

## Gaia and Taoism

(Transcript of the paper presented to the 2nd Chapman Conference on Gaia Theory at the University of Valencia, June 2000 by Peter Horton)

Today I want to explore what I feel is perhaps the most challenging philosophical implication of Gaia theory, which is that, in a profound way, Gaian processes exist 'beyond morality'. This concept represents a paradigm shift for the way we view our relationship to the natural world, both on an ordinary day-to-day survival level and within the institutions and civilised structures we have developed. The 'existing beyond morality' viewpoint is entirely separate from those arguments about the moral implications of Gaia theory conventionally examined in the context of environmentalism or global stewardship. As Lovelock says in the preface to the new edition of 'The Ages of Gaia':

'Gaia theory forces a planetary perspective. It is the health of the planet that matters, not that of some individual species of organisms. This is where Gaia and the environmental movements, which are concerned with the health of people, part company.' (p.xix)

There are two crucial notions which underpin this shift into the 'beyond morality' arena, and again I will quote from 'The Ages of Gaia':

'Through Gaia theory I...see the system of the material Earth and the living organisms on it, evolving so that self-regulation is an emergent property.' (pp.19-20)

Firstly, Gaia is self-regulating; it just does it, and has been doing it for millions of years.

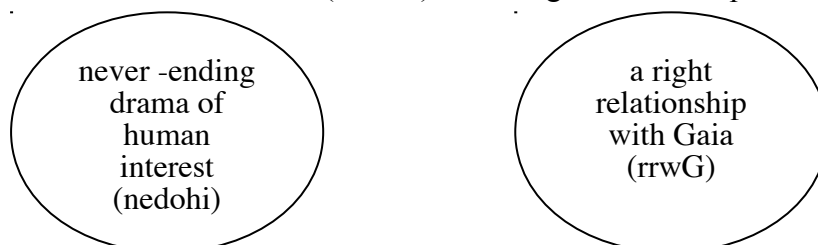
'Gaia theory is as out of tune with the broader humanist world as it is with established science. In Gaia we are just another species, neither the owners nor the stewards of this planet.' (p13)

Secondly, in Gaia we are just another species, no more or less important than any other part of the process. Humans are a part of Gaia, but the Gaia system doesn't need humans to make it work. Gaia existed for millions of years before we came along and is likely to continue long after we have contrived our own demise. Moral codes are a peculiarly human construct about what is deemed to be right or wrong, and as such they may not be the most appropriate tools when trying to come to terms with a system in which self-regulation is an emergent property.

The challenge, then, is how can a species which gets high on fixing things from a moral perspective, learn to live with a system which just keeps the whole thing going on a moment to moment basis in a spectacularly successful way? Or, as Lovelock so succinctly puts it:

'Our future depends much more upon a right relationship with Gaia than with the never-ending drama of human interest.' (ibid p.13)

We are dealing here with what Edward de Bono would call two different logic bubbles, the 'never-ending drama of human interest' (nedohi) and a 'right relationship with Gaia' (rrwG):



What might be intelligent and appropriate decisions and actions in one bubble may well be irrelevant in the other. As part of the nedohi bubble we are here in this room playing at science conferences; at the same time, as part of the Gaia bubble our bodies are keeping us alive and well-ish without any conscious management on our part.

It's also worth noting that the 'never ending drama of human interest' is very noisy and busy and has the habit of blocking out what Gaia is getting up to: 'How can we revere the living world if we can no longer hear the bird song through the noise of traffic, or smell the sweetness of fresh air?' (GII p.197) asks Lovelock. Add to this a fear that many people have of a phrase like 'existing beyond morality', the whiff of anarchy in the air, and the importance of keeping the two logic bubbles clearly separate becomes obvious.

My particular interest is in seeing how the ancient Chinese natural systems philosophy of Taoism might help us in finding a right relationship with Gaia. There will only be time today to give an overview and one or two examples, but maybe a more detailed informal discussion can follow later. I must also say at this point that it is difficult to come up with a definitive way for westerners to pronounce Chinese words and names, so bear with me if you pronounce them differently - I'm sure it won't block the meaning.

(OHP list of the key words and Chinese sources so that they can be shown when mentioned)

The foundations of Taoism go back to Chinese philosophers writing in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, and in broad terms it deals with the way humanity co-operates with the course, trend or flow of the natural world. Already here we have two key ideas - co-operation and dynamic movement. F.W. Mote, in his book 'Intellectual Foundations of China' puts it like this:

'The genuine Chinese cosmogony is that of organismic process, meaning that all of the parts of the entire cosmos belong to one organic whole and that they all interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process.' (p.19)

and Tu Wei-Ming, in his essay 'The Continuity of Being', adds:

'The organismic process as a spontaneously self-generating life process exhibits three basic motifs: continuity, wholeness and dynamism. All modalities of being, from a rock to heaven, are integral parts of a continuum which is often referred to as the 'great transformation'.' (Call. p69-70)

I think that we are not a million miles away, here, from Lovelock's closely coupled self-regulating system driven by the free energy available from sunlight. In fact, 'Gaia the Great Transformation' does have a certain ring to it!

One of the basic difficulties for people who have been brought up in the nedohi bubble is to cut out the noise and busyness long enough to actually experience how the 'great transformation' manifests itself. Lovelock urges us to try an experiment:

'Travel back in your memory to the time when you first awoke, that exquisite moment of childhood when first you came alive - the sudden rush of sound and sight...I seem to recall sunlight and soft fresh air; then suddenly knowing who I was and how good it was to be alive.....As a child I recognised life intuitively. As an adult wondering about the Earth's

strange atmosphere - a mixture made of incompatible gases such as oxygen and methane coexisting like foxes and rabbits in the same burrow - I was forced to recognise Gaia, to intuit its existence long before I could describe it in proper scientific terms.'

(GII p15-16)

What Lovelock is describing here is his intuitive reaction to being part of the patterns and order of nature. In the Taoist tradition the organic order of nature as distinct from mechanical order is known as Li. Li can be found in the grain of wood, in the patterns of moving water, the forms of trees and clouds, the scattering of pebbles on a beach. Li is the organic order which mathematically we now call fractal. I remember how liberating I found it, after reading about Chaos theory and fractal geometry, to start looking at the patterns in nature as fractal and not Euclidian. Euclidian is in the nedohi bubble, fractals, or li, belong to the rrwG. And the appreciation of Li leads us to the next stage in our search for a right relationship with Gaia - the important concept of wu-wei.

Wu-wei may be translated as non-action, or perhaps better as non-forcing. Wu-wei actions go with the grain, swim with the current, sail with the wind - they are sensitive to Li, the organic patterns of nature, and go along with them. Alan Watts takes this one stage further in his seminal work 'Tao: the Watercourse Way':

'Wu-wei is the lifestyle of one who follows the Tao, and must be understood primarily as a form of intelligence - that is, of knowing the principles, structures and trends of human and natural affairs so well that one uses the least amount of energy in dealing with them. But this intelligence is not simply intellectual; it is also the 'unconscious' intelligence of the whole organism and, in particular, the innate wisdom of the nervous system. Wu-wei is a combination of this wisdom with taking the line of least resistance in all one's actions. (p.76)

...the art of life is more like navigation than warfare, for what is important is to understand the winds, the tides, the currents, the seasons, and the principles of growth and decay, so that one's actions may use them and not fight them.' (p. 21)

Here we have a clear indication of how Taoist thinking might help us work towards a right relationship with Gaia. Central to it is the notion of sensitivity to natural processes, both in observing and learning about how they develop and change and in the course of action you might take to go along with them. There is also a recognition of wisdom, both innate, intuitive, what we might call 'Gaian memory' wisdom, and the wisdom that comes from communities living closely with the natural world over successive generations. Of course, there are people in the world who still manage to live in this way. In the introduction to his first book Lovelock says:

'Scientists are usually condemned to lead urban lives, but I find that country people still living close to the earth often seem puzzled that anyone should need to make a formal proposition of anything as obvious as the Gaia hypothesis. For them it is true and always has been.' (p.10)

So we've come back to our two bubbles. If you can escape the noise and busyness of the nedohi and all it's moral complications, and if you sit still and quietly long enough, then you might start to get a feeling for the rhythms and patterns of the Tao, of Gaia, of the great transformation.

Alan Watts puts it one way:

'We and our surroundings are the process of a unified field, which is what the Chinese call Tao. In the long run, we simply have no other alternative than to work along with this process. As human beings have to make the gamble of trusting one another in order to have any kind of workable community, we must also take the risk of trimming our sails to the winds of nature. For our 'selves' are inseparable from this kind of universe, and there is nowhere else to be.' (ibid p.16-117)

Lovelock, in his own inimitable style puts it like this:

'There can be no prescription, no set of rules, for living within Gaia. For each of our different actions there are only consequences.' (GI p.132)

I would like to make one more point, and it is for the dedicated scientists who are working hard on researching Gaia theory, writing learned papers and articles. At the beginning of the Tao Te Ching, Lao tzu says: 'The Tao which can be spoken of is not the real Tao.' Alan Watts explains what this means:

'It is the essence of the Taoist philosophy that the Tao cannot be defined in words and is not an idea or concept. As Chuang-tzu says, 'It may be attained but not seen'. In a similar way, air and water cannot be cut or clutched, and their flow ceases when they are enclosed. There is no way of putting a stream in a bucket or the wind in a bag. Verbal description and definition may be compared to the latitudinal and longitudinal nets which we visualise upon the earth and heavens to define and enclose the positions of mountains and lakes, planets and stars. But earth and heaven are not cut by these imaginary strings.

Although thought is in nature, we must not confuse the game-rules of thought with the patterns of nature.' (p.42)

I would like to say to all those scientists, in the midst of all your intellectual activity and computer models, don't forget all the ordinary people, the country people, the peasant farmers who still live in a close relationship with natural processes every day. And remember,

'The Gaia which can be spoken of is not the real Gaia.'

© Peter Horton June 2000

references not credited in text:

Call : Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought  
Eds: J. Baird Callicott & Roger T. Ames SUNY

GI : Gaia, a New Look at Life on Earth - James Lovelock OUP

GII : The Ages of Gaia - James Lovelock OUP

Les Portes Neuves 32300 Belloc St. Clamens France  
+33.(0)5.62.59.01.83 • e mail: [gaiascompany@free.fr](mailto:gaiascompany@free.fr)