Articles

To Rest Content in the Amnion of Deliverance: Comparative Literature and the Antinatalist (Anti-)Novel[1]

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"If ever we evade the wonted round,

The stagnant vortex of the eddying years,

The child must take the father by the beard,

And say, 'What did you in begetting me?'"

John Davidson, *A Woman and Her Son* (89)

Abstract

In the work below, I employ a comparative approach to the eventual writing of the antinatalist novel (or anti-novel). Antinatalism refers to the philosophical position that human existence is unbearable by default and that, as a consequence, human beings should stop reproducing in order to bring about human extinction. The outcome of this will be the lessening of suffering in the short run and the complete prevention of suffering in the future. As a rising philosophical position, antinatalism will inspire forms of expression outside formal philosophical discourse. It is my contention here that the traditional parameters of literature will be offset with the creation of (future) antinatalist literature. Part and parcel of this sea change will be the opening up of

1 This article builds on topics first discussed in my doctoral dissertation "Between Iron Skies and Copper Earth: A Post-comparative Attempt at Measuring the Diaphysis of the Human Predicament as the Conscious Condition." The exploration of comparative literature, however, is new.

new ways of expression inspired by new ways of understanding the link between the human and nonhuman in the twenty-first century. I argue that the incorporation of classical Chinese Daoist literature will be especially important in this regard.

Keywords: antinatalism, literature, morality, procreation, pessimism, Daoism

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Introduction

In the Chinese classic *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Poetry), there is a short poem that introduces the gist of the present work. In the "Tiao zhi hua" 苕之華 division of the Xiaoya 小雅 (Minor Odes), we read,[2]

> 苕之華、其葉青青。知我如此、不如無生。
>
> The flowers of the bignonia [are gone], [There are only] its leaves all-green. If I had known it would be thus with me, I had better not have been born.

Although there is some scholarly disagreement about the ultimate meaning of this excerpt,[3] the atmosphere revealed by these fifteen characters is tainted by a

2 The translation and interpolation are James Legge's. Unless otherwise noted, the Chinese source texts in the present work have been taken from the Chinese Text Project 中國哲學書電子化計劃, accessible online.

3 For Chen Zhenzhen 陈珍珍 (Chen 49), it refers to a lady in the prime of her life (盛年女子) who laments the fact that she was unable to find her own marriage partner (找不到对象和自己结婚). This saddened her all year round (一年四季心里忧苦) and ultimately drove her to bewail that she was ever born (后悔自己降生到这个世界上所致). The poem, thus, speaks of the trials and tribulations of a yearning heart. The utterance that it would have been better not to have been born (不如無生) can, therefore, be interpreted as incidental and "merely" rhetorical. Yang Guorong 杨国荣, on the other hand, affirms the emotional nature of the *Shijing* as a whole: he argues that this particular poem plays the pessimistic bass notes of the early Chinese metaphysics as a whole (Yang 43). For Yang, it shows that while the natural world (*ziran jie* 自然界) is full of life (生意盎然), the life of the poet himself (作者自身), by contrast (相比之下), is marked only by suffering (苦難). This sharp distinction (强烈比照) between the world and the human brings out the overall meaninglessness of human life (人生無意義感). For the poet-narrator, the realization of this warrants the belief that it would have been better not to have come into this world at all (不如不來到這個世界). Consequently, the lament in the *Shijing* that it would have been better not to have been born (不如無生) reveals a deep metaphysical rift at the heart of existence and does not simply emerge from the pangs of heartache.

gloom usually far removed from common sense. Regardless of the literal meaning that may be excavated here, it is the power of expression that manifests an original and increasingly apposite sensitivity to the everyday affairs of humankind. The desire expressed in the last sentence — that it would have been better not to have been born (不如無生) — is symptomatic of a strange, new type of philosophy that, while splenetic, hints at issues of the utmost moral importance. This is antinatalism, which refers to the philosophical position that human existence is unbearable by default and that, as a consequence, human beings should stop reproducing in order to bring about human extinction. The outcome of this will be the lessening of suffering in the short run and the complete prevention of suffering in the future.

While these are trying thoughts, these are also trying times. As radical as this all may sound, I believe that the phenomenon of antinatalism will leave an especially deep and wide imprint in the fabric of twenty-first-century philosophy and beyond. Not only does it appear that antinatalism flows quite naturally from the progression of ideas over the past centuries (Zandbergen "Between Iron Skies"), but also it is made all the more pertinent by the large-scale destruction that we see all around us at any given time. An almost exponentially increased human destructiveness is braided together with the full force of Mother Nature fighting back. This is the twin-headed monster that encapsulates the antinatalist diagnosis that it would have been better if humankind had never been.

In the present work, I take a comparative approach to the eventual writing of the antinatalist novel, or anti-novel. As a rising philosophical position, antinatalism will inspire forms of expression outside formal philosophical discourse. It is my contention here that the traditional parameters of literature will be offset by the creation of (future) antinatalist literature.

Part and parcel of this sea change will be the opening up of new ways of expression inspired by new ways of understanding the link between the human and nonhuman in the twenty-first century. I argue that the incorporation of classical Chinese Daoist literature will be especially important in this regard.

Section One

For antinatalist philosopher David Benatar, reproduction presents a serious moral dilemma because "we can never obtain the consent of those whom we bring into existence before we create them" (50). The world that we plunge people into by giving birth to them is, Benatar maintains, outright terrible. It is laden with senseless suffering. Because of this, he continues: "coming into existence can never be a benefit to the person who comes into existence" (Benatar 88). This automatically

means that it is greatly immoral to consciously subject anyone to human existence. But, life is not just particularly bad right here and right now. It is bad by definition: "[a]lthough it would have been better had none of the more than 106 billion come into existence, these people (among whom you and I are included) can no longer be prevented" (Benatar 168). In other words, our very existence is a great tragedy. While we can lament over this aspect of reality, we cannot undo it. What we can do, however, is to formulate drastic solutions to the drastic problems that emerge from the continued existence of humankind.

As David E. Cooper writes on antinatalism: "[b]etter that human beings had never been, but given that they are, the next best thing is to ensure, by ceasing to procreate, that they will not be around in the future" (4–5). Conscious human existence is understood to be so pernicious that it warrants a (permanent) halt in reproduction as a means to combat the rampant suffering that all human beings are subject to. The ultimate outcome of antinatalism, then, is extinction, no matter how innocently it is framed. Although Benatar tries as best he can to keep his moral radicalism within the boundaries of rational, analytical philosophy, the solutions that he offers to the human predicament are admittedly vague.

For Nicholas Smyth, contemporary procreative ethics, of which antinatalism is the black sheep, is unnecessarily abstract and has increasingly little bearing on the choices that ordinary people make. It is the reverie of people like Benatar, whom he consequently labels the "*enfant terrible* of procreative ethics" (Smyth 74). Smyth attempts to break this reverie with so-called existential grounding, which might bring concerns about procreation back into the orbit of everyday life. He writes that "[i]t is entirely unclear why impartially delivered facts about overall global suffering must outweigh other practical considerations for any rational agent, or how we are supposed to relate these facts to the actual decision-making processes of situated human beings" (Smyth 75).

Rather than muse endlessly over the ultimate (un)desirability of procreation, Smyth argues that we can gain practical insight from *actual* works on procreation. While he clearly recognizes, per Martha Nussbaum, the potential that literature has in the formation of moral conviction (Smyth 81), he opts for nonfiction (in particular autobiography) as a riposte to some of Benatar's more striking antinatalist allegations. Ultimately, for prospective parents themselves, a mother's account of her own child(ren) is likely more useful than any philosopher's account of children in general, even if the former might seem brazenly inconsequential compared to the latter. On this view, something like procreation might be "existentially grounding" for an individual even if it is uninformed by (abstract) philosophizing about the ultimate (un)

desirability of procreation at large.

But, we should not expect such insight to be easily generalizable. This brings us to the (potential) moral momentum of literature, which, in many cases, is equally un-generalizable.[4] One might interpret literature in a way that differs markedly from others. Yet, people like Benatar are not tolerant of such a multiplicity of views on prime ethical topics like procreation. For him, it is evident that procreation is problematic per se, and not just in a certain place and at a certain time. This inflexibility (or even absolutism) is easily overcome when we heed the transformative power of literary vignettes.

Martha Nussbaum studied the relationship between morality and literature and investigated why "the novel is itself a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a work of literary art" (Nussbaum 148). More than a mere source of aesthetic satisfaction, the written word can be a positive influence on people's moral behavior and choices. The reason for this might be that "[a] novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life" (162). While she is not at all dismissive of the power of philosophy in this regard, it is easy to see that the ordinary person might find literary vignettes more useful and rewarding than needlessly abstract and dense philosophical treatises. Importantly, she argues that philosophy must be "willing to assume a posture of sufficient humility" (161). Literature, on the other hand, does not have this problem.

In the context of the present work, how are we to imagine what it must be like to be an antinatalist or to hold antinatalist views? How can we sympathize with the view that human reproduction should stop, either permanently or temporarily? Moreover, how can such views be convincing outside of the domain of (academic) philosophy? When we look at the possibility of antinatalist literature, what will such literature have to look like if it is to assume a relative position of power vis-à-vis

4 We might, for that matter, include cinema as well. The first thing that comes to mind is the TV series *True Detective*. One of the protagonists is a gloomy detective named Rustin 'Rust' Cohle. Cohle espouses views that can all too easily be construed as antinatalist. He rails against procreation with the highfalutin philosophical sensitivities of a punk rocker. His shtick is that all life is all suffering and that we do not have the moral right to subject a newborn baby to this terrible tragedy. In the series, we learn that his daughter died years ago and his marriage was stranded because of this. Around this twin-headed tragedy, he crafts a personal pessimistic philosophy. While Cohle argues that his views on reproduction are fueled by an antinatalist philosophy, it is more likely that his adherence to the latter comes from personal loss and tragedy, not from some penetrating insight into the very nature of being. This is an important thing to keep in mind, as it merely reveals a tenuous link with what we now refer to as antinatalist philosophy. For more on the various "shades" of antinatalism, see Zandbergen "Wailing."

contemporary antinatalist philosophy? As we will see shortly, the traditional novel is seriously disadvantaged when it comes to expressing some of the core tenets of philosophical antinatalism. As a consequence, we have to take a much more expansive view on what literature is and what it can be. This leads us away from localized literature and brings us to comparative (intercultural and intergenerational) literature.

Aaron Matz notes that the traditional novel, much like traditional philosophy, takes life and life-giving for granted in a way that the prospective antinatalist novel does not. Framed as such, the traditional novel is a necessary product of traditional society. Daniel Just describes how the novel, at the doorstep of industrialized modernity, effectively responded to, and prescribed novel ways of making sense of the new wave of individualism that swept over society. Even revolutionary literary movements, such as the ones that popped up in postwar Europe still paid lip service to these earlier modes of expression. Just writes that "[t]he majority of postwar novelistic experiments perpetuated their genre primarily because they remained under the auspices of the operative notion of the individual" (Just 388).

In other words, both traditional literature and philosophy are implicitly pronatalist in that they view reproduction as, not only unproblematic but as good and even natural. Since antinatalism is a comparatively new philosophical movement, it is no surprise that there has, as of yet, not been any standard definition of antinatalist literature. What is certain is that such literature cannot rely on the same literary tropes and expectations as traditional (pro-natalist) literature if it is to incorporate new types of philosophy like antinatalism. Although antinatalism elicits all sorts of responses from people, it is not controversial to view it as tragic. Any theory that vouches for the extinction of the human species cannot reasonably be expected to be seen as un-tragic. When thinking about prospective antinatalist literature, it is important to separate it from existing tragic fiction. As Matz rightfully notes, "[i]t is not a prerequisite of tragedy to refuse the repeopling of the world" (13). This reveals an important asymmetry between antinatalism and tragedy. Although it is difficult to imagine an antinatalist novel that is not also tragic, a tragic work of fiction need not be, and generally is not, antinatalist.

But, Matz rightly asks, "[h]ow can literature dramatize a cessation of becoming? With respect to procreation in particular, the question is how a novel, for instance, can represent the negativity of antinatalism" (19). It is unrealistic to demand of literature that it provides an endoscopic view from behind the jaws of existence. For that would require nonexistent authors, too. It can, nonetheless, gesture in the general direction of nonexistence. The praxis that this inspires need not necessarily be the total reversion of all human existence but may correspond to the informed

decision to, at least, limit one's progeny to a reasonable number, whatever this may mean. Accordingly, antinatalist literature can be understood as "the moral-aesthetic proxy for contraception" (Matz 27). Prospective antinatalist literature, then, must be able to inspire a praxis of restraint that we cannot feel inspired to by, say, the traditional Victorian novel that inadvertently relies on the promise of life-giving and constant repeopling of the (literary) world.

Given the above, when we reconsider Nussbaum's emphasis on the link between literature and morality, we are led to expand the horizon of the written word and, as will be done here, to incorporate texts from different modes of thinking (and epochs) as well. In this context, it is important to look at the realm of Chinese thought, and at Daoism in particular. It is my contention here that Daoist texts will be extremely important in the creation of prospective antinatalist literature. It should be clear that this is not so because there are Daoist texts that say exactly the same thing that modern, philosophical antinatalist treatises and essays do. Daoism is not antinatalist and antinatalism is not Daoist. What these movements share, however, is the observation that human life really is not all that it is often made out to be. Human existence is seen as inherently destructive to the nonhuman (whether one describes this as Dao 道, the environment, the animal kingdom or even Gaia). Both movements consequently prescribe a praxis (of sorts) that aims to rectify this asymmetric relationship between human and nonhuman. As such, it is argued that (parts of) these Daoist texts can illuminate the underlying problems that modern antinatalism responds to as well and can inspire a moral praxis of restraint that would be agreeable from the perspective of antinatalist philosophy.[5] As we will see below,

5 It can be argued that there is a material basis for this as well. Liu Hongtao 刘洪涛 and Xie Jiangnan 谢江南 note that the place that Chinese writing has traditionally occupied in the realm of so-called World Literature has been far from prominent. But, the mechanisms that gave rise to this poor standing have recently been openly challenged by the important work of people like Chen Sihe 陈思和. Liu and Xie write that the situation has changed markedly in the twenty-first century "against the backdrop of China's increasing international influence and the Chinese nation's increased self-confidence." (它是在中国的国际影响力日益上升、民族越来越自信的背景下产生的) (Liu and Xie 58). As a consequence of this, we can argue that "Chinese literature has been given equal rank with the literature of other countries." (中国文学被放到与其他国家文学平等的地位上) (Liu and Xie 58). In dynamic terms, this also means that Chinese literature has passed through the successive stations of "taking" (拿) from other cultures, "having" (有) a rudimentary conception of an autochthonous literary tradition, to now finally "giving" (给) some of its own in the sphere of international literary exchange (Liu and Xie 59). Wang Ning also argues that given China's economic advances over the last decades, its literature cannot but gain in prominence. He is realistic about the future of Chinese literature on the world stage, however, and argues that the intensified study of English as the lingua franca of international literary exchange would greatly benefit Chinese writers in their quest for global recognition (Wang 90).

it is the shared emphasis on anti-anthropocentrism and anti-anthropomorphism in both Daoism and antinatalism that is important here.

When we understand morality as a dry set of algorithms that can be *used* or consulted to make certain ethical choices in daily life it is difficult to apply Nussbaum's insights to Daoism. But, when we view morality as a more flexible catalog of possibilities and expectations, then Daoism "in fact involves substantive proposals concerning how to act, how to live, and what kind of person to be" (Lee 511). These proposals can satisfactorily be subsumed under the rubric of morality. Accordingly, the texts in which we find them may inspire readers to behave in a certain (moral) way. As we will see shortly, this inspiration is rooted in the very "way" of the universe laid out in these texts.

What unites texts from the loose constellation of Daoist writing is the emphasis on Dao and the adoption of what Jung H. Lee calls the "Daocentric perspective" (529). It is the centrality of Dao in the cosmos at large that (ideally) inspires human beings to behave in a certain way here on Earth. This creates "an *ethics of metanoia*: a call for the radical revaluation and reordering of one's fundamental orientations to coincide with the underlying structure and pattern of ultimate reality (i.e., the Dao)" (Lee 511–2). In other words, people are enjoined to synchronize themselves with the patterns of the (cosmic) Dao that infuses all that is. Since there is a normative emphasis on such synchronization throughout the texts studied here, this quest can be said to take on the shape of a moral project. When we thus heed the moral potential of Daoist texts, and trace this back to the metaphysical core principles on which it is based, we can come to a fuller understanding of the practical relevance of the incorporation of such non-Western texts in the drafting of prospective antinatalist literature that will, likely, be an important preoccupation in the decades to come.

Section Two

Although we cannot get a first-hand account of Dao 道, the sources at our disposal give circumstantial evidence that reveals some of "its" general propensities and characteristics. The noun that aptly encompasses these is "silence." Although not referring to Daoism (or literature), French-Israeli philosopher André Neher argues that "[t]he Bible goes…even so far as to suggest that silence is the metaphysical form of the cosmos" (9). For Neher, this is an attempt at solving the problem of theodicy in relation to the Holocaust. While this is clearly a noble endeavor, of special importance in the current work is the understanding of silence as the "metaphysical form of the cosmos." This is also one of the foundational views espoused in the texts studied here. We find an example of this in the "Dao yuan" 道原 (Original

Dao) chapter in the *Wenzi* 文子 where we read that

> 有形則有聲，無形則無聲。
> The formed has a voice, while the formless is silent.[6]

The "formed" (有形) refers to the phenomena that inhabit the world, chief among these being human beings. What distinguishes humans from other 'objects' in the world is their ability to not just emit sound but to articulate a *voice*, which is a conscious deviation from the natural silence and quietude that mark the "formless" (無形) Dao. While the ultimate efficacy of this human deviation from the cosmic path of Dao can be questioned, we certainly get the impression that ordinary, conscious human existence represents an affront to the otherwise spontaneous, fluid, and silent Dao. Framed as such, reproduction becomes a natural vehicle that leads to more and more disruption in the overall cosmic traffic of Dao. For if human clamor piques the otherwise silent Dao, reproduction only ever deepens the disruption.

While procreative sex is not, as a consequence of this, forbidden by Daoist texts, its cosmic implications are brought to the fore. This stands in marked contrast with the traditional celebration of procreative sex associated with Confucianism. While sex was discussed in classical Chinese sources, wanton sexual behavior was not tolerated, as it was seen as a grave danger to societal harmony. The sublimation of the basest of human desires was one of the main recommendations of Confucian moral practice as a means of establishing and maintaining social harmony. While moderation was advised in all matters pertaining to the expression of desire, Paul Goldin writes that "lust is simply taken to be the cardinal example" (64). As such, lust attracted special scrutiny, and a framework of sexuality was constructed around this. It was imperative to bridle spontaneous sexual outbursts in order to allow for society to function harmoniously and to protect Confucian morality at its center.

As Goldin continues, "the difficulty of this view is that it does not conceive of any form of morally acceptable sexual activity other than for the express purpose of producing offspring. All nonprocreative sex is corrupting and enervating" (64). On the orthodox Confucian view, then, sex was chartered for the production of male heirs that would strengthen the family tree. Gender roles were written in stone. Sex was politicized, and its recreational component was painted over with official colors. Goldin elaborates on the metaphors of sexuality in ancient Chinese poetry and

6 The allusion that Dao is formless and silent should not lead one to think that it does not exist. Rather, the formlessness and silence of Dao are, as in Neher's case mentioned above, meaningful in their own unique way.

reveals how early on a link was established between coital and political hierarchy. The relationship between ruler and minister was likened to (or equated with) that between a man and "his" woman. Accordingly, "[e]very sexual act is thus in some sense a political act, just as every political act is in some sense a sexual act" (Goldin 43). Although this poetic license was revoked by subsequent administrations, the images dreamt of and communicated in this early poetry, where verdant poetical images confounded the audience's views of romance and might alike, all but dried up.

The concept of *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) fueled the need for reproduction and the extension of the family line.[7] We can evoke many instances from the classics that attest to the importance of this. A good example is the famous Confucian vignette in which a son is exhorted to stay loyal to his father, even in the case of the latter's wrongdoing. While the Duke of She 葉公 boasts that in his realm honest sons would not be able to hide their father's crimes, Confucius responds,

> 吾黨之直者異於是。父為子隱，子為父隱，直在其中矣。
>
> In our district the honest people are different from that. A father covers up for his son; a son covers up or his father. There's honesty in that, too. (Watson 91)

This passage reveals that *zhi* 直 (uprightness) is not found in the letter of the law but in loyalty to the family unit, and in particular to one's own father. As one is not to betray one's father, one can also expect to not be betrayed by one's own offspring. This does not mean that filial piety entails blind obedience to one's father. An interesting analysis of the problem is given by Huang Yong who claims that "non-disclosure of one's parents' wrongdoing itself is not upright in and of itself, but uprightness lies within it because this is what makes uprightness possible" (33). For Huang, the filial son should not disclose his father's crime so that he can remonstrate with him in private, rather than subject him to (public) punishment by the government. In other words, filial piety manifests itself not in blind obedience to one's father, but

7 As Buddhism spread across Asia, so did its promotion of sexual abstinence in the monasteries. This is not to say that celibacy was unequivocally welcomed by all. Unsurprisingly, there were many obstacles in the way of its universal adoption among Buddhists around Asia. In fact, John Krieschnick writes that among the many challenges and opportunities brought about by the penetration of Buddhism into the Chinese religious landscape, "perhaps no idea was so strange or faced so many obstacles to success as the notion of celibacy" (226). While Chinese monks eventually embraced celibacy as well, it was this particular aspect of Buddhism that attracted the most ire and ridicule from Confucians, who viewed it as unpatriotic and, literally, self-defeating.

in recognizing and harnessing the possibilities of remedying his behavior where and when this might be necessary. In the story above, the son's filial piety is conditional on his further actions. If the father keeps stealing sheep, and the son keeps refusing to disclose this to authorities, then it is evident that the conditions for rectifying his father's behavior have not been met, and the son will not be truly upright 直.

A successful society should be built around this core notion of filial piety. This is what sets humans apart from beasts and brutes. In the "Feixiang" 非相 (Contra Physiognomy) chapter in the *Xunzi* 荀子, we read,

> 夫禽獸有父子，而無父子之親，有牝牡而無男女之別。
>
> Even though wild animals have parents and offspring, there is no natural affection between them as between father and son, and though there are male and female of the species, there is no proper separation of the sexes. (Knoblock 206)

Nonhuman animal society cannot be based on the same foundational values of filial piety and gendered segregation that are key components in the Confucian civilizational project. This differs markedly from Daoism. Given its general refusal to write any notion of social hierarchy into stone, Daoist society would likely be closer to the animal kingdom than to the realm of Confucian ethics.[8] It would be exactly the lack of such a Confucian pecking order that would mark a Daoist society.

Although there are some parallels, the Daoist theory of sex is overall very different from its Confucian counterpart. Although Daoists frequently discussed sex and sexual rites, they too castigated lechery. Furthermore, sex was also regimented in their own (religious) communities. Yet, sex was not politicized, and it was not blindly valued as a vehicle to produce male heirs to keep the family tree firm and nourished. Rather, sex had a spiritual component as it allowed Daoists of both sexes to reach higher states of inner cultivation. Elaborate sexual rites were enacted that were meant to prevent impregnation. Procreation was only ever an undesired result of intercourse. As Livia Kohn points out, sexual energy

> has to be harnessed and properly refined, so that the ultimate goal of Daoist cultivation can be reached: immortality, an extended lifespan, and mystical vision on earth followed by a continued spirit existence in the heavens after this body has fallen away. (Kohn 241)

8 Because of this, Xunzi argued that the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 was unnecessarily abstract and detached from the ordinary concerns of Confucians (Knoblock 102).

While intercourse was separated from its otherwise procreative promise, it nonetheless played a part in the spiritual logistics of Daoist theory and practice. Furthermore, the conviction that the proper channeling of sexual powers may yield spiritual offspring (as opposed to actual children) became one of the characteristics of the first religious Daoist sects. Among these, "sexual rites were of central importance. All members of the community were initiated into a religious life that comprised a strict moral code and various psychophysiological practices" (Kohn 250).

People engaged in these rites not for pleasure but in order to validate their cosmological and philosophical worldview centered on Dao. These sexual rites were merely a springboard from which practitioners could follow the trajectory of transcendence and synchronize themselves with the clockwork of the cosmos. This relates to a leading motif in Daoist theory. Hans-Georg Moeller writes that since

> Daoism does not look at the world from an anthropocentric perspective … this is also true for its views on sexuality. Human beings are sexual beings, but their sexuality is only part of a larger sexuality that encompasses all of nature. (*The Philosophy* 26)

In the Daoist view, sex is not simply an act between two humans potentially resulting in offspring. It is a *cosmic* process whereby Daoist practitioners can escape the confines of typical human existence. Wanton sexual behavior runs counter to this. Since Dao precedes the cosmic separation into heaven and Earth, and the eventual branching off of humankind, Daoists should mirror this, too. There is, then, a retrogressive movement away from sexual differentiation towards the undifferentiated aura of the Dao. This under-emphasis on the ordinary contours of sexuality and reproduction coupled with the overemphasis on Dao reveals a fundamental devaluation of the human being vis-à-vis its cosmic background. There are many vignettes that testify to this blooming anti-anthropocentrism and anti-anthropomorphism so justifiably associated with Daoism.

Section Three

One of the more famous stories in the "Inner Chapters" 內篇 of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 tells the story of the death of the mythical Emperor Hundun (渾沌).[9] The guileless emperor is accidentally killed by two of his well-meaning guests, Hu忽 and Shu 儵, who "meet each other in Hundun's realm from time to time" (時相與遇於

9 My understanding of this story was shaped to a large degree by Girardot.

渾沌之地). As they are always "received very kindly" (待之甚善), his guests "wish to reciprocate Hundun's kindness" (謀報渾沌之德) once and for all. They note that "all humans have seven openings" (人皆有七竅) used to "see, hear, eat and breathe" (視聽食息), which only this one lacks (此獨無有). Strangely motivated by this observation, Hu and Shu decide to drill (鑿) a series of holes into Hundun's natural, untouched, and holeless face. After they "drill a hole a day" (日鑿一竅), the emperor dies after seven days (七日而渾沌死).

Although this short story can be interpreted along various lines, from the religious to the sociopolitical, these ultimately all lead back to the fundamental distinction made here between the original, holeless condition of Emperor Hundun and his later "drilled" state, which also results in his death. Where the former is seen as natural and innocent, the latter is artificial and "humanized." We read that Hundun initially did not have a face or any other human characteristics, thereby symbolizing Dao in all "its" purity, silence, and spontaneity. This state is then greatly disrupted by the, nonetheless well-intentioned, "gift" of human marks of distinction, namely the eyes, nostrils, ears, and mouth. In their attempt to make a "human" out of the "nonhuman," Hu and Shu end up killing Hundun, or Dao. This reveals an innate resistance to the humanizing attempt of the emperor's guests, which thereby symbolizes the incursion of the "human" into the "nonhuman" more generally. The story, therefore, revolves around the tension between the simple ways of the world and the noisy, serpentine ways of humankind. The more humans attempt to reify all that is around them, the more disastrous the consequences will be. Importantly, however, as tragic as this may all sound, this is not the end of the story.

For Hans-Georg Moeller, the story of Hundun's death should be seen as a kind of parody that does not merely have a rhetorical purpose in the text itself but also important extra-textual efficacy. The accidental killing of the emperor by his two guests Hu and Shu may impact the reader as well. Moeller writes that "[p]erhaps the sudden demise of the story's protagonist is meant to signal paradoxically to the reader that he or she, too, has, unwittingly, now come to an end and reached a stage of no return" ("Hundun's Mistake" 783.) In other words, having traversed the many stories and illustrations of the *Zhuangzi*, the reader might now have crossed the event horizon of merely passive readership and absorption. As such, the story of the emperor's death can have a transformative effect that, paradoxically, gives birth to a new type of *reader.*

Consequently, this prime Daoist vignette should not be read as a tragedy. Rather, Moeller argues, it should be seen as a kind of Daoist comedy. The death of Emperor Hundun should be celebrated so that readers themselves may not fall victim to

the same hubris that killed him. This reveals Daoism's encompassing concentration on the cosmos at large rather than on the finite doings of humankind. As such, the brief myth of the death of Hundun as described in the *Zhuangzi* critiques a human-centered understanding of the world and problematizes the continued privilege of the human species over and against the nonhuman (whether this refers to nature, the environment, Gaia, the animal kingdom or Dao). As such, Moeller writes that the death of Emperor Hundun "could not illustrate anti-anthropocentrism and anti-anthropomorphism more directly" ("Hundun's Mistake" 788).

Although not referring to Chinese texts, Patricia MacCormack welcomes the anti-anthropocentric and anti-anthropomorphic potential of writing in general and argues that this potential must be tapped into even more fervently in the twenty-first century. She writes that "we are in a time of need for different modes of expression that use art and alternative syntax than that of the anthropocene's dominant logocentrism" (MacCormack 102). As we have seen with Emperor Hundun's well-meaning guests Hu and Shu, in spite of undoubtedly sound intentions, humans inadvertently but unsurprisingly subscribe to a human-centered understanding of the world: they continually seek to turn the nonhuman into something recognizably and undeniably human. What MacCormack is after, then, is an emancipation from such (unconscious) forms of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. The various meta-problems faced in the twenty-first century crown a timeless sequence of human domination over the nonhuman and necessitate an overhaul of humankind's innate anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. This need is also reflected in the call for new modes of expression that align themselves better with new ways of understanding the relationship between the human and nonhuman, chief among these the modern philosophical movement of antinatalism:

> What if we configure death as an inevitable ecstasy that constitutes how we live, rather than a cessation of that life? What if we were born again for the Earth? Perceived this way the death of the human comes after the death of the anthropocene, as humans live as carers for this Earth. In this sense what is known as antinatalism has its unfortunate insinuation of misanthropy and privation removed, and the cessation of this species is reminded that care for who remains is still an overwhelming creative task of nurturing. (MacCormack 109)

Although the antinatalist prognosis is dire indeed, MacCormack wants to isolate its redeeming qualities centered on the eventual dissolution of humanity's deeply

rooted anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. It is argued here that abstract, and at times vague, philosophical discourse like antinatalism is seriously disadvantaged when it is propagated through traditional, philosophical means. It makes sense, therefore, to turn to literature and literary vignettes. As we have seen, traditional (Western) literature, with its implicit message of life-giving and 'repeopling the world', is not a very powerful medium for this. Rather more helpful are some of the key passages from the Daoist corpus, such as the myth of Emperor Hundun discussed above.[10] As we have seen, Hundun's death is not merely tragically recounted. There is, in this short story, a call to action as well. For the shattering of human entitlement in the face of a vacuous or faceless cosmos inspires a praxis of restraint that, step by step, allows a return to some of the *world's* former glory. Moeller writes on this that,

> [r]ather than having any privileged natural role or function, humankind is embedded in encompassing natural contexts that determine the conditions of its survival. Accordingly, rather than imposing themselves on the natural world, humans ought to integrate themselves into their non-human environment. ("Hundun's Mistake" 788)

This is a sea change from the typical, unconscious subscription to ordinary, logocentric modes of understanding the relationship between human and nonhuman as well as modes of expression that pay lip service to these. This might well seem strange from the typical human point of view but need not be so strange when set against the expansive horizon of Dao.

Section Four

In the "Da yue" 大樂 (Great Music) chapter in the expansive *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (The Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü), we read that

> 亡國戮民，非無樂也，其樂不樂。溺者非不笑也，罪人非不歌也，狂者非不武也，亂世之樂，有似於此。君臣失位，父子失處，夫婦失宜，民人呻吟，其以為樂也，若之何哉？

10 A case can also be made for nonacademic, popular nonfiction such as Alan Weisman's thought experiment *The World Without Us.* Weisman writes that "[t]he intelligent solution would require the courage and the wisdom to put our knowledge to the test. It would be poignant and distressing in ways, but not fatal. It would henceforth limit every human female on Earth capable of bearing children to one" (Weisman 349).

It is not that doomed states and disgraced peoples lack music, but rather that their music does not convey joy. It is not that "a drowning man does not laugh," "a condemned man does not sing," or "a crazy man does not dance." The music of a disordered age is like these. When ruler and minister fail to keep their proper places, father and son fail in their proper duties, and husband and wife fail to maintain their proper relationship, the people groan and sigh; but can this be considered to be music? (Knoblock and Riegel 137–8)[11]

As it builds upon notions from divergent intellectual traditions, the *Lüshi chunqiu* is not an easy work to characterize. But, in spite of its overt syncretism, parts of the text can be particularly useful in illuminating some of the core Daoist notions discussed here.[12] From the traditional Confucian point of view, music was held to be a reflection of deep inner harmony. Only a well-ordered (Confucian) state could produce harmonious and beautiful music. Although "vanquished nations and oppressed people" could produce music of their own, this music could only ever reflect their inner state of turmoil. As a consequence, this music could never be harmonious or beautiful. There is, therefore, a solid connection between inner harmony and outer expression. Only adherence to the key tenets of Confucian ethics will properly conduct this relationship.

In the example of the drowning person (溺者) in the passage above, while this person might desperately laugh in the face of a terrible death, this laughter, like the music of a vanquished nation or oppressed people, cannot truly be joyous (樂). Although it is certainly strange for a person to laugh while drowning, Confucians argue that it is equally strange to expect a state in turmoil to produce harmonious or beautiful music. In both cases, there is a dangerous incongruence between inner state and outer expression. These simply do not align, and this results in disaster, or even death. Harmony can only flow from a well-ordered state or a person who properly adheres to the tenets of Confucianism. This is the Confucian notion of *zhengming* 正名 (rectification of names).

11 Scott Cook explains that with these metaphors, the authors may have taken their cue from the pages of the pre-Qin *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Cook 327n).

12 Scott Cook writes on this that "[i]t may be too much to assert that a single set of tenets prevails throughout the entire *Lüshi chunqiu*, given the diversity of its authors and the unlikelihood of complete uniformity, not to mention allowances built in for unresolved contradictions described above. Yet a careful reading of the work shows that throughout much of it, a certain preference seems to be given, in ways both subtle and overt, to the thought of Lao Zi, or that of the emerging 'Huang-Lao' 黄老 tradition" (Cook 318).

From the Daoist perspective, this obsession with aligning or rectifying the inner and outer is not only counterproductive — it is dangerous. For not only does it impact humans, it also tarnishes Dao because it runs counter to "its" natural fluidity, silence, and spontaneity. Although resistance to this core Confucian notion of *zhengming* is found throughout the Daoist corpus, it is especially expounded on in the *Zhuangzi*. As Moeller et al. write, "the *Zhuangzi* views the demand for congruent names as a recipe for creating sociopolitical oppression, deceit, and/or hypocrisy as well as personal depression, pride, and/or arrogance" (309). The rectification of names, in other words, is but another vehicle for the continued reliance on anthropocentric and anthropomorphic bias. This is why texts like the *Zhuangzi* rather cherish the *in*congruence of names.

Returning now to the passage from the *Lüshi chunqiu*, we can argue that a drowning person might as well laugh in the face of one of the most terrifying deaths imaginable. This is not to say, however, that drowning people *should* laugh because it somehow accords better with some inner sense of acceptance or resignation to fate. Rather, there is no moral manual or blueprint for action, which is exactly what the Confucians are implicitly accused of promoting. There is no one way to behave correctly, not even in the face of death. Exemplary people, sages, behave naturally and spontaneously and take things as they come. In this, they mirror Dao "itself" by taking on its qualities and predilections. This might well include laughter at grossly inappropriate times (or at least, such behavior is not seen as outright 'wrong'). In the same vein, we can argue that the criminal (罪人) might as well sing (歌) or the madman dance (舞).[13] These seemingly strange types of behavior reveal the incongruence of names implicit in the worldview of texts like the *Zhuangzi*.

This worldview is based on implicit notions of anti-anthropocentrism and anti-anthropomorphism. With an overemphasis on Dao and a simultaneous under-emphasis on strictly human affairs, a "Daocentric perspective" is enacted that counters the inadvertent bias towards the human and, at the same time, against the nonhuman. While this is not to say that human affairs are completely irrelevant, they have to be understood in the context of the nonhuman, or Dao. This inspires a praxis of restraint that is agreeable from the perspective of contemporary antinatalist philosophy as well, which equally fervently critiques the bias towards the human. Daoist stories like the ones discussed above could not, in the words of Moeller, "illustrate anti-anthropocentrism and anti-anthropomorphism more directly" ("Hundun's Mistake" 788). As such, these can be helpful tools in elucidating some key aspects of

13 Along with Knoblock and Riegel in their translation, it is noted that *wu* 武here should be read as *wu* 舞.

radical, contemporary philosophies like antinatalism that will, in all likelihood, gain prominence in the decades to come.

Conclusion

This article started with a short passage from the *Shijing* that expressed the lament that it would have been better not to have been born (不如無生). This utterance aptly introduced the contemporary philosophical phenomenon of antinatalism, or the view that life is so inherently disruptive that people should stop reproducing in order to contribute (eventually) to human extinction. As a novel philosophical and intellectual movement, we cannot yet speak of antinatalist literature or fiction. In order to draft prospective antinatalist literature, we cannot take our cue from the traditional modes of literary expression such as the novel, which (still) mirrors a very specific set of socioeconomic circumstances. Accordingly, the typical novel is implicitly concerned with life-giving and "repeopling of the world," which run counter to the core tenets of antinatalism that are inherently anti-anthropocentric and anti-anthropomorphic.

In order to overcome the shortcomings of traditional literature and philosophy in the face of the looming threat of antinatalism and similar, radical ways of understanding the link between the human and nonhuman, it makes sense to gather materials from different intellectual traditions and times, sometimes far removed from our own. In the work above, I made a strong case for the incorporation of Daoist material in the drafting of prospective antinatalism. This is not to say that Daoism is somehow inherently antinatalist (or that antinatalism is inherently Daoist). But Daoism builds on foundational notions of anti-anthropocentrism and anti-anthropomorphism that importantly underline contemporary antinatalist philosophy as well. More than a mere openness to variegated views and perspectives for its own sake, we are led to unconventional ways of beholding the relationship between the human and nonhuman that do not blindly privilege the former to the detriment of the latter.

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