

## Nature, mystery, and morality: a Daoist view

IAN JAMES KIDD

*Department of Philosophy, Durham University, 50 Old Elvet, Durham, County Durham, DH1 3HN, UK*  
*e-mail: i.j.kidd@durham.ac.uk*

**Abstract:** This article argues that a sense of nature's mystery can inspire and inform ways of experiencing and engaging with natural places and creatures in a way that is deeply morally transformative. Focusing on Daoism, it argues that engagement with natural places and creatures can facilitate the cultivation of receptivity to a sense of nature's mystery in a way that gradually releases a person from stances and conceptions that are morally and ecologically objectionable. The article closes by suggesting that a capacity to cultivate receptivity to nature's mystery is contingent upon the concerns and convictions of our background moral and social culture.

### Introduction

Since antiquity, many figures and traditions have maintained that, if human beings are to enjoy a morally admirable relationship to the natural world – of a sort one should aspire to attain – then it is important, if not essential, to have a sense of its *mystery*. Such claims have, of course, taken many different forms, but they each gesture to an intimate association – deep and rich, though often subtle – between mystery, nature, and morality. The Czech phenomenologist Erazim Kohák wrote of the ‘experience of Being’, a sense of the ‘nearness and depth’ of something both mysterious, yet ‘absolutely crucial’ to human life. This experience is, continues Kohák, best sought in nature: under ‘vast . . . starry heavens’ or during moments when ‘the forest enfolds you in a profound peace’. Such intimate experiences and moments can teach us ‘not to speculate but to see’, and so how to ‘live in truth’.<sup>1</sup>

Many nature writers echo such sentiments, including Henry Thoreau, who warned that a life will ‘stagnate’, unless nourished by the ‘tonic of wildness’, of being in places and amongst creatures that instil a sense that nature is

'mysterious . . . and unfathomed'.<sup>2</sup> Similar evocations of nature's mystery can also be found in the writings of advocates of 'deep ecology', 'eco-spirituality', and even of those, such as Richard Dawkins, who are typically hostile to anything that smacks of mysticism, yet invite their readers to contemplate the natural world and to 'bask in wonder and revel in . . . mystery'.<sup>3</sup>

Such testimonies and invitations, and the claims they reflect, typically meet with many different responses, ranging from unreflective sympathy through open scepticism to overt scornfulness. Charles Taylor surely speaks for many people when he speaks of 'moral meanings' that flow from a 'current running through all things', and of being 'opened up to something deeper and fuller by . . . contact with nature', but, equally surely, he does not speak for everyone.<sup>4</sup> But no matter how one regards claims of intimate association between mystery, nature, and meaning, several obvious unclaritys present themselves that require discussion: what is a sense of mystery? What, if anything, has it to do with nature? How, if at all, could one derive moral guidance from such a sense? For those unclaritys both upset our understanding of a sense of nature's mystery – if there is such a thing – and offer a critical point of entry for those scornful sceptics that an enthusiast, like Kohák or Thoreau, should be keen to close.

The aims of this article are to address those unclaritys by offering a sympathetic account of a sense of nature's mystery, and then to indicate how it might enable and encourage moral transformation in a 'green' or 'ecologically enlightened' direction. After an account of a sense of mystery, inspired by the work of David E. Cooper, two closely related ways of understanding the intimate association of mystery, nature, and morality emerge. The first is that the cultivation of receptivity to mystery requires sustained, mindful attentiveness to natural places and creatures, and this affords ethical transformation of at least those aspects of one's life that involve practical and experiential engagement with nature. The second is that the gradual cultivation of a sense of nature's mystery can progressively release a person from ways of experiencing and engaging with the world that are destructive, exploitative, or otherwise objectionable. These correspond to two distinguishable levels of transformation, which begin – to quote Thoreau again – with one's being 'alone, in the woods', but end with one's return to 'civilized life', albeit with a new and morally revived 'mode of life'.<sup>5</sup>

My claim, then, is that the morally transformative potential of a sense of nature's mystery lies in the two aspects of receptivity and of release, but that many features of late modern societies make it difficult to recognize and realize that potential.

### **Mystery, nature, and morality**

It is useful to begin by briefly surveying some common attitudes towards claims about an intimate association between mystery, nature, and morality. Since a systematic survey of either critical or sympathetic attitudes is beyond the scope

of a single article let me offer just three broad reasons each 'for' and 'against' the suggestion that one ought to take seriously a sense of nature's mystery.

In the first camp are those who are open or sympathetic to or, indeed, reasoned advocates of claims of intimacy between mystery, nature, and morality, including groups for whom such an association is codified in theological or philosophical doctrine, such as Buddhists, Daoists, and acolytes of 'Gaia theory' or 'deep green religion'.<sup>6</sup> Such groups typically offer at least one of three sorts of reasons, the first being recognition that many traditions with 'green' credentials incorporate and esteem a sense of nature's mystery, albeit typically in ways that are more complex than is often realized.<sup>7</sup> The second is the fact that many 'green heroes', such as Kohák and Thoreau, issue calls for a retrieval of a sense of nature's mystery, and lament, with the naturalist John Muir, the fact that few people, today, discern in the 'depth and grandeur' of forests – 'god's first temples' – a sense of 'infinite mystery'.<sup>8</sup> Third and finally, there is the perception of a deep and dark complicity between a 'disenchanting' loss of a sense of nature's mystery and the emergence and entrenchment of environmentally destructive stances and practices – of how, in Heidegger's analysis, our 'forgetting of being' has led, inevitably, to the 'devastation of the earth'.<sup>9</sup>

Here, then, are just three reasons why a sense of nature's mystery may be regarded not only as intelligible, but also important, and therefore worth recapturing and reviving. But of course, there are many who wish to challenge such sympathies and enthusiasms, and these critics belong in the second camp, of those who either challenge the intelligibility, or question the importance, of a sense of nature's mystery.

Let me offer three commonly given reasons, beginning, first, with those who are flatly sceptical of the very idea of anything like a sense of mystery; those, like Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, who judge such talk to be 'purely vacuous' or 'quite empty', and hence neither intelligible nor practicable.<sup>10</sup> Then, second, there are those more conciliatory sceptics who might object that modern moral cultures and philosophies recognize and incorporate ideas like utility, duty, and contract, aligned to broadly consequentialist and deontological theories, but nothing like *mystery* – if so, an appeal to or sense of mystery could play no useful motivational or explanatory role in our moral life.<sup>11</sup> Third and finally, there are those who object that even if a sense of mystery could be cashed out in a sufficiently robust way, its capacity to guide environmental practice and policy is, as Roger Scruton recently complained, simply 'opaque'.<sup>12</sup> Many other forms of, and reasons for, scepticism or hostility towards the very idea of a morally transformative sense of nature's mystery could be offered – especially if such loss is, as Heidegger once warned, a deep feature of late modernity – but these few examples should suffice.

To soften the sharp contrast that this survey may have implied, it might be useful to consider one well-known example of a writer who sits with those who are 'against' a sense of nature's mystery, but whose views, properly considered,

help to clarify an important feature of the moral potential of a sense of nature's mystery. This writer is the Australian philosopher John Passmore, who, in *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, famously described 'eco-mysticism' as the sort of 'rubbish' that should be 'cleared away' – and as a matter of some urgency – to expose the genuine resources of our moral heritage.<sup>13</sup> The real target of these claims was, in fact, the sort of trendy 'eco-spirituality', marked by a hollow rhetoric of 'oneness with nature', that became popular in the 1970s – and, indeed, still thrives today – rather than at those cultures whose moral and spiritual convictions were informed by a robust sense of mystery.

This qualification is important because it points to the idea that the capacity of mystery to motivate and guide our conduct is affected by the presuppositions and convictions that are provided by the moral heritage of the culture in which one lives. Clearly enough, not all cultures inherit the sorts of sensibilities and aspirations that allow a sense of mystery to be recognized, esteemed, and employed, and, this being so, appraisals of the moral capacities of a sense of mystery ought to be sensitive to cultural and philosophical context. For it is certainly the case that a sense of mystery has played a robust role in certain cultures – including the Buddhist and Daoist cultures of Asia – even if that sense cannot, and perhaps does not, play a similar role in late modern cultures, perhaps owing to the contingencies of our moral heritage, or to a prevailing scientism, or whatever.<sup>14</sup>

Any appraisal of claims about an intimate association between mystery, nature, and morality – and of the specific idea of a morally robust sense of nature's mystery – should be grounded in sensitivity to historical and cultural context. This being so, an effective way to consider those claims is to ask how, in cultures with a sense of nature's mystery, was the intimate association of mystery, nature, and morality understood: or more simply, to follow Wittgenstein's advice not to speculate from afar, but to 'look and see'.

To do this, one should begin with *mystery*.

### **Mystery**

There are many traditions of mystery in the history of world philosophies. From antiquity through to the present day, reflective men and women in the religious and philosophical traditions of Europe, India, and China have found a variety of experiential, doctrinal, and philosophical reasons to support the claim that reality is *mysterious*. Many reasons have, of course, been offered for the presence and persistence of such vigorous and robust claims on behalf of mystery. They range from the claim that they reflect immature stages in the history of inquiry into the nature of reality, to the claim that they reflect a deep desire on the part of human beings to escape alienation from the world by seeking integration with the wider order of things. My account of mystery here relies mainly upon that offered by David E. Cooper, for the reasons that his account is informed by the

world's major traditions of mystery and by contemporary environmental philosophy, while also being alert to and respectful of the many philosophical sceptics about and critics of mystery in their many forms. Though the focus in this article – as of Cooper's recent work – is on Daoism, I hope these remarks can be usefully applied to other traditions that include and employ mystery, though exploring that possibility is beyond my present purposes.<sup>15</sup>

The core claim of these traditions of mystery is that reality is it 'anyway is', independent of human perspectives, is ineffable and mysterious – and so not, in Kant's useful term, 'discursible'.<sup>16</sup> This is not the claim that an understanding of the nature of reality lies beyond our current knowledge and resources, perhaps awaiting a 'theory of everything'. It is, rather, the stronger claim that reality is radically and inevitably mysterious.

It is worth distinguishing, at this early point, between a *doctrine of mystery* – an articulated philosophical or theological account of reality inclusive of its mysteriousness – and a *sense of mystery*, a subtler sense, intimation, or experience of the world as mysterious. This distinction is often difficult to draw precisely, but is genuine nonetheless, for the reason that a person may have the one without the other. A latent sense of mystery might inspire the pursuit or development of a doctrine to enable its articulation – what some scholars refer to as the 'path of the mystic' – while the adoption of a doctrine of mystery might provide a framework for the cultivation of a sense of mystery. The exegetical value in distinguishing a sense of mystery from a doctrine of mystery in the present context is that it helps to identify the two different styles or strategies of argument for mystery to which, in my judgement, they are naturally coupled.

The first is that a doctrine of mystery is usually served by what one might call 'philosophical arguments', of a sort offered by Buddhists and Daoists, Meister Eckhart and the later Heidegger, and indeed by Cooper, who liberally draws upon these and other venerable advocates of mystery. Common forms of argument that can be found in traditions of mystery include the claim that our concepts and language necessarily 'chop up' or abstract from what is, in fact, a seamless and unitary reality, such that our consequent experience and understanding of it is false or distorted (a strategy employed by Śāṅkara and Bradley, for instance); or that style of argument which stresses the perspectival character of our accounts of what the world is like, such that the nature or structure of that reality, independently of our various perspectival 'takes' on it, lies beyond our capacities.<sup>17</sup> The thrust of these and related styles or strategies of argument is that the nature of reality is necessarily *mysterious* – hence, a doctrine of mystery.

The leading figures of the many historical traditions of mystery do, of course, provide such philosophical arguments – a fact some critics obstinately ignore – but a careful study of the texts and pedagogies they employ indicates that they privilege a different style or strategy of arguing for mystery, which I'll label 'phenomenological arguments'.

This strategy involves an invitation to attend carefully to the comportments of those persons – adepts, masters, sages – whose lives are informed by a sense of mystery. It is a call to observe attentively and engage mindfully with the attitudes, actions, moods, and ‘lifestyle’ of a person who has a deeply cultivated sense of mystery: of how she receives and responds to things, of the sorts of behaviours she embraces and those she resists, of the structure and rhythms of her life as a whole.<sup>18</sup> A phenomenological style of argument invites a person to engage carefully with those persons who are, to borrow a Daoist idiom, ‘on the Way’, and in so doing to come to appreciate, for oneself, what a life that is on the Way or informed by a sense of mystery is like.

It is this call for attentive and mindful engagement with persons whose lives are informed by *dao* or mystery that inspires the distinctive literary style of the major Daoist texts. The *Zhuangzi*, *Daodejing*, and *Liezi* often puzzle those readers who are either unfamiliar with Daoist philosophy or who are overly invested in the rigidly formal literary styles more typical of modern academic philosophy.<sup>19</sup> These texts are after all filled with anecdotes and stories – of fishermen chiding pompous sages, of disputes between animals over who is the most beautiful, of dreams involving men turning into butterflies. But of course, a choice of literary style is, often, a philosophical choice,<sup>20</sup> and the Daoist texts can be understood as offering illustrative descriptions of the character and comportment of those persons – sages – whose life is informed by a sense of mystery.

It is the phenomenological style of argument for mystery which plausibly informs the sorts of virtues that are central to traditions of mystery. A core Buddhist virtue is *saddhā*, which is often translated as ‘faith’, but is, perhaps, better understood in terms of resolution or confidence – or of ‘resolute confidence’. This has prompted Cooper to suggest that a person can come to a sense of mystery by investing resolute confidence in the way of life of a sage: the ‘faith’ that there *is* a ‘way’, that it is a way that goes somewhere, a way worth following, a way that one can be guided along, and so on – thereby indicating the richness of the metaphor of a way.<sup>21</sup> If so, implicit in the phenomenological style of argument is the claim that, if a person is to come to share and live with a sense of mystery, then this requires, at least initially, that this person invest faith – understood as ‘resolute confidence’ – in those already in that situation. But of course, this claim invites an obvious objection to the phenomenological style of argument. This is that, put bluntly, it isn’t an *argument* for mystery at all. This objection is apt to be amplified by the perception that the pedagogical strategies typically employed by Daoist sages seem to involve very little by way of sombre rational deliberation.

This objection is, however, a bad one. For one thing, those sages do provide the sorts of philosophical arguments – of the sort described earlier – with which the critic presumably expects and feels comfortable. For another thing, it speaks in favour of the phenomenological style that it is triply consonant with wider features

of the articulated philosophical doctrines of which those arguments are a component. First, a call for mindful engagement with the life of a person on the Way is consonant with the emphasis upon the ineffability or mysteriousness of *dao* ('way'), which is 'nameless, formless, and obscure', but which one can 'intuit' if one becomes suitably 'tranquil' and 'free of... evaluations'.<sup>22</sup> Similarly the *Daodejing*, in its famous opening lines, warns its readers that 'the way that can be spoken of is not the true way', while the *Liezi* similarly cautions that 'he who knows does not speak'.<sup>23</sup> Certainly it would be odd to respond to an ineffable mystery by reaching for concepts, languages, and arguments which would involve, futilely and frustratingly, trying, and indeed inevitably failing, to 'eff' the ineffable.

Second, it is consonant with the style of moral reason typically privileged in traditions of mystery, and indeed in the ancient philosophies – Buddhist and Daoist, Stoic and Epicurean – that conform to a conception of philosophy as a way of life. The spiritually enlightened person in these traditions did not establish a particular account of reality and then go on to argue for or infer from it a prescription for a certain way of life. Instead, as Cooper puts it, the sage – often a charismatic figure – offered a 'vision' which, once 'properly absorbed', has, as a 'natural response', a recognition of a convergence between a certain comportment and that vision of reality.<sup>24</sup> Third, the phenomenological style is consonant with the soteriological warnings offered by Daoist sages of the dangers of intellectualizing or over-theorizing – of trying to explain and define and systematize – a sense of mystery. This is why the sage, as the *Daodejing* tells us, 'speaks his [or her] understanding through wordless teachings', and why Zhuangzi advised a person who seeks the Way to practice a 'fasting of the mind' and a 'sitting and forgetting'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Zhuangzi says that, though to 'know *dao* is easy, not to speak about it is hard', and that being capable of 'knowing and not saying... is to aspire to the Heavenly'.<sup>26</sup> A sage, then, restrains the urge to theorize, dispute, and discriminate, though this takes great effort, and 'few in the world... attain to it'.<sup>27</sup>

Nor are such warnings of the dangers of intellectualism confined to traditions with a defined soteriology. Kohák called upon us 'not to speculate but to see', while Thoreau wrote sadly of the 'discontent of the literary classes', who forget that the 'preamble of thought' is 'action', and that a person must be 'strong to life' as well as 'strong to think'.<sup>28</sup>

Here, then, are three reasons to take seriously the privileging of the phenomenological style of argument offered by the reflective members of some venerable traditions of mystery, including the Daoist sages. Two things have emerged in this section, the first being the importance of distinguishing a sense of mystery from a doctrine of mystery, albeit while appreciating their intimate relationship. The second is that an appreciation of the sense of mystery requires the exercise of virtues, such as attentiveness, mindfulness, and faith. This being so, a clear route has started to appear from mystery through to both nature and morality.

Specifying that route will require the introduction of the ideas of *receptivity* and of *release*, and that is the aim of the next section.

### **Receptivity and release**

There are several ways in which a sense of mystery can inform our experience of and engagement with natural places and creatures in a way that is morally transformative and ecologically enlightened. Although the specifics of those possible ways will be subtly shaped by the doctrinal and contextual particularities of the traditions in question, the two that are outlined in this section I'll label *receptivity* and *release*. These have the virtues of being evident in Daoism while also enjoying resonance with other figures and traditions that testify to a sense of mystery. Identifying any further ways is, again, a task for another time.

The first way in which one can understand the intimate association between mystery, nature, and morality is to invoke the idea of *receptivity*. It has often been argued that a sense of mystery, or something very similar, is a native or innate feature of human beings and their situation in the world; perhaps the deep 'intimations' of a 'silent mystery' that John Cottingham proposes are part of our 'natural birthright'.<sup>29</sup> Such claims are of course challenged by those who, by their own account, seem to lack the sorts of feelings or sensibilities that might be related to such 'senses' or 'intimations'. But even if a sense of mystery is not part of the 'birthright' of all of us, it seems to be typically raw or imperfect in those who do have it, and hence open to cultivation. Indeed, a call for the cultivation of receptivity is evident in many traditions of mystery in the form of robust systems of practices – bodily, practical, spiritual – whose purpose is to effect a cognitive, affective, and moral transformation of one's character and conduct.<sup>30</sup> If so, then a sense of mystery should be understood not as a taken-for-granted feature of life, but as a cultivated feature of certain ways of life. Initiation into these ways of life will require participation in practices for the cultivation of receptivity to mystery.

As might be expected, the cultivation of receptivity to mystery can and indeed has taken many different forms, including meditation, scriptural study, and various bodily disciplines. Many proposed practices of receptivity include appropriately mindful experience of and engagement with nature, typically for a set of reasons clustering around the educative and edifying aspects of such cultivation.<sup>31</sup> For a start, the very idea of cultivating receptivity to mystery – to the mysterious 'source' or 'wellspring' of all things – necessarily incorporates a desire for a closer or richer relationship with nature – a desire to 'follow the way of earth [which] follows the way of heaven', as the *Daodejing* puts it.<sup>32</sup> Zhuangzi, too, writes that *dao* is something to 'honour' and 'respect', for it is, like water, earth, and air, 'that by which all the forms of life have life'.<sup>33</sup> Next, nature affords instructive metaphors that can alert one to, and remind one of, that mystery to which one is



trying to become receptive. Many Daoists maintain that the fullness, richness, and constant activity of nature at once reflects and symbolizes *dao* – ‘the origin of heaven and earth’ and ‘mother of the myriad things’<sup>34</sup> – for an effective way of identifying a mysterious ‘source’ or ‘wellspring’ is, of course, to engage mindfully with the ‘myriad things’ that it ‘gives forth’.

Finally, nature, if attentively engaged with, can afford opportunities for escape from the many different attitudes, activities, and ambitions that occlude both our experience of nature and any native, imperfect sense of mystery that one might have. This might be escape from pragmatic, analytic perspectives that narrow our experience of the world and so obscure our sense of the *dao* that ‘runs through and connects everything’.<sup>35</sup> Or it might perhaps be escape from experiences of the world rigidly structured by human concerns and conventions – ‘artifice’ – a worry that prompted Zhuangzi’s remark that ‘being in a vast mountain forest’ affords opportunities for ‘letting go of the world’ and its ‘entanglements’, like ‘rank, wealth, prestige’.<sup>36</sup> It is by escaping these sorts of stances that one can gradually come to see the particularity and parochiality of human perspectives, and recognize that, as Zhuangzi charmingly puts it, ‘the human realm is like the tip of a hair of the body of a horse’.<sup>37</sup>

Certain ways of experiencing and engaging with natural places and creatures can therefore afford systematic or spontaneous opportunities for the cultivation of receptivity to a sense of mystery. And such cultivation offers a double gift, for its fruit is not only a deeply cultivated sense of mystery, but also certain virtues, including humility, attentiveness, and mindfulness. It is no coincidence, then, that these are the virtues typically esteemed by Buddhism, Daoism, and other traditions of mystery.

The second way to understand the association of mystery, nature, and morality lies in the idea of *release*, an idea already prefigured in talk, earlier, of escaping from certain stances towards the world. Specifically, the progressive cultivation of receptivity to a sense of nature’s mystery will gradually release a person from conceptions and compartments – ways of experiencing and engaging with the world – that are hubristic, destructive, and so ‘ecologically unenlightened’.<sup>38</sup> The idea of ‘release’ at work here has a double aspect. The first is a *release-from*. Here, one is released from a conception of nature as inert ‘stuff’ lacking its own integrity; from a sense of creatures as objects experienced and valued only as objects for inquiry and manipulation; from a zeal for intrusively transforming places and creatures according to their ‘yield’ or ‘convenience’ to human beings; from a hubristic confidence in the capacity of human beings to manage and order the natural world – and so, more generally, from Heidegger’s ‘technological’ stance towards nature.

The second aspect is, of course, *release-to*, for as one is gradually released from hubristic conceptions and compartments, one is naturally released into their humbler, less intrusive alternatives. Most obviously, a person is released to a sense

of mystery – a sense of the world as a ‘gift’ of *dao*, say – that brings with it a spontaneous willingness to ‘follow along’ the way of things and an unwillingness to ‘force things’ away from the ways they naturally follow.<sup>39</sup> Released, too, into a sense of the perspectival character of our aesthetic and practical evaluations and so into an ‘all-embracing impartiality’ that recognizes, but not does not dogmatically privilege, our particular ‘likes and dislikes’.<sup>40</sup> Released, finally, to a recognition that human beings are not ‘separated off from the creatures of the world’ and into a realization that other creatures have their own ways, different from though not lesser than ours, such that one ought not to obstruct *their* ways, nor force them to conform to ours.<sup>41</sup> Such a person will recognize, for instance, that animals, too, ‘wish to preserve their lives’, and come to attend to, and ‘interpret’, the ‘habits of all the myriad things’, rather than see them only as raw materials for human manipulation.<sup>42</sup> As a person becomes increasingly receptive to a sense of nature’s mystery – and so becomes ‘on the Way’ – he is increasingly released into conceptions and comportments – gentle, humble, mindful – that are ‘green’, virtuous, and ecologically enlightened. In fact, a primary purpose of the practices for the cultivation of receptivity to a sense of mystery is surely to ensure that a person experiences ‘release’ positively – as emancipatory liberation, say – rather than negatively, as dread or despair.<sup>43</sup>

Here, then, are two ideas – *receptivity* and *release* – that can explain the intimate association between mystery, nature, and morality. The progressive cultivation of receptivity to a sense of mystery requires mindful experience of and engagement with natural places and creatures – as Daoists long maintained – and this gradually releases a person from stances of hubris into ones of humility.

At this point, however, two worries emerge about these claims on behalf of the transformative potential of a sense of nature’s mystery. The first is that such a sense is too abstract, remote, ‘subjective’, or esoteric to transform a person’s practical conduct in any robust sense. This is, in effect, the criticism pressed by Scruton, Putnam, Rorty, and the many other members of the broad group of sceptics of mystery. If this objection holds, then even if an argument from mystery to nature succeeds, it is still the case that nothing of moral consequence does, or could, follow. The response to this objection is that it misunderstands a sense of nature’s mystery, for this is deeply intimate with – and therefore capable of guiding and shaping – a person’s engagement with nature.

It is abundantly clear from the Daoist texts and from the writings of other advocates of mystery that this sense, once deeply cultivated, inspires and informs a person’s actions, attitudes, moods, and ‘lifestyle’, including the ways she experiences and engages with people, creatures, and places. Indeed, it is for this reason that one can, as the Daoists stress, identify a person who is ‘on the Way’, and many of the stories in their texts concern certain people – a fisherman, a butcher, a sage – who exemplify *dao*, whether they are fishing, carving meat, or talking with less enlightened peers.

It is easy enough to identify plausible reasons for the origins of a misunderstanding of the nature of a sense of mystery that informs the objection. These might include the obvious hermeneutical difficulties of trying to grasp a sense of mystery that one lacks; or impatience with the figurative or poetic evocations of mystery that those with a sense of it often find themselves compelled to adopt; or mistakenly 'cognitive' interpretations of this sense as a set of propositional attitudes; or more generally the absence of sympathetic attitudes towards the very idea of a sense of mystery within late modern societies.

Certain features of late modern moral culture and philosophy also inform the second worry, which pertains to perceived tensions between *mystery* and *morality*. Generally put, the puzzle is how, if nature is mysterious, attuning or orienting oneself to it could be morally transformative. Surely *mystery*, in the strong sense outlined in earlier sections, is an unpromising source of explicit moral imperatives? If *dao* is ineffable, how can 'alignment' with it be judged to be a *good* thing? Presumably such puzzles prompted Scruton's judgment that the moral potential of 'eco-mysticism', at least in its robust forms, is, and will remain, 'obscure'.<sup>44</sup>

Such puzzles reflect a modern conception of the moral philosopher as a person who *argues*, perhaps by establishing a certain vision of reality, and then inferring from it a certain set of moral imperatives. Such a conception of moral philosophy is not employed by the Daoists, however, for their claim was that a person who is attuned or oriented to *dao* – or who has cultivated receptivity to nature's mystery – will spontaneously recognize that certain attitudes and actions are not consonant with their sense of mystery, of *dao*, of the Way. The sage enjoys an experiential realization of how their lives ought to go – for example, that if one 'abides in the practice of not acting', then one 'joins with the world'.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the Daoist claim cannot be that *dao* is 'good', such that, once one grasps this, a certain set of articulable moral imperatives will fully follow, for at least two reasons. The first is that *dao* is ineffable and 'nameless', and so – to recall the *Daodejing's* opening lines – to say of the Way that it is good is not to speak of the true Way. The second is that Daoists typically avoid or reject moral talk of rights, values, and duties, because such preoccupations only arise when *dao* is already lost. It was when *dao* was 'abandoned', says Zhuangzi, that 'Good' was 'substituted', and, in a passage worth quoting at length, this complaint is extended:

When *dao* was lost, Virtue appeared;  
 when Virtue was lost, benevolence appeared;  
 when benevolence was lost, righteousness appeared;  
 when righteousness was lost, ritual appeared.  
 Rituals are just the frills on the hem of *dao*, and are signs of impending disorder.<sup>46</sup>

It is this resistance to moral theorizing that explains advice that might otherwise seem peculiar, such as that the sage ought to 'get rid of wisdom' and '[c]ut off benevolence'.<sup>47</sup> The sage is guided morally, not by rigid codes and norms, but,

instead, by her spontaneous experiential realization that certain types of conduct and comportment are consonant with her cultivated receptivity to mystery, to *dao*.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly enough, the style of moral reason employed by the Daoists is different from that preferred by modern moral philosophers, though that is neither a surprise nor a criticism. Daoists, after all, would regard modern moral philosophy – with its focus on rules, arguments, and theories – with considerable suspicion, and certainly many modern moral philosophers might agree with the spirit, at least, of their concerns.<sup>49</sup> If so, then several features of contemporary moral and philosophical culture may make engaging with Daoist assertions of an intimate association between mystery, nature, and morality difficult.

The following, final section of the article, then, considers three other such features, and asks how they might affect the potential for retrieving a morally transformative sense of nature's mystery.

### **Problems and prospects**

Earlier the point was made that appraisals of the potential of a sense of mystery to inform moral and practical conduct should be sensitive to contextual features of the culture in question – in this case, late modern developed world societies. Many deeply entrenched features of those societies – their convictions, sensibilities, and ambitions – make it very difficult to recognize and sustain an intimate association between mystery, nature, and morality of a sort that was clearly recognized and respected in other times and climes. At least three main sets of problems suggest themselves.

The first set of problems gathers around the very idea of mystery in the strong sense outlined in earlier sections of the article. Some people are, it seems, simply oblivious to the very idea of mystery, perhaps because neither their own experiences, nor the ideas and doctrines they embrace, lend support to experiences or intimations of mystery. Other people may evince a hostility, perhaps of a scientific sort, to strong claims about the mystery of reality, especially if it is the case, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued, that modernity is informed by the deep conviction that there 'shall be neither mystery nor any desire to reveal mystery'.<sup>50</sup> And some people may have their enthusiasm for mystery dampened or jaded by persistent exposure to a facile rhetoric of 'oneness with nature' of a sort that appeals to those whom Patrick Curry has aptly dubbed 'New Age consumers'.<sup>51</sup>

It is for reasons such as these, but not only these, that many people in late modern societies may be oblivious or resistant or unsympathetic to the very idea of a sense of nature's mystery. It was these sorts of reasons, too, that may have prompted Daoists to complain that people are apt to 'lose the Way', and that motivated Heidegger to urge us to 'heed the call of being'.

The second set of problems concerns the difficulties attending the cultivation of receptivity to mystery. It should be clear from the earlier account, brief though it was, that the cultivation of receptivity is a very difficult and demanding task, requiring prolonged and sustained effort, discipline, and commitment from the person pursuing it. The *Daodejing* reminds us that ‘those who know are few’, and, even when a person ‘hears the Way’, he often forgets it again quickly, not least since it is difficult to ‘reduce self-love’ and ‘curb desire’, which distract us from the discipline required.<sup>52</sup> Such difficulties are presumably a main reason why rigorous monastic training was identified as one of the best routes to the cultivation of receptivity; but this points to several aspects of modern moral and public culture that make such cultivation difficult. First, it is a plausible prediction that most of the members of late modern societies will be averse to the robust programmes of intensive moral and spiritual discipline that such cultivation requires. Second, many of those people are also likely to be in the grip of certain ways of experiencing and engaging with the world – such as the ‘technological’ styles that Heidegger described – that prevent them from easily identifying and adopting the alternative stances required to recognize, let alone cultivate receptivity to, mystery.<sup>53</sup> For a person who is locked in those sorts of stances is liable to interpret a sense of the mystery of nature, if one even obtains, as frivolous or ‘subjective’ or irrelevant to scientific inquiry and practical exploitation, or even as anomalously pathological. Third, a person might cheerfully concede the intelligibility and the attractions of cultivating receptivity to mystery, but quickly insist that this project is something esoteric for exoterics – fine for adepts living in remote mountain huts, but not for those who live busy lives in Norwich or Nanking. It is factors such as these – though, again, not only these – that can conspire to prevent a person from finding intelligible and attractive, and then vigorously pursuing, the project of cultivating receptivity to a sense of mystery, and so which occlude the consequent possibility of enjoying the forms of moral transformation that such a sense, if deeply cultivated, could enable.<sup>54</sup>

The third and final set of problems is motivated by the worry that it would be very difficult to live a life that is released into mystery – a life that is ‘on the Way’. There are different ways to articulate this concern, but one way would be to point to the sorts of virtues that typically characterize the comportment of sages and to contrast them with the virtues – or vices – implicit in much of life in modern societies. The Daoist virtues include impartiality, simplicity, humility, spontaneity, but these do not typically feature in the ‘tables of virtues’ that are current today. Even if one pays them lip service – dutifully reciting them on demand – they are hardly encouraged by or implicit in the practices, aspirations, and lifestyles that those societies urge upon their members. Zhuangzi, for instance, criticized a tendency among people to ‘take the world and run it’, and to ‘sort things out’ according to their own designs and ambitions – a confidently assertive stance that is far from alien to late modern societies.<sup>55</sup>

Life in a technologically intensive, consumerist, mass-productive society is not one in which quietude, frugality, and modesty can easily prevail. For we are, as one writer nicely puts it, ‘continually distracted by . . . things that . . . call to us’, all of which reflect and reinforce ‘desires [and] cravings’ and thereby conspire to narrow and distort our experience of the surrounding world.<sup>56</sup> Zhuangzi could have been describing many modern-day city-dwellers when lamenting the emerging direction of the lives of his contemporaries: their lives are marked by ‘busyness’, ‘scurrying around even when sitting still’, always ‘buying and selling’, and fluctuating between ‘sad’ and ‘worried’.<sup>57</sup> Nowadays, ‘the world has lost *dao*’, and no longer can ‘*dao* lead the world, or a person of *dao* be seen by the world, or the world come to appreciate *dao*’.<sup>58</sup> A person who is busy, active, contentious may be well suited to life in the modern world, but her life is, to the Daoist, marked by the sorts of qualities – or rather, *vices* – that mark out a person who has ‘lost the Way’.

Many features of late modern societies can therefore be understood as serious obstacles to the core components of a sense of nature’s mystery, and especially to the transformative ones of receptivity and of release. Put concisely, both the *having* and the *living* of a sense of mystery is increasingly difficult within late modern societies, albeit for reasons grounded in the contingencies of our history rather than in eschatological narratives of the inevitable ‘forgetting of being’ proffered by Heidegger and others. Certainly it is not difficult to identify other features of modern life that exacerbate these already considerable problems for the achievement of suitably attuned ways of experiencing and engaging with nature: declining biodiversity, increasing urbanization, and other gloomy symptoms of ‘environmental impoverishment’.

These depressingly familiar trends are the constant subject of criticism and comment by green activists and, as Zhuangzi and other Daoists argued, they reflect a society whose members have lost their sense of nature’s mystery.

### Conclusions

This article has offered a sympathetic account of how a sense of mystery can inspire and inform ways of experiencing and engaging with natural places, processes, things, and events in ways that are morally transformative, and hence praiseworthy, virtuous, and ‘on the Way’. It emerged that the transformative potential of that sense lies in the two ideas of receptivity and of release, but also that the recognition and realization of this potential is conditional upon wider features of a given culture. Passmore’s scepticism about the moral resources of ‘eco-mysticism’ therefore ought to be qualified: even if late modern societies offer particularly poor soil for a morally transformative sense of mystery, this does not indicate that mystery could not play a more decisive role if the values, sensibilities, and attitudes of those societies were to change substantially. A society as well as

a person can be more or less receptive to mystery, for, as Zhuangzi and others noted long ago, all people and all societies are vulnerable to a loss of their sense of mystery, if only because of the efforts that achieving and keeping it require. But, of course, if it is the case that modernity was not inevitably doomed to lose its sense of mystery, then it remains possible that this sense could be retrieved. A renewed appreciation of the moral possibilities that such a sense can afford will be a useful contribution to that project.<sup>59</sup>

## References

- ADORNO, THEODOR & HORKHEIMER, MAX (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- CAFARO, PHILIP (2004) *Thoreau's Living Ethics: 'Walden' and the Pursuit of Virtue* (London: University of Georgia Press).
- COOPER, DAVID E. (2002) *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility, and Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon).
- (2003) *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (2005) 'Heidegger on nature', *Environmental Values*, 14, 339–351.
- (2009) 'Mystery, world, and religion', in J. Cornwell & M. McGhee (eds) *Philosophers and God: On the Frontiers of Faith and Reason* (London: Continuum), 51–62.
- (2012a) *Convergence with Nature: A Daoist Perspective* (Dartington: Green Books).
- (2012b) 'Living with mystery', *The European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 4, 1–13.
- COOPER, DAVID E. & FOUL, PETER S. (eds) (2010) *Philosophy: The Classic Readings* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell).
- COOPER, DAVID E. & JAMES, SIMON P. (2005) *Buddhism, Virtue, and Environment* (Aldershot: Ashgate).
- COTTINGHAM, JOHN (2005) *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (2008) 'The good life and the "radical contingency of the ethical"', in D. Callcut (ed.) *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge), 25–43.
- CURRY, PATRICK (2011) *Ecological Ethics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity).
- DAWKINS, RICHARD (2006) *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion, and the Appetite for Wonder* (London: Penguin).
- GRAHAM, A. C. (2001) *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett).
- HANSEN, CHAD (1992) *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- HEIDEGGER, MARTIN (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, W. Lovitt (tr.) (New York: Harper & Row).
- IVANHOE, P. J. (2002) *The Daodejing of Laozi* (Indianapolis: Hackett).
- JAMES, SIMON P. (2009) *The Presence of Nature: A Study in Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan).
- KEPING, WANG (1990) *The Book of Lieh-Tzu: A Classic of Tao* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- (2010) *Reading the Dao: A Thematic Inquiry* (London: Continuum).
- KIDD, IAN JAMES (2012a) 'Humane philosophy and the question of progress', *Ratio*, 25, 277–290.
- (2012b) 'Receptivity to mystery', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 4, 51–68.
- (2013) 'Is naturalism bleak?', *Environmental Values*, 22, 689–702.
- KOHÁK, ERAZIM (1987) *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- KÖHN, LIVIA (1993) *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (New York: State University of New York Press).
- MC GHEE, MICHAEL (2000) *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- MUIR, JOHN (1987) *Muir: Nature Writings* (New York: Library of America).
- NUSSBAUM, MARTHA (1990) *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- PALMER, MARTIN (2006) *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (London: Penguin).
- PARKES, GRAHAM (2012) 'Awe and humility in the face of things: somatic practice in East-Asian philosophies', *The European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 4, 69–88.
- PASSMORE, JOHN (1974) *Man's Responsibility for Nature: Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (London: Duckworth).

- PUTNAM, HILARY (1995) *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- RATCLIFFE, M. J. (2014) 'Evaluating existential despair', in S. Roeser & C. Todd (eds) *Emotion and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), in press.
- RORTY, RICHARD (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–80* (Brighton: Harvester).
- SCRUTON, ROGER (2012) *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously about the Planet* (London: Atlantic).
- TAYLOR, BRON RAYMOND (2010) *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press).
- TAYLOR, CHARLES (2007) *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).
- THOREAU, HENRY DAVID (1854) *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company).
- WYNN, MARK (2013) *Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- ZIPORYN, BROOK A. (2009) *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett).

## Notes

1. Kohák (1987), 60, 59, 6, 216. For a rich discussion of Kohák, see Wynn (2013), 129–135.
2. Quoted and discussed in Cafaro (2004), 166.
3. Dawkins (2006), 17.
4. Taylor (2007), 350; Kidd (2013).
5. Thoreau (1854), 1.
6. See, e.g., Taylor (2010).
7. See Cooper & James (2005).
8. Muir (1987), 16 and 253.
9. Heidegger (1977), 26.
10. Rorty (1982), 15; Putnam (1995), 29.
11. The moral philosophical landscape has, of course, been diversified over the last century by the revival of virtue ethics, so perhaps the climate might not be as restrictive as it once was. I thank an anonymous referee for noting this point.
12. Scruton (2012), 195.
13. Passmore (1974), 173.
14. See, further, Cottingham (2008).
15. The most relevant works of his are Cooper (2002), (2003), (2009), (2012a), and (2012b). I am very grateful to David Cooper for long, helpful, and patient correspondence.
16. The account given here follows Cooper (2002).
17. See, *inter alios*, Cooper & Fosl (2010), sect. 3, chs 1, 7, and 20.
18. On the Daoist sage, see Cooper (2012a), ch. 7.
19. Chad Hansen (1992), 97f., dubs such literary prejudices 'style slander' See also Cooper's (2009, 55f.) remarks on 'poetics' and 'rhetorics' of mystery.
20. See Nussbaum (1990).
21. Cooper (2012a). The account of *saddhā* invoked here is inspired by McGhee (2000), 13f. and 100f.
22. Köhn (1993), 11.
23. D1 and L56. References are to chapters of the *Daodejing* (D), *The Book of Liezi* (L), and the *The Book of Zhuangzi* (Z). I have used various translations, but mainly used Graham (2001), Ivanhoe (2002), Keping (2010) and (1990), Palmer (2006), and Ziporyn (2009). With due deference to current norms of transliteration, I use 'dao' rather than 'the dao' or 'tao' in my quotations.
24. Cooper (2012a), 9.
25. D2 and Z2.
26. Z32.
27. D43.
28. Quoted and discussed in Cafaro (2004), 5f.
29. Cottingham (2005), 112, 78, 134.
30. Parkes (2012), 69–88.
31. The terms 'educative' and 'edifying' are taken from Cooper (2012b), ch. 5.



32. D22.
33. Z31.
34. D22.
35. D2 and Z2
36. Z26, 19, 23.
37. Z17.
38. See, further, the closely related notions of 'confrontation', 'degradation', and 'occlusion' in Cooper (2002), ch. 13.
39. Z5 and D22.
40. D55.
41. Z23.
42. L2 and 3.
43. See, further, Cooper (2002), chs 10 and 12, and, for a critical discussion, Ratcliffe (2014).
44. I am very grateful to an anonymous referee for gently but firmly making this criticism, and for the Editor's guidance in composing my response.
45. D2 and 49.
46. Z16 and 22.
47. D5 and 19.
48. An anonymous referee offered the rich and intriguing idea that the idea of 'mystery' could be further defended by pointing to cases where orienting our lives towards reality mysteriously construed has positive moral results – as, perhaps, it does for Daoist sages. Certainly this would be consonant with the phenomenological style of argumentation that Daoists privilege, and certainly part of their reason for such privileging is the conviction that such successful 'orientations' are educative.
49. Perhaps the best example is Bernard Williams and John Cottingham's advocacy of a 'humane' conception of philosophy; for references, discussion, and a defence, see Kidd (2012a).
50. Adorno & Horkheimer (2002), 2.
51. Curry (2011), 141.
52. D70, 41, 19.
53. See further Cooper (2005).
54. See, further, Kidd (2012b).
55. D29 and Z2.
56. James (2009), ch. 4. Quotations from pages 155 and 152.
57. Z2, 4, 24.
58. Z16.
59. I am very grateful to an anonymous referee, the Editor, David E. Cooper, Simon P. James, and to an audience at the International Society for Environmental Ethics: Tenth Annual Meeting on Environmental Philosophy, University of East Anglia, 12–14 June 2013.