

Article

Without Why: Useless Plants in Daoism and Christianity

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Abstract: This article focuses on three examples of religious considerations of plants, with specific attention to the uselessness of plants. Drawing on Christian and Daoist sources, the examples include the following: (1) the lilies of the field described by Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke; (2) the useless tree of Zhuangzi; and (3) Martin Heidegger's reading of a mystic poet influenced by Meister Eckhart, Angelus Silesius, for whom a rose blooms "without why," which resonates with Heidegger's deconstruction (*Destruktion*) of the history of metaphysics and his interpretation of uselessness in Zhuangzi. Each of those examples involves non-anthropocentric engagements with the uselessness of plants, which is not to say that they are completely free of the anthropocentrically scaled perspectives that assimilate uselessness into the logistics of agricultural societies. In contrast to ethical theories of the intrinsic value (biocentrism) or systemic value (ecocentrism) of plants, these Christian and Daoist perspectives converge with ecological deconstruction in suggesting that ethical encounters with plants emerge through attention to their uselessness. A viable response to planetary emergency can emerge with the radical passivity of effortless action, which is a careless care that finds solidarity with the carefree ways of plants.

Keywords: contemplation; deconstruction; Meister Eckhart; Heidegger; Timothy Morton; passivity; Angelus Silesius; value; Zhuangzi

What is it that I love when I love a plant? This question is a paraphrase of one of the many profound questions that [Augustine of Hippo \(1997\)](#) asks of himself in his *Confessions*: "What is it, then, that I love when I love my God?" (X 7.11). Whether one is speaking of a plant or of God, one is speaking of something different from humans, which is to say, something other, nonhuman, or perhaps more-than-human. Perspectives from religion and botany open toward something outside the purview of human exceptionalism. Spiritual and vegetal phenomena are far from mutually exclusive. They converge, at least occasionally, insofar as they compel humans to consider something more than humans.

What, then, do I love when I love a plant? Presumably, I love a plant and not merely myself or other humans. It is not merely what is loved within an anthropocentric perspective, for that would only consider plants as resources for human health and wealth. Nonanthropocentric ethics do not necessarily fare much better in attending to plants on their own terms. For instance, nonanthropocentric extensions of utilitarianism support concern for plants insofar as vegetal life registers in the cost-benefit analysis of pain and pleasure. However, plants only get indirect consideration in that case, insofar as pain and pleasure are typically measured in terms of a central nervous system, which is found in animal but not vegetal life. Even if plants were given utilitarian consideration, it would still be merely instrumental value, that is, the value of a thing insofar as it exhibits some measure of utility, some calculable benefit for the greater good.

What if a plant has more than anthropocentric or utilitarian values? What if it has value in itself, intrinsic value? That is the position of Paul Taylor's biocentric egalitarianism, according to which every

single organism has intrinsic value, which enjoins humans to respect all organisms equally (Taylor 1989). The compelling value that Kant found in the rational autonomy of humans is thus extended to include the self-organization (autopoiesis) evident in all organisms. Taylor's "egalitarian type of biocentrism" can be contrasted with the "ecocentric perspective" of the land ethic proposed by Aldo Leopold and defended by Baird Callicott (Nash 1989, pp. 153–60). The land ethic is an ethical holism wherein the health and beauty of an ecosystem has a more central value than does any particular living organism. Value is thus not located in instrumental or intrinsic dynamics but in the harmony of the systemic whole.

What if a plant has more than biocentric and ecocentric value? What if the question of a plant's value is the completely wrong way to ask what I love when I love a plant? To be sure, a rejection of values is not a rejection of ethics as such. For example, Martin Heidegger's deconstructive philosophy and Alastair MacIntyre's virtue ethics both reject values, but not ethics. John Caputo notes that both thinkers see a "great beginning" of ethics taking place among the Ancient Greeks, a "terrible decline" taking place among the moderns, and a hope for a new beginning, with this new beginning involving some amount of nostalgia for the tradition that emerged from the Greeks and some amount of antagonism for modernism (Caputo 1987, p. 241). Furthermore, both Heidegger and MacIntyre view the theory of "values" as being at the heart of the modern ethical dilemma.

As the cosmic context and teleology of the ancient world became lost in modernity, ethics became a matter of subjective value disconnected from objective fact, a matter of an *ought* that has no conceivable connection to an *is* (MacIntyre 1984, pp. 57–59). For MacIntyre, Nietzsche is particularly representative of the modern alienation from a shared ethical context, for it was Nietzsche who "understood more clearly than any other philosopher" that the ostensibly objective claims of morality were "expressions of subjective will" (ibid., p. 113). Heidegger likewise views Nietzsche's account of "values" as being the pinnacle of the disorder and oblivion of modern ethics, particularly insofar as discourses on "ought" and "value" reduce human conduct to a matter of subjectivity or individual will, thus alienating the conduct of human beings from the context of their essential relation to Being (Heidegger 1987, pp. 196–99). The challenge of ethics is not about ascribing value to things. It is about finding one's *ethos* not in the sense of one's "character" or some such psychological constitution, but rather in the sense of one's "abode" or "dwelling place" (Heidegger 1993, p. 256).

Instrumental, intrinsic, and systemic values are all missing something about plants, something that is astoundingly simple and obvious, yet impossible to grasp. It is like an open secret, hidden in plain sight. There is really nothing to it, like the empty hub of a wheel. What do I love when I love a plant? That is what I love: a plant as an open question, a mystery. A lily, a rose, or a tree is not a fact that requires an attribution of value, whether instrumental, intrinsic, or systemic. A plant is itself, which is distinct from any use, reason, or system that would ascribe value to the plant. Simply itself, a plant is useless. It is invaluable, and nothing more. What if some sort of uselessness, listlessness, or emptiness were crucial for ethical interactions with plants? In other words, what if radical passivity could open a path toward ethical relationships with plants? This paper explores this possibility, particularly by interpreting three examples of religious considerations of plants. More specifically, these examples focus on metaphorical meanings of plants, not on interactions with actual plants, although metaphors are not irrelevant to those more concrete interactions. The first example is Christian, focusing on theological interpretations of the lilies of the field described by Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Drawing on Daoism, the second example comes from Zhuangzi's account of a useless tree. Those two examples are brought together in the third example, which involves Heidegger's reading of Angelus Silesius, a mystical Christian poet who speaks of a blooming rose, and his reading of Zhuangzi's sayings on uselessness. These examples point toward ecological ethics as deconstructive ethics, undoing dichotomies between active and passive, human and nonhuman, and spiritual and vegetal, and thus opening up paradoxical possibilities for caring about plants through carelessness and using plants by letting them remain useless.

Lilies of the Field

Part of the Sermon on the Mount portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew is a sermon against worrying. Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about their lives, bodies, food, and clothing. In this context, Jesus issues the following imperative. “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith” (Matthew 6:28–30 NRSV)? That speech is paralleled in Luke (12:27 NRSV). “Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!”

The analogy is that God will clothe us humans just like lilies clothe the grassy field. What do I consider, then, when I consider the lilies? The passages from Matthew and Luke each refer to “the lilies” (*ta krina*) and to “the grass” (*ton chorton*) that the lilies clothe. The grass could be any of a few species of grass native to the Middle East. The species of flower translated as “lilies” is much less certain. A Christian in the contemporary United States might imagine Easter lilies. However, as H. Paul Santmire notes, that is not botanically accurate.

In Israel today, avid explorers sometimes can find a kind of white lily distantly related to our Easter lilies. But to do that, you have to head high up into the mountains. Such flowers aren’t found in “the fields.” Even biblical scholars with botanical interests haven’t been able to identify the flowers to which Jesus was referring with any certainty. We should probably therefore think of some lovely wild flowers, which grew in fields and which most people in first-century Palestine would have immediately recognized. (Santmire 2017, p. 5)

Whatever they are, whether daisy, poppy, anemone, gladiolus, or lily, these flowers seem particularly beautiful to Jesus, as each one of them is greater than even the greatest clothing, greater even than whatever clothing was obtained in the glory of Solomon.

While Jesus is instructing the disciples not to worry, he is also enjoining them to share in his “celebration of those glorious flowers *in themselves*” (ibid., p. 6). The verb “consider” does not necessarily convey this kind of contemplative attention. Talk of consideration could also connote a calculative examination of the lilies or an act of looking or inspecting. However, connotations of calculating or inspecting miss the point of the exceeding beauty of the flowers themselves. Something that appears in excess of Solomon’s glory must be truly astounding. Accordingly, Joseph Sittler prefers the term “behold” instead of “consider.” “The word ‘behold’ lies upon that which is beheld with a kind of tenderness which suggests that things in themselves have their own wondrous authenticity and integrity. I am called upon in such a saying not simply to ‘look’ at a non-self but to ‘regard’ things with a kind of spiritual honoring of the immaculate integrity of things which are not myself” (Sittler 2000, p. 80).

The lilies neither toil nor spin. They do not reap or sow. They simply radiate their beauty. They do not worry about themselves or their future, and neither does the grassy field that they clothe. They are something to behold. The point here is not merely to tell people to be patient while God provides clothing, and the point is not simply to say that clothes for humans is analogous to lilies for a field. There is a deeper point, seemingly insignificant, even careless, like a diversion. It is what Søren Kierkegaard calls a “godly diversion,” one that “costs nothing,” like staring into a starry sky at night “without any particular motive” (Kierkegaard 1958, p. 233). Unlike the “empty noise and driving impatience” characteristic of boredom, this diversion is “in a covenant with the eternal,” exuding a “persuasiveness” that increases in the growing quiet (ibid., pp. 233–34). This is how “it is with everything in nature; it seems insignificant, and yet it is so infinitely right” (ibid., p. 234).

Kierkegaard interprets the lilies of the field as an example of such a divine diversion. The Gospel directs us “to go out into the field, and then to stand still, in order to observe the lily and the bird, so that the godly diversion may cause the staring eye to move, may divert the mind within which the

concern has established itself" (ibid., p. 234). The diversion is not oriented toward using the lilies or respecting them. It is more about enjoyment and play.

Consider the lily, see how it stands in loveliness at your feet; do not despise it; indeed it still waits for you that you may enjoy its beauty! See how it sways back and forth, shakes everything from it so that it may continue to be lovely! See how it sports with the wind, quivers with every movement, so that quiet again it may rejoice in its happy existence! See how gentle it is, always willing to jest and play, while by yielding it still triumphs over the most violent storm, and weathers it! (ibid., pp. 234–35)

The playfulness and gentleness of the lily is indicative of its beauty, but it is not merely aesthetic. It is ethico-politically subversive. Gentle and playful, the lilies of the field undo the hierarchies that prop up the powerful and the exceptional. As Kierkegaard declares, "in the field with the lilies," the strife and effort of rulers and prodigies is gently undone, and thus "no one will be a ruler" and "no one will be a prodigy" (ibid., p. 238).

The beauty of the lilies is grounded in divine play. It is not grounded in some unique striving or effort accomplished on the part of lilies themselves. As a godly diversion, the playful effortlessness of the lilies is crucial. The providential care symbolized by the lilies is not the calculative care of utilitarianism or the respectful concern of deontology. Nor is God's care that of a supervening power who can grant wishes or help my favorite football team win a game. Caputo conveys the deconstruction of that powerful image of God, cracking it open to find the weakness of God (Caputo 2006). This makes the lilies of the field difficult to interpret. "And what can living like the lilies of the field possibly mean if we do not think that God will intervene in our affairs and turn the tide against the wicked and lift up the righteous" (ibid., 176)? The lesson of the lilies is not to stop worrying about things and let God take care of everything. The point is to "worry without worry" (ibid., p. 157). God's care for the lilies is a weak care, carefree and careless, simple letting the lilies be. The goodness and wisdom of God's creation is not found in power but in weakness. Accordingly, the submissive sway of lilies in the field shows the wisdom of creation, a wisdom that is powerless, effortless, and listless, just like faith. "Think of faith as a meteorological event, carried by a breeze blowing out of Paradise: behold the lilies of the field, blowing in the wind. Behold the *ruach Elohim* ['spirit of God']" (ibid., p. 181).

In her reading of the lilies of the field, the ecofeminist theologian Mary Grey intertwines these various meanings of the lilies: "symbols of natural beauty, of God's providential care and symbols of nature's wisdom," that is, the "wisdom of creation" (Grey 2009, p. 14). For Grey, the wisdom embodied in the lilies is capable of guiding humans through the current ecological crisis. It is not about controlling the environment or even about respecting nature as much as it is about "*reconciliation with the Earth*" (ibid., p. 12). Beholding the lilies is a matter of coming together with the lilies, companionship and commiserating. As Santmire emphasizes, it is a matter of contemplation, letting them divert your attention into their gentle sway, finding God's love and wisdom therein. The contemplation of nature is thus of fundamental importance for followers of Jesus. It is not extraneous or optional. In other words, "*if you want to be a follower of Jesus you must contemplate nature*" (Santmire 2017, p. 4). Santmire is not setting up the requirement that all Christians find a pristine wilderness or a rural field in order to connect with creation. Urban settings are acceptable, too. What matters is finding the life, land, air, and water wherever you are, which requires some amount of concern, planning, care, and indeed, worry, but it must be a worry without worry. This is a deeply personal issue, while also providing a guide for facing "the urgencies of our planetary ecojustice crisis" (ibid., p. 1).

Not unlike Grey and Santmire, Pope Francis also considers how contemplating the lilies of the field can facilitate a connection with creation and empower responses to the entangled crises of environmental devastation, social injustice, and spiritual alienation. Indeed, many others, not only theologians but also biblical scholars employing methods of ecological literary criticism (ecocriticism), have interpreted the ecological implications of these lilies, and, indeed, of the whole Sermon on the Mount (Bauckham 2011). The perspectives represented in the present inquiry are but a few threads within a much more complex tapestry. For Francis, "to contemplate the lilies of the field" is to

cultivate “an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness” (Francis 2015). That attitude overcomes the anxiety of “superficial, aggressive and compulsive consumers,” and “it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need” (ibid.). For some, contemplative solidarity might sound woefully inadequate for guiding ethical interactions with plants. Serene attentiveness flies in the face of all of the activists and academics who tell us that the condition of life on Earth should have everyone deeply worried, not serene.

If the planetary crisis calls for radical action, contemplative solidarity sounds too passive, both because it puts humans in a passive role, thinking instead of doing, and because it perpetuates anthropocentric exclusions of plants from agency. What if a profound relaxation that emerges with contemplation is exactly the kind of power that activists need in order to defuse the explosive hyperactivity of industrial growth? Nonetheless, exclusions and backgrounding are a problem. Matthew Hall raises this sort of objection in his critique of Christian representations of “passive plants” (Hall 2011, p. 55). While he does not discuss the lilies in Matthew or Luke, he discusses several other passages from the Bible and from various theologians. Indeed, it is not uncommon for plants to have very little status compared to human and nonhuman animals. Christianity emerged in a predominantly agrarian context, and accordingly it reproduces the hierarchical logic typical of agriculture, which puts humans over nature, treating nature as relatively passive compared to human or divine agency, and treating plants as passive in contrast to animal life. Plants are thus relegated to the background of ethical concern.

Hall thinks that the Christian backgrounding of plants is not an accident. It is not an omission resulting from the physiological bias whereby humans tend to ignore organisms that exist at different temporal and spatial scales. Rather, treating “plants as passive and radically different is a deliberate process of exclusion” (ibid., p. 71). I would agree that this backgrounding is not an accident. It is deliberate, but it is not simply “a deliberate move to expand human claims on the natural world while avoiding moral consequences” (ibid., p. 70). It is a deliberate move that does at least two things. It communicates in terms that make sense in agrarian contexts, and it affirms a radical passivity that is not a lack of action but a carefree and spontaneous florescence, which reverses and displaces hierarchies (e.g., active/passive, powerful/weak, spiritual/vegetal). This is not to say that the injunction to consider the lilies of the field is not without problems. Indeed, the reference to the “field” (*agros*) is a reminder that Christianity is complicit in the anthropocentric logistics of agricultural societies, wherein cultivation and perhaps stewardship are practiced, but little attention is given to reconciliation. While anthropocentrism is indeed a problem, the passivity of plants is ambiguous. It can justify a logic of domination, yet it also holds potential for a profoundly nonanthropocentric attention to plants, one which simply lets plants be.

A Useless Tree

To appreciate the profound uselessness of plants, it is helpful to juxtapose the Christian example of the lilies of the field with an example from Daoism. Dialogue between Christianity and Daoism offers much toward a recuperation of the material, relational, regenerative dynamics of life on Earth. This is demonstrated by Hyo-Dong Lee, who finds a shared energy between Christian “spirit” and the *qi* of Daoist and Confucian thought, an energy that facilitates the democratic, emancipatory power of the multitude (Lee 2014). Like spirit, *qi* has connotations of breath and steam, and it denotes a kind of energy that has material and psychological force, what Lee calls “psycho-physical energy” (ibid., p. 42). It is an energy that connects humans, Earth, and the whole cosmos.

In terms of plants, Daoism does not indulge in agricultural metaphors as much as Christianity. Daoism emerged in an agrarian society, but in its complementary tension with Confucianism, it is the latter that is associated with the idea of self-cultivation and benevolent cultivation of nature. As Ruiping Fan puts it, Confucian environmental ethics is a “weak anthropocentrism,” which is a type of anthropocentrism that is “cosmic-principle-oriented” (Fan 2005, pp. 105–7). Daoism is more unequivocally nonanthropocentric. Daoist representations of passive plants are less involved with

the logistics of agriculture, and more clearly oriented around attention to the spontaneous way of the natural world.

Among ancient Daoist texts, the most explicit formulation of uselessness in plants comes from Zhuangzi. The opening chapter of the *Zhuangzi*—a text that bears that author's name—involves a conversation regarding a useless tree. Before introducing this tree, some contextual clarification are in order. The *Zhuangzi*, like the *Daodejing*, is known for its elliptical expressions, but both texts express a coherent message, which is not to say that both texts always agree with each other (Kirkland 2004, p. 36). As Russell Kirkland observes, the message of the *Zhuangzi*, when taken on its own terms, involves a recognition that life is always full of more surprises than one can anticipate through logical thought or “common sense”: “Life is never fully predictable, and if we simply enjoy the surprises that occur, and adjust our lives to what shows up, then our life can be pleasant to the day that we leave it” (ibid., p. 37). If a sensible life does not fit with a “plan or pattern,” then “one who is living sensibly becomes ‘useless’” (ibid.).

Zhuangzi does not give specific advice on how to cultivate a state of uselessness, and due to the vagueness of the idea, and the association of uselessness with irresponsibility and neglect, “the ethical implications” of this text have been the subject of ongoing debate throughout Chinese philosophy and more recently Western philosophy (ibid., p. 39). It is important to bear in mind that the rhetoric about uselessness could be hyperbolic, such that Zhuangzi is not advocating for the complete abandonment of usefulness. “What he hopes of instead,” according to Schwitzgebel (1996, p. 83), “is to persuade the reader to rethink her commitment to usefulness, reduce it, and bring it into line with an appreciation of uselessness.” It is what Major (1975, p. 266) calls “efficacious uselessness,” which finds expression in a parable about a “large but useless tree.”

In the parable, the philosopher Huizi mentions a tree to Zhuangzi: “I have a big tree called a *shu*. Its trunk is too gnarled and bumpy to apply a measuring line to, its branches too bent and twisty to match up to a compass or square. You could stand it by the road, and no carpenter would look at it twice. Your words, too, are big and useless, and so everyone alike spurns them” (Zhuangzi 2013, p. 6). Zhuangzi responds: “Now you have this big tree, and you're distressed because it's useless. Why don't you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? Axes will never shorten its life, nothing can ever harm it. If there's no use for it, how can it come to grief or pain?”

Part of this story involves a parallel between the uselessness of the tree and the uselessness of words, indicating a fluid relationship between human words and the natural world. In chapter 26 of the *Zhuangzi*, the theme of uselessness shows up in another conversation with Huizi, again with a fluidity between linguistic and terrestrial modes of existence.

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “Your words are useless!”

Zhuangzi said, “A man has to understand the useless before you can talk to him about the useful. The earth is certainly vast and broad, though a man uses no more of it than the area he puts his feet on. If, however, you were to dig away all the earth from around his feet until you reached the Yellow Springs, then would the man still be able to make use of it?”

“No, it would be useless,” said Huizi.

“It is obvious, then,” said Zhuangzi, “that the useless has its use.” (231)

Different stories about a useless tree are repeated throughout the text, including one iteration where Zhuangzi advocates a position between useful and useless (156). Another story has an oak tree speaking with a carpenter in a dream, informing the carpenter of the use of uselessness (30). The lesson is relatively simple. If the tree is useful, it gets killed. If the whole earth is useful, there is no place left on which to stand. Being useful causes problems, grief, and pain. Being useless maintains broad and boundless possibilities. Being useful destroys the conditions for ongoing use. The use of

uselessness entails renewability and sustainability, that is, the ability to use something in the present without compromising the ability to continue using it in the future. Joseph Grange formulates this point succinctly in his analysis of the pragmatism of Zhuangzi's uselessness. "The point is *uselessness* and *survival* go hand in hand" (Grange 2005, p. 178).

Uselessness involves passivity, but it is not simply a lack of agency. It is more like effective action without strife and effort, a kind of action for which active and passive interpenetrate, like dark (*yin*) and bright (*yang*) in the yin–yang symbol. This is consistent with the Daoist ideal of a person who acts without action, doing "non-doing" (*wu wei*). According to Laozi in the *Daodejing*, "sages abide in the business of nonaction,/ and practice the teaching that is without words./ They work with the myriad creatures and turn none away" (2002, p. 2). There are many variations on this point. "Act but through nonaction./ Be active, but have no activities./ [. . .] This is why sages never work at great things and are able to achieve greatness" (ibid., p. 63). It is a paradox of "trying not to try" (Slingerland 2014). Moreover, the *Zhuangzi* is even more committed to uselessness than the *Daodejing* on this point. In the former, *wu wei* "refers mainly to cultivating simplicity and living one's life in conformity with natural process," whereas in the latter, "*wu-wei* becomes a political formula for the sage-king to perfect his control by ruling" according to the *Dao* (Major 1975, p. 275).

A useless tree provides a perfect exemplar for Daoist action. It attempts nothing and is fully accomplished. It is efficacious while nonetheless overlooked and unseen, unnoticed by common sense. To be clear, trees are not the only examples of uselessness in Daoism. The radical passivity of uselessness is often described in terms of the gentleness of water. "In all the world, nothing is more supple or weak than water;/ Yet nothing can surpass it for attacking what is stiff and strong/ And so nothing can take its place./ [. . .] Straightforward words seem paradoxical" (Laozi 2002, p. 78). Weakness is thus not a lack of strength, but a power greater than strength. Similarly, transitioning from the world to the word, the word "weakness" is not the opposite of "strength" but interpenetrates its semantic field.

The point about true words demonstrates Huizi's point that Zhuangzi's words are useless. Like water, the gentle flow of Zhuangzi's utterances paradoxically twists words into their opposites. Zhuangzi does not disagree that he speaks nonsense. True words admit that they sound fake, while fake words pretend to present the truth as it really is. This is a particularly relevant perspective for a time when people are having trouble distinguishing between real news and fake news. Useless language is a way of speaking without speaking, saying the unsayable by unsaying the sayable. "A name that can be named is not a constant name" (ibid., p. 1).

This useless speech is very useful. This way of speaking and acting entails a radically nonviolent politics. Power (*de*) flows like water, such that the power of the leader is the power of "noncontention," which means that those who are "good at using others put themselves in a lower position" (ibid., p. 68). It is the power of weakness. To say that trees or rivers are weak is not to disrespect them, although it does not treat them as recipients of moral obligations either. In any case, it is not justification for expanding human agency. The point is to put human agency in its place, along its way (*dao*), where effective activity arises as radical passivity, a way of letting things be. This is not a *laissez-faire* attitude, quietism, or detached individualism. It is a politics of radical transformation. "Follow no activity and gain the world," which means that I can transform society precisely by doing nothing: "I do nothing and the people transform themselves" (ibid., p. 57).

As James Miller observes, the role of the inactive individual in transforming the people resembles the role of a catalyst in a chemical reaction. "A catalyst is a substance that enables a chemical reaction to take place at a higher rate but does not itself take part in the reaction and is not, as a result, consumed by the reaction" (Miller 2017, p. 38). The energy for political transformation does not come from the work of individuals or the efforts of groups. It comes from withdrawal from usefulness, retreat from the strength and striving or work and energy. Doing nothing, one makes room for dynamic processes that are already flowing effortlessly through things. To avoid misinterpreting non-doing as an individual action or as a lack of action, Miller refers to it as "transaction," which suggests that action

is not located in any individual but is distributed across things through their dynamic relationships (ibid., p. 40). This is preferable even to the idea of “effortless,” which still implies that the determining features of the action have something to do with the mental state of an individual actor. However, terms like transaction, interaction, and intra-action are still caught in an active/passive dichotomy that Daoism complicates.

It is not merely the agency or subjectivity of things that gives them power, for the usefulness of any agency is predicated on something unseen and overlooked, not unlike the uselessness of empty space. “Thirty spokes are joined in the hub of a wheel. / But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the carriage,” as the *Daodejing* puts it (11). Facilitating transaction is a matter of finding emptiness (*wu*) from which human and nonhuman transactions emerge. In Chinese religious practices, attention to the emptiness of things (humans and nonhumans) is known as “pacing the void” (Miller 2017, p. 97). Attuning to emptiness is a way of opening possibilities. It is a religious practice of aligning oneself with the *dao*. It is also a political practice of facilitating noncoercive forms of assembly and organization. Furthermore, it is a scientific practice, yielding a unique perspective on the emergence of mind from matter.

In *Incomplete Nature*, a monumental book on the scientific question of how mind emerged from material processes, Terrence Deacon proposes a Daoist approach to the question of emergence, referring to the *Daodejing*, specifically the aforementioned image of a wheel’s empty hub (Deacon 2013, p. 18). Organisms with mental capacities have intentions and purposes that are not present in matter alone. How did they get there? In stark contrast to the predominant biological theories, which tend to describe the emergence of mind as “something more” than matter coming from “nothing but” matter, Deacon proposes “absentialism,” which paces the void, looking for mind in “something less . . .”: “We simply need to pay attention to the *holes*” (ibid., p. 42). The intentional capacities of my whole body emerge from the empty hub. This means, counterintuitively, that “the whole is *less* than the sum of the parts” (ibid., p. 43). The material parts of an organism are constrained by the complex pattern of the organism’s self-organization. The constraint is not present. It is not locatable in any particular part, not one organ, gene, molecule, or cell. It is the unseen way that they gnarl together. It is the emptiness or uselessness of the gnarled parts that allows the emergence of a more complex whole.

While all of the parts of a plant can do many things on their own (consider the multifarious assemblages that their carbon atoms or water molecules could otherwise join), the whole body of the plant hollows out most of those possibilities. Its body is less than its parts. Expressing a similar version of this idea that “the whole is always smaller than the sum of its parts,” Timothy Morton observes that wholes might be spatially or temporally larger than their parts, but however “physically huge,” wholes are “ontologically tiny” (Morton 2017, pp. 102, 106). The whole is emptier than its parts. The uselessness of a tree’s sum of parts makes way for uniquely focused agencies, which exhibit some degree of intentionality and purpose, agential capacities like self-organization, reproduction, photosynthesis, and as more contemporary research continues to indicate, even sensation and communication (Karban 2015).

In contrast to anthropocentric misunderstandings and misuses of plants, which fail to account for their agential and intentional lives, it is most surely welcome to see continually more scientific articles and scholarly books supporting the idea that agency and subjectivity are found in various ways among many (if not all) varieties of nonhumans. However, so much is missed if agency is still understood as primary. If you miss the holes, you miss the uselessness of the tree, the emptiness of the hub, the lilies of the field. If you miss emptiness, you miss everything.

Blooming without Why

In the interest of juxtaposing Christian and Daoist attitudes toward uselessness, particularly with respect to plants, Heidegger’s philosophy is uniquely relevant here. Heidegger called his philosophy a *Destruktion* (de-structuring), which Jacques Derrida famously translated as “deconstruction,” the aim of which is to pay attention to the holes—the absences suppressed in the Western metaphysical

tradition, which tends to hold that something must be present in order for it to exist. De-structuring shows up in Heidegger's description of tool-use in *Being and Time*, where he indicates the way in which being "present-at-hand" (*vorhanden*) depends on being "ready-to-hand" (*zuhanden*).

A tool can become present, for instance, when it breaks and has to be fixed, but when everything is working, it must withdraw (*zurückzuziehen*) from any direct theoretical or practical concern to stay ready (Heidegger 1962, p. 99). Morton gives a cogent account of this point. Things are present to us when they stick out, when they are malfunctioning. You're running through the supermarket hell bent on finishing your shopping trip, when you slip on a slick part of the floor (someone used too much polish). As you slip embarrassingly toward the ground, you notice the floor for the first time, the color, the patterns, the material composition—even though it was supporting you the whole time you were on your grocery mission. Being present is secondary to just sort of happening, which means, argues Heidegger, that *being isn't present*, which is why he calls his philosophy deconstruction or destructuring. What he is destructuring is the metaphysics of presence. (Morton 2018, p. 7)

Several related dualisms intersect with the presence/absence hierarchy of Western metaphysics, including, respectively, active/passive, animal/vegetal, human/nonhuman, and spiritual/material. The undoing of those dualisms provides the antidote to the kind of ethical and political failings that Heidegger exhibited with his association with Nazism. "Nazism for Heidegger was a way for him to cover over and ignore and keep anthropocentrically safe from the most radical implications of his own theory" (*ibid.*, p. 39).

Finding holes, absence, and difference entails noncoercion, nonviolence, and hospitality to otherness, and thus precludes the violent destruction of difference exhibited in Nazism and other variants of fascism. It also precludes the violent destruction of the biosphere. To affirm the use of the useless is to preserve the renewability of the complex transactions that constitute life on Earth. Undoing the metaphysics of the presence undoes the dualisms of the Severing and gives way to ecological transactions. Deconstruction is thus eco-deconstruction (Fritsch et al. 2018). In other words, thinking about deconstruction *and* ecology means thinking of deconstruction *as* ecology (Morton 2014). Finding the use of the useless in Christian mysticism and in Daoism, Heidegger opens passageways for an ecological deconstruction that is decisively committed to solidarity across human differences and, indeed, solidarity with nonhumans. I elaborate on that solidarity following an overview of Heidegger's readings of Zhuangzi and the poet Angelus Silesius.

Heidegger explicitly engages with Daoist thought on several occasions throughout his later writings, beginning around the end of the Second World War, referring to the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* (Ma 2006; Ma and Brakel 2014). He read those texts in the German translation available in his time, by Wilhelm (1920). Heidegger describes Daoism as somewhat formative for his intellectual development, claiming to have begun reading those texts when he was still a student (Van Brakel 2014, p. 388). Although the translations Heidegger used are outdated, and the semantics of uselessness across Chinese and German are not simple, Heidegger's interpretation of Zhuangzi's writings may, as Jaap van Brakel concludes, "still be admissible and relevant for scholarly work on Zhuangzi's uselessness" (*ibid.*, p. 402).

The meaning of the Zhuangzi's "use of the useless" (*wuyong zhi weiyong*) becomes, in Heidegger's formulation, following the Wilhelm translation, *die Notwendigkeit des Unnötigen*, which can be translated as "the necessity of the unnecessary" or "the pressing need of the unneeded" (Van Brakel 2014, p. 389). In the "Evening Conversation" of his *Country Path Conversations*, Heidegger repeats this formulation several times. He never refers to the useless tree, but he does repeat verbatim the lines of the conversation from chapter 26 of the *Zhuangzi* regarding the use of the useless (Heidegger 2010, p. 156). He does not mention Zhuangzi or cite Wilhelm's translation, but he does mention that the story is from "Chinese philosophy" (*ibid.*).

While *wuyong* is always translated as "useless" in English, German affords a variety of options, and its translation as *Unnötigen* carries many connotations. The word that is translated as "need" (*Not*)

can also indicate trouble, distress, danger, and emergency. Thus, *Unnötigen* can mean “unneeded,” “untroubled,” and “unstressed,” as well as “unnecessary.” This highlights the radical passivity of uselessness. It is something like a listless acquiescence, unneeded and untroubled. Heidegger interprets it as a kind of waiting: “For what is more unnecessary than the waiting that waits on the coming” (ibid., p. 152)? Waiting on what is coming is different from waiting for something specific. Waiting on the coming has no object. It has no use. It “yields nothing tangible that could be of use for progress and raising the achievement curve, and for the brisk pace of business” (ibid.). When we wait upon what is coming, “we leave open what we are waiting for” (Heidegger 1966, p. 68). Wait *for* something, and our waiting has a use. “Wait in a releasement,” and our waiting is a useless non-willing: “When we let ourselves into releasement [. . .], we will non-willing” (ibid., p. 79).

Heidegger finds the releasement of non-willing in Zhuangzi, but he does not assume that it is exclusively or primarily a Chinese idea. Although it is relatively rare in the metaphysical tradition that grew out of ancient Greek thinking, which tends to focus on the presence of Being and reduce emptiness to a negation of Being, the idea of non-willing is not unprecedented. Heidegger finds non-willing in the mystical tradition of Christianity, including the German mystic of the Late Medieval Period, Meister Eckhart, from whom Heidegger adopts the idea of “releasement” (*Gelassenheit*) (ibid., p. 61). Zhuangzi’s and Eckhart’s variations of openness are comparable insofar as Eckhart’s God is not thought exclusively in terms of Being or the ultimate *Grund* (“ground” or “reason”) of Being. God is thought also as groundlessness, as an emptiness that is not the negation of grounds, but the hub from which grounds are posited or negated.

The influence of Eckhart on Heidegger’s philosophy is well-documented, most notably due to John Caputo’s in-depth analysis of that influence in *The Mystical Element of Heidegger’s Thought* (Caputo 1986). Indeed, the influences of mystics can be found at work in many of the philosophers who, like Heidegger, are associated with existentialism (Pattison and Kirkpatrick 2019). Moreover, Caputo is explicit that Heidegger’s relationship to mysticism cannot be accounted for without attention to “Heidegger’s relationship to the East” (Caputo 1986, p. 203). Caputo devotes a short section to Heidegger’s relationship with Zen Buddhism, including a brief mention of Daoism (ibid., p. 204). For Heidegger, non-willing is “releasement toward things,” but whereas Eckhart would describe releasement in theistic terms as opening toward things and toward God, Heidegger’s non-willing is closer to the non-theistic sensibility of Zen and Daoism, such that releasement maintains “openness to the mystery,” with no singular God (Heidegger 1966, pp. 54–55).

Heidegger finds a plant that serves as a model for mystical non-willing. Eckhart’s groundlessness finds its way into Heidegger’s philosophy through a poet’s saying about a blooming rose. “The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms/It cares not for itself; asks not if it’s seen” (quoted in Caputo 1986, p. 9). Interpreting Eckhart’s understanding of the openness or groundlessness of things, Heidegger quotes those lines from *The Cherubic Wanderer*—a collection of poetry by the 17th-century mystic, Angelus Silesius, whose writings “are very much rooted in Meister Eckhart’s thought” (ibid., p. 98). A rose blooming without why is a rose that blooms without a reason, without any ground or necessary foundation. Blooming does not happen *for* anything. It happens for no reason outside of its own blooming. The rose blooms without doing anything, just patiently waiting, willing non-willing. The blooming rose exemplifies the “unselfish surrender” that characterizes *Gelassenheit* (ibid., p. 99).

As with the useless tree and the lilies of the field, the point is that the radical passivity of the blooming rose shows the way for humans. “Heidegger claims that Silesius is really telling us that man must learn to be like the mystical rose” (ibid., p. 97). The rose blooms groundlessly, empty of all effort, and so too must humans effortlessly wait, letting beings be. Releasement is a “letting-be” that humans learn from flowers (ibid., pp. 200, 213). Noting the similarities between this blooming rose and the lilies of the field, Caputo declares that “Angelus Silesius’s mystical rose should be added to the botany of the kingdom, along with the lilies of the field” (Caputo 2006, p. 171). Moreover, the divine kingdom of which Jesus spoke was not a kingdom of robust strength and dominance but an impossible kingdom of “powerless power,” a kingdom characterized by “the rule of weak forces like patience and

forgiveness, which, instead of forcibly exacting payment for an offense, release and let go (ibid., 15, p. 101). Given the deconstructive force of Silesius's rose, it is no surprise that, like Heidegger and Caputo, Derrida too found affinity with Silesius, whose undecidably ambiguous play between poetic saying and mystical unsaying (*apophasis*) fuels Derrida's passion for the possibility of the impossible (Derrida 1995, pp. 41–43). Caputo quotes Derrida to invoke the impossible (Caputo 2006, p. 103). Derrida quotes Silesius, "*The most impossible is possible*" (Derrida 1995, p. 44). Non-doing can be done.

Conclusions

Is the uselessness of plants really a reliable guide for human existence? Is this not a profoundly dangerous idea? Could the rose, which blooms for no reason other than blooming, be interpreted as an embodiment of an irrational will for the sake of willing, which supports the accelerating violence that technological domination and authoritarian control are wreaking across the planet? Bret Davis answers, no.

And yet the technological will to will, and the will to power of the Nazi guard as an extreme self-obsession that wills to recognize no end outside its own power-preservation and power-enhancement, are utterly different from the spontaneous self-giving of the rose that blooms without asking for any return, not even for the recognition that its beauty has been seen and appreciated. (Davis 2007, 324n11)

Like the considerably careless patience of the lilies of the field, and like the useless tree, the rose that blooms without why gestures effortlessly toward regenerative, sustainable alternatives to the rapacious hyperactivity with which humans are destroying the biosphere and its human and nonhuman denizens. Useless plants are exemplary participants in the kingdom. Plants that are useful are not the opposite of useless plants. Usefulness for habitat, food, medicine, and fiber springs from the uselessness of effortless action. The opposite of useless plants would be plants that are used up, such that their use and uselessness are not sustained or renewed.

Waiting in releasement, one is untroubled by questions that seek relief from anxiety. Deconstructive thought does not worry about the classic ethical question, "What are we going to do" (Morton 2018, p. xvii)? As Caputo puts it, this kind of radical thinking is the end of ethics.

The end of ethics is thus a moment of unvarnished honesty in which we are forced to concede that in ethics we are more likely to begin with the conclusions, with the "ends" of triumphant ethical finales we had in mind all along, and worry about the premises later. Waiting for firm theoretical premises to bolster and back up our ethical beliefs is a little like waiting for a proof of the veracity of perception to come in before getting out of the way of a tornado barreling down the highway right in our direction. (Caputo 2000, p. 172)

Ecological deconstruction does not wait for reasons, which are post hoc and justificatory. Instead, at the end of ethics, deconstruction is a letting-be. Intimacy with nonhumans has less to do with asking questions to figure out what should be done and more to do with effortlessness, becoming highly susceptible to nonhumans.

Does this mean not doing anything, not even caring? No. It means that care becomes a little careless or carefree. It is a "*playful care*," "*care with the care/less halo*," an effortless care that indicates not a lack of seriousness but an open seriousness, a "*playful seriousness*," attuned to the ambiguous play of the presence and emptiness of things (Morton 2018, p. 131). The playfulness does not get rid of the anxiety and horror of our planetary emergency. It is what anxiety feels like when you let it emerge and do not try to erase it. It feels like a hospitable atmosphere, but strange and profoundly ambiguous, where the lines of presence/absence, human/nonhuman, spiritual/material, etc. become twisted, porous, and perforated. It feels like being human, but confining humankind to an anthropocentric cage. In playful care, humankind shows itself as solidarity with nonhumans, where "solidarity is the default affective environment of the top layers of Earth's crust" (Morton 2017, p. 14). Solidarity is

the default mode of the ecological transactions that make up the symbiotic real. Since you are always already symbiotic, finding solidarity is a challenge not because it is too difficult, but because it is too easy (Morton 2018, p. 157). You have to try not to try.

The lesson from the rose, the lilies, and the useless tree is about learning the use of uselessness, “learning to know the need [*Not*] in which everywhere the unnecessary [*das Unnötigen*] must still persevere.” (Heidegger 2010, p. 155). The existential threat facing our planetary civilization is not any particular environmental or social problem, like climate change, mass extinction, inequality, poverty, or alienation. The most severe emergency is the failure to let this planetary emergency really be an emergency. For Heidegger, this is the emergency of a lack of emergency, “the distress of lack of distress” (*die Not der Notlosigkeit*) (Heidegger 1999, pp. 75, 166–68). There is a lack of knowledge of the use of uselessness; there is little understanding of the necessity of the unnecessary. Without the useless, use too is lost; without the unstressed, effort and striving are also lost. In other words, without the empty hub, effort loses its renewability, and the carelessness that characterizes the spontaneous care of the carefree becomes the carelessness of numbness and apathy. When the effortless action of the unneeded (*Unnötigen*) is lacking, it becomes a deficiency of urgency (*Notlosigkeit*).

The only way out is by trying not to try to find a way out. This is not a new problem, otherwise Jesus and Zhuangzi would not have had to address it. As Morton speculates, the metaphysics of presence and its concomitant suppression of emptiness is a symptom of the logistics operating in the background of agrarian societies. This is not to say that agriculture is somehow a problem. Farming and using the land are good, on the condition that they are oriented around minding the gaps, pacing the void, safeguarding the uselessness from which use springs. The problem is the failure to realize that the world is not simply present. “The world is full of holes” (Morton 2018, p. 37). Morton is diagnosing the logistics at work in the social space that opened up with agriculture around five to ten thousand years ago. Putting humans in the position of cultivating nature, the development of agriculture accompanied a “Severing” that separated humans (culture) from nonhumans (nature), giving rise to anthropocentrism (Morton 2017, pp. 13–18). The Severing began operating in agrarian societies after the Neolithic Revolution, and it was subsequently codified in literate religions, formalized by philosophy, and exacerbated by industrialization, the modern risk society, and globalization.

The operation of the logistics behind the Severing, what Morton calls “agrilogistics,” causes ecological problems like deforestation, erosion, and pollution, and humans tend to respond to those problems by trying to sever their connections to them—escape the problems, control them, fix them, solve them (*ibid.*, pp. 45–46). Reforestation is a good idea, but it cannot counter the causes of deforestation if it does not counter the metaphysics of presence, which denigrates and destroys the effortless play that sustains and regenerates life on Earth. If a solution operates according to agrilogistics, that only perpetuates the Severing—human culture solving problems over there, in nature—and thus causes further problems, which lead to further escape attempts, thus producing more ecological problems and more severance. The positive feedback loop of agrilogistics is a catastrophic way of using. It is a sickness unto mass extinction.

Instead of seeking a way out, consider the lilies of the field. Follow the plants. Let the emergency be, and, perhaps, that letting-be could allow for a spontaneous transmutation: from agrilogistics to solidarity with nonhumans. Urgent action would effortlessly flow from the unstressed uselessness of things. You can still use plants. Just use them in a way that lets them be. Find ways of use in which the useless perseveres. You are already doing it. You do not have to do anything to enter into solidarity with plants. It is already happening. They are already inside you, as kin in the vast web of life, and as the breath and atmosphere in and around you. You need only let this solidarity happen, without effort, for no reason. Humankind just is solidarity with plants and, indeed, all nonhumans (Morton 2017). Of course, there is a planetary emergency to worry about, but you must worry without worry.

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