the world have the same value and are irreplaceable. One of Zhuang Zi's most important representative works is his "Theory of Levelling All Things", which mentions that "Heaven and Earth are one, and I live side by side with all things." This also proves Zhuang Zi's point of view above, which does not discriminate other values from people's point of view, nor ignores its own intangible value. This is consistent with the view of Ralston, the representative of ecological holism. Ralston once said, "The values generated and carried by ecosystems and the conscious value evaluation of them by human beings as a successor are not entirely subjective, and have nothing to do with my conscious preferences." That is to say, as a part of the whole ecosystem, all the existence of ecosystem has value as long as it exists. Namely, existence has value. Human beings are the members of the whole ecosystem, not the judgment criterion and judgment of evaluation. Their existence value is objective, and has nothing to do with human subjectivity.

### III. THE THOUGHT OF ABSTINENT CONTENTMENT

In Taoist ecological ethics, we should not only maintain the ecological balance, but also have the idea of abstinent contentment when exploiting and utilizing natural resources. Lao Zi believes that when exploiting and utilizing nature, human beings should recognize the boundaries that nature can bear, and more importantly, they should be able to stop at the right time and be self-satisfied, and not be able to exploit nature in a way of draining the pond to get all the fish or killing chickens to get the eggs.

In Taoist thought, everything in the world has its own maximum limit. Human behavior should be limited in this scope, and they should know satisfaction.

Lao Zi once said, "He who loves most spends most; he who hoards much loses much; the contented man meets no disgrace; who know when to stop runs into no danger; he can long endure." (Translated by Lin Yutang) In other words, excessive care will lead to more waste, and a large number of goods will certainly have greater losses. If people know the self-satisfaction, they will not be humiliated; if they know to stop appropriately, they can avoid crisis, so as to achieve long-term stability. This is to warn people to restrain their desires. People can't just satisfy their desires, and harm

nature. There should be a limit to the opening up of nature. People should do everything properly. And Lao Zi ever said, "He who is contented with contentment; shall be always content." (Translated by Lin Yutang) This is to remind people that human beings should content with themselves, and they can maintain satisfaction for a long time. That is to say, when dealing with natural relations, people need to stop at the appropriate moment, so that the nature can continue to provide resources.

Later, Zhuang Zi also continued the idea of abstinent contentment. In the article "Dasheng", he mentioned that "those who have access to the true meaning of life will not pursue what life does not need; those who have access to the true meaning of life will not do things that are helpless to life." That is to say, people need to know how to be satisfied and how to stop, so that human beings can be healthy for a long time.

As the general principle of Taoism in utilizing natural resources, abstinent contentment requires human beings to exploit and utilize natural resources reasonably within the reasonable bearing range of nature, and make use of nature appropriately. This idea plays a guiding role in solving the increasingly serious ecological crisis and resource exhaustion.

### IV. THE THOUGHT OF UNDERSTANDING THE ETERNAL LAW AND HARMONY

From the overall concept, Taoism emphasizes the harmony and unity between man and nature. Man and all things is an organism, and the ecological balance is the code of conduct, that is, the idea of "understanding the eternal law and harmony", which is the behavioral requirement of Taoist ecological ethics. It pursues the harmonious coexistence between man and nature, and takes the protection of ecological system balance as the working principle.

Taoism holds that nature has its own law of development. People should not act against the law, but should conform to nature and follow the trend. Lao Zi ever said, "Like vegetation that luxuriantly grows; but returns to the root (soil) from which it springs; to return to the root is repose? It is called going back to one's destiny; going back to ones; destiny is to find the eternal law; to know the eternal law is enlightenment; and not to know the eternal law; is to court disaster." (Translated by Lin Yutang) The eternal law here refers to the law of objective existence in the development of things. This is to say that all things in nature will always return to their roots. For this ultimate action, we regard it as "quiet", and the other interpretation of "quiet" can also be called "resurrection". Resurrection means the law of recurrence. The Taoist theory of understanding the eternal law is to know the law of natural development, to act according to the law of nature, to maintain due attention and concern for nature, and to deal with the relationship between man and nature in accordance with the law. But this kind of conformity to nature does not mean passive inaction, but refers to acting according to time and local conditions, grasping the timing and opportunities. If it is in an inappropriate time and place, people should not deliberately pursue.

Lao Zi ever said, "To know harmony is to be in accord with the eternal; (And) to know eternity is called discerning." (Translated by Lin Yutang) Understanding harmony is called "the eternal law", and understanding "the eternal law" is called "being discerning". This has a deeper meaning than the eternal law mentioned above. People should understand the process of the growth of all things, the nature of all things, and the law of natural development. Importantly, the more important and basic principle is harmony. Therefore, the premise of human acting in nature is harmony, which is closer to the existence of Tao. It is because of this that all things can develop sustainably, which is also consistent with the requirements of contemporary ecological ethics.

Zhuang Zi ever said in "the Way of Heaven", "Understanding the inaction law that heaven and earth are based on, it is to grasp the root and the origin, and become a harmonious person with nature. This idea is used to equalize all things and conform to the people's conditions, and to cultivate harmonious person with all people. Being harmony with human beings is called human pleasure; and being harmony with nature is called heaven's pleasure." Knowing the law of harmony in nature and the great virtues of heaven and earth is the basic principle, which is the premise of governing by inaction. People, who use this idea to balance all things and conform to the people's conditions, are in harmony with others. Being harmony with human beings is called human pleasure; and being harmony with nature is called heaven's pleasure. People are in harmony with nature, they can realize the joy of heaven. The joy of heaven is a state of freedom and happiness integrated with heaven and earth, and it is the life purport of the people who obtain the "Tao".

For human beings, the principle of human behavior is to know "the eternal law", and "the harmony". Harmony is not only the natural law, but also the basic law of human behavior. If human beings reach the state of "harmony", they can grow up healthily.

## V. MODERN ENLIGHTENMENT

Taoism has always had a tremendous impact. From ancient times to today, it has been a treasure of Chinese culture. Taoism's ecological ethics thought provides a powerful guiding ideology for modern people and nature, and provides practical solutions for dealing with the relationship between man and nature, and for dealing with contemporary ecological crisis. Not only does it provide ideological resources for domestic ecological construction, but some western ecologists also take Taoist ecological ethics as the ideological basis for the development of western ecological development. Taoist ecological ethics has been universally recognized in the world.

Learning Taoist ecological ethics is conducive to the establishment of correct ecological concepts. At present, people have deviated from dealing with the nature. At present, human beings always put themselves in the supreme position and override nature, which leads to human being's blind demand for nature and believes that human beings can conquer nature. When human beings enjoy themselves

secretly in this infinite demand, they do not know that the natural revenge has come, and the ecological crisis has become more and more serious. Today, in dealing with the relationship between man and nature, Taoist ethics has given us great enlightenment, that is, to live with nature in a harmonious way, to know the eternal law and harmony, to be satisfied, and to know how to stop at the appropriate moment. Human beings are only a part of nature, and can't be above the nature. People should be in harmony with nature, and all things are equal. From this point of view, Taoist ecological ethics helps us to establish correct values.

The study of Taoist ecological ethics helps to foster a healthy lifestyle. Since the 1970s, Western hedonism has spread, and human lifestyle has been affected. In order to pursue material, luxury consumption and other unhealthy lifestyles, people blindly pursue material interests. In order to make benefit, people chop down the trees and kill the animals, resulting in the depletion of ecological resources and the reduction of ecological species. The ecological crisis has threatened human development. The Taoism advocates abstinent contentment, which gives us a good reminder that people should satisfy themselves, not pursue too much material, make use of nature with contentment mentality, and develop nature with the idea of knowing how to stop.

Drawing on Taoist ecological ethics is conducive to changing the concept of development. According to the traditional concept of development, human development only needs economy and material resources. People don't pay attention to the protection of nature, and only focus on the improvement of the quality of human material life. The development of human being mainly focuses on economic development. As a result, the natural environment in which people live is getting worse and worse. The natural environment is seriously damaged, and the ecological crisis is aggravated. Taoist ecological ethics regards inaction as its basic principle. As a methodology to deal with the contradiction between man and nature, it is enlightenment for human beings to interfere in nature excessively and destroy nature. Traditional concepts are bound to bring bad effects. People should change the development concepts, act according to the law, pay equal attention to both natural environment and material life, recognize the role of natural environment, and make the development in harmony with nature. Taoist ecological ethics provides a theoretical basis for the establishment of new development concepts.

The requirement of sustainable development aims at every link of society, which also includes green consumption. The green consumption mainly includes two aspects. One is resource-saving consumption, namely, people's consumption behavior should be coordinated with the storage of natural resources and the carrying capacity of the natural environment. In this consumption pattern, the quantity, type and behavior of people's consumption are consistent with the self-renewal ability and adjustment ability of natural ecology. The other is the environment-friendly consumption. The main characteristic is that human beings should pay more attention to the protection of ecological environment when meeting their own material needs and interests. People's consumption content and methods should meet the

requirements of environmental protection and coordinate with the self-purification energy of the natural environment. Based on meeting people's actual needs, green consumption advocates thrift and moderate consumption, which is a consumption mode of saving resources, reducing pollution and sustainable development. The Taoist ecological ethics emphasizes the principle of contentment and moderation, which coincides with the green consumption people advocate now. This idea enlightens us to change the consumption concept and implement green consumption, which is not only for the benefit of contemporary people, but also is for the survival and development of future generations.

However, people should also see its limitations. The harmonious coexistence between man and nature in Taoist ecological ethics is put forward under the condition of agricultural civilization, not after the ecological crisis. The systematic, complete and scientific ideological and theoretical system formed by scientific analysis and rational reflection on modern ecological environment has its limitations of the times.

## VI. CONCLUSION

As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, Taoist thought contains rich and profound survival wisdom and principles of dealing with affairs, which has a great guiding role in promoting contemporary human self-realm, enriching the soul and purifying the soul. The ecological ethics thought put forward by Taoism requires people to study nature objectively, evaluate nature and respect the law of nature, to realize that all things are equal and have their own values, to have an attitude of contentment in the development of nature, to be clear about the bearing capacity of nature, to be satisfied, to know how to stop, and to develop and utilize nature in a limited way. Nature can continue to be used for us. There are green waters, green mountains, blue sky, and white clouds.

Nowadays, people should not only seek theoretical support from modern ecological ethics, but also absorb nutrients from the excellent traditional culture of their own nation to find the ecological ethical wisdom in the excellent traditional culture. Only the theoretical essence rooted in their own nation can more thoroughly and profoundly affect our realistic activities, and more easily obtain our inner recognition.

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