



Authenticity, Sincerity and Spontaneity: The Mutual Implication of Nature and Religion in China and the West

James Miller

School of Religion, Queen's University, Canada K7L3N6
james.miller@queensu.ca

Abstract

Fundamental approaches to ethics and morality in both China and the West are bound up not only with conceptions of religion and ultimate truth, but also with conceptions of nature. One dominant theme in the West is to see nature in terms of an original goodness that precedes human manipulation. This theme is bound up with Biblical views of divine creation by a divine lawmaker. In contrast to this view, Chinese conceptions of sincerity (*cheng*) and spontaneity (*ziran*) mitigate against such an abstract conception of the original goodness or authenticity of nature.

Keywords

nature, religion, authenticity, daoism, confucianism, ethics

A story reported in the Western news media in the context of China's bid for the Olympic games was that the Beijing authorities had used a chemical spray to paint the otherwise dried-out brown grass of Beijing a sparkling emerald green. Evidence of the popularity of this story, and the potential harm it did to China's image, can be found in the fact that the People's Daily had to publish a counter-story "Greening Liquid Does No Harm" pointing out that the chemical spray was developed by a US company and complied with all the relevant environmental and health standards. What this counter-story failed to appreciate, however, was why the story had been so popular in the first place: namely, that it had traded on a fundamental difference in conceptions of nature between China and the West. In the modern Western social imagination one of the key features of the concept of "nature" is that it should be "authentic." This means that any attempts to revise, improve or tamper with nature are seen as aesthetically and even morally suspect. To the exasperation of public policy makers and food scientists, for instance, the genetic modification of foods is fraught

with a moral uncertainty in the public imagination that goes well beyond the notion of whether or not the food is actually safe. Rather, it goes to the moral force behind the notion that food ought to be natural, where natural means authentic and not artificial. Similarly, the idea that one might paint grass green to make it look nicer seems at best risible to many Westerners whereas, clearly, it had seemed desirable to someone in China.

Equally important is that the story about the artificially-green grass was not simply a random blip. A more recent story appeared in *The Guardian* on February 15, 2007, which noted that £30,000 was spent in Yunnan province to paint the side of a mountain green. No explanation was offered for this action, except that perhaps it had something to do with “feng shui.” It would be easy to dismiss this case as one of those strange cultural misunderstandings whereby people view the Other as bizarre, exotic or otherwise inscrutable. Yet, as this chapter argues, this simple incident in fact is emblematic of a profound cultural difference at work in Chinese and Western conceptions of nature. How is it that secular Westerners might regard painting the grass green as a violation of the natural order whereas a Chinese official might have no such aesthetic or moral qualms? Conversely, how is it that a Westerner might balk at purchasing GM foods whereas a Chinese person might regard such a food as an improvement over its “natural” version? At stake here is the question of authenticity, and how the Western concept of naturalness has the capacity to evoke moral outrage in the secular public imagination.

Closely allied to this concept of natural authenticity is the moral value of sincerity. Painting the grass or the mountain green could clearly be interpreted literally as an act of “greenwashing,” or making cosmetic improvements to give a false impression of a commitment to environmentalism. Such an act would also be morally suspect in the contemporary Western social imagination not just because it is an act of deceit, but because it is a deception perpetrated on the very authenticity of nature. When the social sphere is full of lies, deceptions and disingenuousness, it becomes even more important to believe that “nature” is authentic and genuine in and of itself.

This essay, therefore, considers the concept of authenticity, relating it to the idea of nature, ethics and religion in China and the West. It does so by examining the idea of authenticity in terms of authentic religion and authentic nature in the West and then by contrasting that with Confucian and Daoist ideas of sincerity and spontaneity. In all three cases it will be observed that ideas of nature are implicated in normative questions about the cosmological ordering of nature and humanity, that is to say, essentially

religious questions. However, the fundamental distinctions between Chinese and Western cosmology meant that the destruction of the environment has not been fraught with such ontological anxiety as it was in the West. There has been no ideal concept of an “authentic nature” free from the influence of human beings. Nor, conversely, was there any ultimate concern to dominate and transform nature, until the arrival of modern Western ideologies in the 19th century. Rather, the ideal relationship between humans and the natural world (until the modern period) has been one of coexistence and coevolution rather than idealization or antagonism.

I. Authenticity

One of the central intellectual achievements of the modern period has been the establishment of religion as a distinct universal category of the social imagination. Indeed, the idea of religion, in the singular, has become so commonplace that it is difficult sometimes to remember that there is, in actual fact, no such thing. Religions are social and empirical realities, but religion is a social construct; it belongs to the web of social significations by which moderns navigate their worlds of meaning and identity, but it does not have any particular reality.

The invention of religion as an overarching category goes back to early theorists in the sixteenth century who sought to solve religious conflicts by considering religions not from the perspective of the specific truth-claims of the various faiths, but rather by putting them in a larger perspective, that of religion in the singular. By considering the various faiths as instantiations of some larger universal category, religion in the singular, the mutual antagonisms of specific religions were subsumed under a broader ecumenical category. A classic example of this style of reasoning is evident in the *Colloquium Heptaplomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis*, attributed to Jean Bodin (1529/30-1596), but not officially published until 1841 (see Preus 1987 for a basic overview). In this work, seven friends representing various strands of the Abrahamic religions debate the origin of religion. This strategy of having religious representatives participate in a colloquium enabled Bodin to posit his concept of a “true religion” (*vera religio*) which he held to be the authentic common element genetically shared by the various traditions. In the light of a linear view of history, Bodin held that the differences among the various religions were to be located in their historical differentiation. Consequently Bodin, through his fictional spokesperson Diego Toralba, was able to argue that religious difference was relatively

unimportant. What was important was the authentic essence of religion in which all historical traditions more or less participated by virtue of their common genealogy. True religion was thus the most ancient, the most authentic and the most common aspect of the various traditions.

A similar form of argument was employed by the English Deist, Herbert of Cherbury, who sought to locate authentic religion by discovering the common element among various forms of religion (see Preus 1987 for an overview). Key to Herbert's method was to discount the specific details of religious revelations as the essence of religion. Rather, the authentic element of any particular religion was to be found in what it held in common with other religions. Herbert's investigations led him to conclude that these common elements were belief in God, the worship of God, a life of virtue, repentance, and an afterlife. Herbert's reasoning was that these authentic and universal religious elements were common to various religions because they were innate to religion itself. The various elements that distinguished specific religious traditions were to be overlooked in favour of the authentic core of those religions, which, in fact, was the common essence of religion.

From these two examples it is possible to see how the partisan study of the specific details of religious traditions and histories came to give way to the construction of an Archimedean vantage point under which the various differences among the religions could be subsumed and from which a neutral, tolerant and theoretically objective view of religions could be obtained. That vantage point was a pure idea, namely, religion, a concept abstracted from the concrete reality of religious worlds and located within the social imagination. With this process of abstraction in place it became possible to think of religion in two important ways. The first was that religion was natural, that is to say, universal and common among human beings and human societies. The idea of religion as a natural category enabled the disciplines of anthropology and sociology to construct general theoretical understandings of religion in general, which could be used to interpret the historical and psychological realities of specific religious traditions and experiences. Without such a general understanding of religion in place, it would have been impossible to formulate any general scientific understanding of how religion functioned in human lives and in human societies. But the second consequence of the construction of religion as an abstract universal category was that religion could be differentiated from other arenas of the social imagination. Religion could be distinguished from politics, from the state, and from education. In short, it became possible to imagine an entirely secular world that could operate irrespective of

the specific details of specific religions. When the authentic essence of religion was understood as belief in God or the afterlife, rather than specific psychological experiences or the rituals for the negotiation of social power, religion became paradoxically abstracted from the social reality and considered chiefly in terms of theology. In effect, religion came to stand as a cipher for God or theology, a specific arena of the social imagination that could be clearly distinguished from other “secular” arenas such as politics, philosophy or psychology.

At work in the above analysis is a presumption about the significance of authenticity. Bodin located the authenticity of religion in its original nature, a nature that had become obscured by the passage of time. Herbert located the authenticity of religion in its timeless and universal nature, in those elements that could be purely abstracted from the social matrix. What is curious here is that religion came to be regarded as most authentic when it was disconnected from its social roots. Indeed, paradoxically, Herbert’s deism came to be regarded as “natural” religion because it discounted the significance of divine revelation and focussed on the common elements among various traditions. Religion was regarded as authentic and natural (so-of-itself) when it was imagined as a pure concept.

This idea gives us an important clue to understanding the idea of nature that was bound up with the idea of religion. For a thing to be natural meant to be in the state that most perfectly conformed to the way in which it had been created by God. Religion, in this view, would be most authentic and most original when it was in its most natural state, free from the corruptions and accretions of human history. For this reason, Bodin viewed the most authentic form of religion as the “original religion” created by God, religion which had had as little time as possible to be corrupted by human hands.

From this observation it must become clear that the idea of religion invented in the sixteenth century was not, despite its pretensions, an attempt to create an entirely neutral space from which to understand the specific details of the various historical traditions. Rather, the invention of religion resulted from the application of a category of authenticity that itself had specific theological roots. The true, universal and abstract form of religion was one that most clearly conformed to a theological understanding of nature, namely the prelapsarian divine creation. Equally significant is that the trope of an immaculate creation sullied by human actions, which clearly bespeaks the very essence of a Christian cosmology, underlies not only the modern view of religion as an abstract entity, but also of nature. In modernity, true religion has to be authentic to itself as a pure category, just as true nature has to be authentic to itself as a pure category.

In explicitly theological understandings of religion and nature, this authenticity is of course bound up with an understanding of God. Nature is authentically natural when it is in conformity with God's providential ordering. Religion is authentically religious when it fulfills God's divinely ordained purposes. Conversely, nature and religion are inauthentic when their conformity to divine providence has become obscured by sin. As one Puritan put it:

Man had originally an Empire and Dominion over these creature here below. . . . But sin hath inverted this Order, and brought confusion upon earth. Man is dethroned, and become a servant and slave to those things that are made to serve him, and he puts those things in his heart that God hath put under his feet. (Quoted in Taylor 1989: 222)

Authentic religion was thus to be prosecuted in terms of the recovery of the authentic relationship between humans and the natural order. This authenticity had resided, for Deists, in God's providential ordering of the cosmos. For Puritans, however, this authenticity had become fatally obscured by the devices of sin and had to be recovered in the inner struggle of the soul (Taylor 1989: 312).

But the modern period is significant not just for its theological views of authenticity but also for those views that replaced it when the idea of God lost its authority within the social imagination. If God is no longer an operative symbol grounding the various ontologies of the social imagination, where then is authenticity to be located? The answer of the Romantic movement to this question was clear: authenticity resides in nature in and of itself. Drawing on the providential view of nature formulated by the Deists, Romantics from Rousseau to Hegel envisioned nature as permeated by an order larger than any single unit but which each unit expressed in its own being. Nature was not simply matter—inert stuff free of any kind of moral identity—but rather expressive of a transcendent moral value and a spiritual order. The Romantic vision of nature was thus also a spirituality, that is to say, the intuition of a pattern of sacral ordering, and also a source of moral capital to be engaged through the inner processes of the soul. In an age of industrialization and mechanization, people had become alienated from the natural world and therefore from their true natures. The recovery of authenticity could only take place by means of reengaging the self with its authentic source, that is to say, the natural world from which it had been uprooted.

Variations of this nature spirituality have been a constant thread in the Western imagination. One classic example can be found in the Arcadian sensibilities of Gilbert White (1720-1793), an Anglican priest whose book

The Natural History of Selborne (1789) became a model for nature writing in the English-speaking world. White's intense observation of the diversity of flora and fauna within his parish was undergirded by his theological view of the providential ordering of creation. In such a view, no creature was insignificant. White writes of how cattle cooled themselves in ponds, thereby providing through their excrement food for insects and fish (Worster 7). In such an organismic view of nature, the authenticity of an individual creature was inextricably bound up with its role in the overall functioning of the ecosystem:

The most insignificant insects and reptiles are of much more consequence, and have much more influence in the economy of nature, than the incurious are aware of; and are mighty in their effect, from their minuteness, which renders them less an object of attention; and from their numbers and fecundity. Earthworms, though in appearance a small and despicable link in the chain of nature, yet, if lost would make a lamentable chasm. (Quoted in Worster 1994: 7-8)

In this organic view, therefore, the authentic nature of the earthworm is tied to its role within the ecosystem. Its authenticity, or self-being, is not simply a function of itself as a unique creature but woven into the overall pattern of the providential ordering of creation, that is to say, Nature as an abstract, theoretical concept.

Here we can observe the same process of reasoning as in Herbert of Cherbury and Jean Bodin. The authenticity of religion can be found not in its specific instantiation in the form of Judaism or Islam, but rather by its participation in an abstract concept which is held to be the ground of those realities. Similarly, the authenticity or true nature of the earthworm is not to be found in its particularity but rather in its participation in the abstract concept of the providential ordering of nature. In both these cases, the authenticity of a thing is grounded in something beyond itself, whether this is understood as its "original nature" or its role in the overall economic ordering of creation.

From this deep line of thinking that permeates Western thought an important paradox emerges. The authentic value of a thing does not reside in the thing itself but in some abstracted principle that is attributed to the thing itself. Authenticity does not refer to the thing as it is, but to some concept of what it ought originally to have been or how it relates ideally to some abstract principle beyond itself. This paradox helps explain two common ideas that can be seen in modern culture. The first is that religion is inauthentic when it is engaged with social and economic processes, and, conversely, most authentic when it conforms to some abstract spiritual norm of what religion ought essentially to be. Real religion, that is to say,

the business of running churches, organizing rituals, or dealing with the realities of human life is regarded as less important or less authentic than the focus on the spiritual life of the individual. The material culture of religious practice is seen as detracting from, rather than actively constituting, the spiritual experience. Secondly, nature is somehow regarded as inauthentic when it does not conform to some idea of the pristine. The more domesticated nature is, the more implicated it is in the social and economic realities of human existence; the less it is regarded as authentic or "natural." The key element here is that both religion and nature are seen as being most authentically religious and natural when they are disentangled as much as possible from the human socio-economic world but relate instead to some norm or ideal which is abstractly attributed to them. The irony is, of course, that the authentic religion and the authentic nature is a fiction of the human symbolic imagination. The modern perception of an ideal nature and an ideal religion is predicated on an imagination of the ultimate ordering of the world in which their authenticity is detached from the material reality of the (human) world.

The social consequences of such a view are well known. In terms of the natural world, legal frameworks were created so as to place designated areas into "the public trust" which would consider their use from the dispassionate perspective required to ensure their preservation for generations to come (see Delgado 2003). The premise behind such a move is that an abstract bureaucratic entity such as a trust is the most suitable vehicle for considering how to preserve these various natural resources for the enjoyment of future generations. By a process of legal abstraction "the environment" is thus "preserved" from the rapacious demands of greedy citizens and corporations. Such an approach has the effect of forestalling more radical considerations of the relationship between humans and the environment because it accepts the basic premise that nature is to be preserved in some authentic state, and that humans are pathologically weak creatures who will stop at nothing to take as much as they can without considering the needs of others. The nature trust is thus a mechanism for inhibiting the "dark impulse to act in ways that go against our better natures" (2003: 5). Such a view is basically the extension of the Puritan suspicion that our disordered relationship with nature is the result of the war within the human spirit. The function of religion (in the Puritan world) and the law (in the secular world) is thus to regulate the desires of sinful humans so as to recover the right ordering of the cosmos. Such right ordering enables human beings to restrain their immoral impulses and recover their authentic nature. It also enables nature to be preserved in its authentic, that is to

say Divinely-created state, for the benefit of an abstract "humanity." Such an abstract legal arrangement does nothing to foster the sense of responsibility of humans for the natural world, or to encourage their deeper appreciation of the natural world. Rather it devolves those responsibilities and privileges onto the "trust," thereby saving the public from having to make those decisions itself. It basically acknowledges the inevitability of moral failure among human beings and asks a small group of people to save the community from itself.

As this discussion makes clear, it is impossible to consider in any depth issues relating to the modern view of nature without engaging at some level the religious motifs that underlie it. Specifically, in the Western tradition, nature is regarded as something "other," which has been sullied by unrestrained human greed. The solution to this problem has been to generate mechanisms of restraint such as taxes, treaties and regulations, by which nature can be preserved in its authentic state. At the same time, environmentalists seek to induce guilt in people for the excessive consumption of natural resources. For these reasons contemporary environmentalism is frequently likened to a religion. This is not surprising, since environmentalism draws on the same religious sensibilities that have been operative in Western culture for two thousand years. The disordering of nature is, for many modern environmentalists, the consequence of sin and ignorance, and is thus a supremely moral question. Those who do not recycle, or who drive SUVs, are viewed as immoral or ignorant people who have no regard for the consequence of their actions within the natural order. Their actions may even be regarded as products of a flawed human nature and consequently perpetuate the vitiated relationship between humans and the natural world that has only become intensified in the industrial age. Moreover, natural disasters, once viewed as divine punishment for human intransigence, continue to be regarded as the apocalyptic consequences of human folly. These moralistic views are predicated above all on the idea of an authentic nature disturbed by human intervention.

The constant feature that can be observed here is the necessity of some abstract concept to ground the discussion of authenticity. Abstract nature and abstract religion, though theoretical constructs, have been the central pillars upon which modern ideas of religion and nature are grounded. The connection between religion and nature lies in the notion of a providential ordering or divine creation that underwrites the proper functioning of the cosmos. The disorder of modernity can be understood as a rejection of the authentic relationship between humans and the natural world. Puritans regarded this as the consequence of sin within the human soul. Romantics

regarded this as the failure to appreciate the value of nature as a moral source. Both regarded the nature of the problem as the loss of something authentic within humanity properly understood.

In postmodern thought, however, the situation is more complicated: "The subject *becomes* that ground of Being, in that religious, moral and even epistemic truth become seen as grounded in, rather than grounding, subjective experience" (Szerszynski 2008: 27). In such a context authenticity is not disclosed by religious revelations, providential nature or ecological theory. Rather it has simply to be asserted in order to create meaning that can ground moral action. In such a context, nature becomes a contested site precisely in the same way that religion becomes a contested site. What previously was regarded as a moral source (religion) or as the necessary ground for a moral meaning (nature) no longer functions in that way. The previous problem was how to disclose the authenticity that undergirded moral meaning. The problem now is that such authenticity is understood as a theoretical construct that has no ultimate ground beyond the subjectivity of individual experience. Authenticity, paradoxically, is fake: it is the very product of what it purports to ground.

Adding to the problems faced by contemporary Western environmentalists is that the idea of an authentic, "balanced" nature has also largely been abandoned in contemporary ecological science, being replaced by ideas derived from chaos theory and neo-Darwinism. As Donald Worster writes (424):

But now, as we have seen, scientists have abandoned that equilibrium view of nature and invented a new one that looks remarkably like the human sphere in which we live. We can no longer maintain that either nature or society is a stable entity. All history has become a record of disturbance and that disturbance comes from both cultural *and* natural agents, including droughts, earthquakes, pests, viruses, corporate takeovers, loss of markets, new technologies, increasing crime, new federal laws, and even the invasion of America by French literary theory.

This chaotic, amoral, swirling view of history and nature is one that is largely free from overarching metaphysical pretensions: "The living world of nature was inherently a world of unique and unpredictable events, setting biology off from the physical sciences and making it difficult for physical scientists to understand biological phenomena" (Worster 400). The consequence of this loss of nature's metaphysical authenticity was that it became difficult to motivate any kind of moral concern or direct action as regards the human relationship with its environment. For this reason, scientists in the West have been attempting to invent a new kind of moral reasoning that is capable of addressing contemporary environmental questions. E. O. Wilson writes:

Every species allowed to go extinct is a slide down the ratchet, an irreversible loss for all. It is time to invent moral reasoning of a new a more powerful kind, to look to the very roots of motivation and understand why, in what circumstances and on which occasions, we cherish and protect life. (Quoted in Worster 418)

Or, as Michael B. McElroy (2001: 32) writes in a different context:

Do we have the right to change the composition of the atmosphere globally when we are unsure of the ultimate consequences, even though the best scientific studies suggest that they could be serious and persistent?

These calls for a new moral reasoning are an attempt to reinvest nature with an abstract authenticity. Wilson seeks to invest the abstract concept of biodiversity with the status of an authentic moral claim. In effect, he is making the claim that biodiversity is sacred, that to lose any aspect of it would constitute an “irreversible loss for all.” Similarly McElroy’s claim that the composition of the atmosphere has a moral claim upon us such that we must question whether we have the right to interfere with it, is in effect an argument for the preservation of some authentic form of atmospheric composition. Wilson and McElroy’s attempts to offer moral arguments for environmental action are based on the notion of reinvesting the natural world with its claim to authenticity. Though they shy away from making any full-blown metaphysical claims about the nature of nature, they implicitly recognize that those type of metaphysical claims are necessary to motivate human action on environmental issues. As much as postmodern science may deprecate any metaphysical undertones or pretensions, it is hard to make moral claims regarding the natural world without recourse to the language of authenticity. Without such a language it is difficult in the Western tradition to make arguments about the intrinsic moral value of species in particular or the biosphere in general.

From this discussion it is clear that the loss of a transcendent ground for moral authority has resulted in two basic approaches in the modern period. The first is to ground moral authority in the public or in the collective. This can be observed in terms of establishing the state as the ultimate source of power and authority. The second is to ground moral authority in science, that is, to regard natural laws as the foundation for moral reasoning. When these authority structures disintegrate, it is hardly surprising that environmentalism emerges in the West as yet another attempt to locate the ground for authentic being. Just as Comte sought to create a “Positive Religion” to ground scientific humanism in the social imagination in the nineteenth century, so also the West is now witnessing the formulation of “universe stories” and “earth days,” the necessary myths and rituals to ground environmentalism in the social imagination.

II. Sincerity

An alternative approach to the problem of grounding moral action regarding nature can be found in the Confucian concept of sincerity (*cheng*). Tracing the historical evolution of this concept from Mengzi, through to the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhang Zai (1020-1077) and more recent materialist philosophers such as Wang Fuzhi reveals important similarities and differences for thinking about the relationship between human beings, nature and the cosmos.

The basic meaning of *cheng* is related to the idea of trustworthiness (*xin*), and means the way of acting that is capable of inspiring the confidence or trust of others. The Confucian answer to the question of how to win the confidence in other people was to ensure a correspondence between one's words and one's deeds:

In order to enjoy the trust of other people, there must be a correspondence between what one thinks and what one says, and between what one says and what one does. Moreover, one needs to uphold consistency not only in one's thinking, saying, and doing, but also in the relationship among these three moments. Finally, one should try constantly to preserve the correspondence and consistency. (Tao 2005: 71)

If one thinks of sincerity as the correspondence between one's external deeds and one's inner thoughts, this locates the problem of the human condition in quite a different place than the religious thought of the Christian West. Moral action does not need to be grounded in a transcendent principle but emerges organically out of the negotiations in the social sphere.

Mencius said, "If those occupying inferior positions do not have the confidence of their superiors, they will not be able to govern the people. There is a way to have the confidence of the superiors. If one is not trusted by his friends, he will not have the confidence of his superiors. There is a way to be trusted by one's friends. If one's service to his parents does not give them pleasure, the will not be trusted by his friends. There is a way to please one's parents. If one examines himself and finds himself to be insincere, he cannot please his parents. There is a way to be sincere with himself. If one does not understand what is good, he will not be sincere with himself. Therefore sincerity is the way of Heaven, and to think how to be sincere is the way of man. There has never been a person who was completely sincere and yet did not move others. Nor has there been a person who was not sincere and yet could move others. (Chan 74)

In this passage Mengzi (Mencius 372-289 B.C.E.) treats politics not in terms of how to distribute the absolute power of the state, but rather in terms of how to inspire trust and confidence among the various social layers. This he conceives of as a series of concentric circles: trust within the state depends on trust within families; trust within families depends on sincerity with oneself.

The foundational problem for the Confucian is thus how to be sincere within one's own person, that is to say, how to overcome the fundamental psychological problem of self-deception. Whereas the Way of Heaven is, of its own nature sincere, or self-realizing, this is not immediately the case for human beings whose task it is to "think how to be sincere." Nature does not have to think this. It is so in and of itself. Human beings, however, have to think how to do this.

This basic recognition of a fundamental distinction between human beings and nature, or the Way of Heaven, permeated Confucian debate about the nature of sincerity. How was it that the natural world freely exhibited sincerity, that is to say a correspondence between principle and reality, whereas the human world did so only fragmentarily? The answer to this question was most forcefully articulated by the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhang Zai in the argument that humans have the capacity to functionally differentiate themselves from the Way of Heaven. This argument relied on the classic difference between substance (*ti*) and function (*yong*). Humans and nature were ontologically indivisible by virtue of the principle of the continuity of being (all reality is composed of the same vital force or *qi*), but could be differentiated at the level of function or operation (*yong*). The result of this differentiation is the possibility of insincerity—that is to say a lack of existential continuity between the principle of a thing and its actualization. This functional differentiation between humans and nature is exactly the same thing as insincerity. Conversely, sincerity is the functional integrity of humans with the way of Heaven:

When the Way of Heaven and the nature of man function separately, there cannot be sincerity. When there is a difference between the knowledge obtained by following (the Way of) Heaven and that obtained by following (the nature of) man, there cannot be perfect enlightenment. What is meant by enlightenment resulting from sincerity is that in which there is no distinction between the Way of Heaven as being great and the nature of man as being small. (Chan 507)

The significance of Zhang Zai's philosophy for the present discussion is that it presents a different philosophical perspective for thinking about the connections between humanity, authenticity, nature and religion, one that began to produce a different set of problems in late Imperial China. But before considering these differences in more detail it is important to point out the basic similarity: in both cases, the nexus of moral questions surrounding the concepts of authenticity, sincerity and integrity are understood not simply as the question of the self as a discrete entity, but rather in terms of ultimate convictions about the relationship between the self and its envioning context. This question, moreover, is a fundamental metaphysical question that is predicated on questions of ultimate reality and assumptions about the nature of the universe. In

short, the question of authenticity cannot be raised without also considering the question of authentic nature and authentic religiosity.

In the Western tradition, the concern for authenticity (whether in the sphere of religion, nature or humanity) invoked questions about the nature of creation. Authenticity was associated with the positing of an idea of an original creation. Authenticity was thus something to be preserved, or, when lost, to be recovered. The problem that emerges in the late modern period is the apparent impossibility of some ultimate ground for that authenticity beyond the simple assertion of it from within the subjective experience of the individual. This problem is largely bypassed in the Chinese tradition because of the absence of an ultimate distinction between essence and existence, that is to say the failure to conceive of some absolute ontological ground on which existence must be predicate. The closest parallel emerges in the discussions over the relative priority of principle (*li*) and material force (*qi*) in Neoconfucianism, and the labelling of various positions taken by Chinese philosophers as either “idealist” or “materialist.” This debate notwithstanding, the fundamental cosmological picture that grounded this discussion in China was one in which no ultimate distinction could be posited between the Way of Heaven and the Way of humanity. Without such a distinction, the problem of authenticity is not fraught with quite so much ontological anxiety. The authentic nature of nature is not something to be recovered or preserved from the predations of an alienated humanity.

At this point it is helpful to examine some of the later Confucian thinkers who sought to clarify the relationship between humanity and nature. The basic question up for debate was the relationship between desire and nature. Recall Zhang Zai’s statement that sincerity entails following the way of Heaven, bringing things to their natural completion and allowing for no interruption in their course of evolution. The question that arises from this is where does insincerity come from? Zhang Zai wedded human moral capacity so clearly to the operations of nature that he had to make a sharp distinction between human immorality and the processes of nature. This he did by invoking the concept of desire: “Those who understand the higher things return to the Principle of Nature . . . while those who understand lower things follow human desires” (Chan 509). In so doing he allied himself with a long and distinguished history of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist thinking that saw sensuality and desire as a fundamental problem of the human condition. This insight, first articulated in terms of a fully-fledged theory of nature by Zhang Zai, certainly encapsulated one major approach to nature in Chinese tradition, an approach that emphasized

moderation, restraint and a certain degree of asceticism. Zhang Zai's view was that sensuality had the capacity to deceive the heart/mind (*xin*), dragging the soul, as it were, off course and thus preventing the operations of nature from achieving their full fruition.

In this approach, human beings are not ontologically alienated from ultimate reality, nor are they existentially alienated from nature in a way that requires the intervention of a divine being or saviour to overcome. Rather, because of the power of sensuality, humans deviate from the Way and make decisions that are effectively insincere or self-defeating. Moral training therefore consists in learning how to overcome the effects of sensuality or living in a cloistered environment. It places the burden on the psycho-affective capacities of the individual, rather than on some grand cosmic scheme for remaking the world or establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth.

But this was not the dominant approach in Chinese tradition, especially in the later Imperial period. Rather than taking the road opened up by Zhang Zai, later Confucians such as Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692), emphasized a materialistic approach in which the principle of nature came to be imagined even less as any kind of ideal state. Zhang Zai had argued that principle (*li*) could never be divested from material force (*qi*) such that one could imagine some kind of ultimate reality independent from the process of the natural world. Wang Fuzhi argued, however, that not only could principle not be divorced from abstract materiality, it could not even be divorced from concrete materiality (Chan 693). In short, there could be no abstract principle of heaven or ideal nature beyond the actuality of the real processes of the material world. With such a strongly materialist philosophy it was even harder to advocate some sense of ideal human nature above and beyond the reality of the natural world. This did not mean that the concept of nature as "heaven" (*tian*) was abandoned. Rather it meant that the concept of nature/heaven could not be abstracted completely from the material world. To put this in the terms of Western intellectual history, the authenticity or "sincerity" of natural processes was not to be predicated upon some original or ideal state, whether located in some prelapsarian past or some utopian future. Moreover, there could be even less cosmological diremption between human nature and the nature of heaven, that is to say, the natural environment. Thus Wang Fuzhi proudly quotes the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*):

The great characteristic of Heaven and Earth is to produce. The most precious thing for the sage is [the highest] position. To keep his position depends on humanity. How to collect a large population depends on wealth. (Chan 700)

Wang's interpretation of this forthright adoration of nature's fecundity is a critique of those moral or religious doctrines that advocate the restraint of desire as the way of harmony with nature:

Thus in sound, color, flavor, and fragrance, we can broadly see the open desires of all creatures, and at the same time they also constitute the impartial principle for all of them. Let us be broad and greatly impartial, respond to things as they come, look at them, and listen to them, and follow this way in words and action without seeking anything outside. And let us be unlike Lao Tzu, who said that the five colors blind one's eyes and the five tones deafen one's ears, or the Buddha, who despised them as dust and hated them as robbers. (Chan 700)

Wang's point is that if one accepts the basic Neo-Confucian doctrine that heavenly principle (*li*) cannot be separated in any ultimate way from material force (*qi*), then it makes no sense to argue from the perspective of an axiology of nature that human desires are the root of the problem of the human condition. The fundamental principle of nature is the flourishing of life. Desire is essential to this operation. Conversely, religious people who follow ascetic lives and advocate the restraint of desires do not properly comprehend the moral relationship between human beings and nature. Although Buddhists or Daoists may posit some ultimate reality, whether denominated as mystery (*xuan*) or Buddha-nature, such a concept cannot have anything to do with the real world of moral import, or as Wang puts it, "the correct activities of our seeing, hearing, speech and action" (700). The authenticity of nature—both human and non-human—lies not in some transcendental principle but in the reality of nature's capacity for ceaseless production. As Wang puts it:

The fact that the things of the world, whether rivers or mountains, plants or animals, those with or without intelligence, and those yielding blossoms or bearing fruits, provide beneficial support for all things is the result of the natural influence of the moving power of material force. (Chan 698)

In other words, the moral mandate that can be derived from nature is not to be sought in any kind of abstract principle, but rather in the material force (*qi*), or the power to move and grow and transform, the power that drives nature to constantly flourish. One should not read this as a kind of hedonistic delight in nature's fecundity. Wang's message is thoroughly moralistic: but it is also deeply realistic in its appreciation that real world problems have to be dealt with at the level of natural, material reality rather than based on some idealistic abstraction. To give this view a modern interpretative gloss, one might say that if one cares about the environment as a moral problem, one should not be a Romantic.

The consequence of this in terms of the Chinese imagination is best understood in terms of two significant absences. Consider the Baconian

religious and moral imperative to know and remake nature into the Edenic image that it had lost after the fall. Such an image would be impossible within the Chinese social imagination. Consider also Blake's image of "dark satanic mills," widely interpreted in the public imagination as a reference to the industrial age. Such an image, so heavily fraught with apocalyptic anxiety, could not have occurred except in a symbolic system that could imbue the natural world with such powerful ontological meaning. This does not mean to say that Romantic sensibilities never made themselves apparent in Chinese art. Quite the reverse is the case. But it does mean that industrialization could not have sparked the same kind of ontological terror (or, equally, ontological hope) that it did in two centuries ago in the West. Certainly there were feelings of loss and nostalgia for the encroachment of human civilization upon the natural world. But the human relationship to nature, though conceived of as a spiritual question, was not fraught with the same anxiety that the concept of authenticity evoked in the Western imagination. Though the Confucian tradition right through to the early modern period drew on nature as a moral source, and located the fundamental questions of human nature within a broader cosmological context of heavenly principle and material force, this did not lead them to invest nature with an ultimate ontological value that transcended human nature. In fact, as the tradition began to enter the modern period it insisted even more strongly on the material actuality of nature as its defining cosmic image. In other words nature's moral value, its value as a moral source for human beings, is not to be located in some idealization of nature's principle, or the imaginative construction of some "original" or "authentic" nature that somehow stands outside the material reality of the world.

III. Spontaneity

As the above discussion is beginning to make clear, both Western and Chinese intellectual traditions engaged in serious theoretical discussions about the connections between cosmology, nature and ethics. Both traditions found ways to treat nature as a moral source, but in the West this was heavily bound up with ontological and existential questions about nature's "lost" authenticity. In fact it was precisely by positing some transcendent authenticity that nature could serve as an ethic-religious source, or become a question of ethico-religious concern. Conversely, in the Confucian tradition, especially in its more materialistic strains, nature's moral value was not to be located in some abstract authenticity but rather in its material force. To understand the concept of Qi

in a more practical context it is necessary to turn to the religious tradition of Daoism, which, perhaps more than any other Chinese tradition, reflected upon and embraced the transformative spontaneity of this vital force.

The *locus classicus* for the Daoist view of nature is found in chapter 25 of the *Daode jing*:

Humans follow Earth
Earth follows Heaven
Heaven follows Dao
Dao follows its own spontaneity

The Chinese binome translated above as “its own spontaneity” is *ziran* which may also be rendered as “self-so” or “thus of its own accord.” It is an indication that there is no ground to the Dao beyond the Dao itself. In this cosmological picture, the Dao emerges fractal-like in a reflexive self-generating multitude of processes. It is also no surprise that the term *ziran* is also the modern Chinese word for “nature” or “natural.” The basic idea here is that natural processes are those which follow their own capacity for self-transformation and do not actualize the agency of some external force. This view of the natural world as a process of reflexive self-transformation is one of the most powerful images of nature to have emerged in the Chinese context, and is also a source of moral and religious revelation.

To understand the Daoist conception of nature, therefore, it is necessary to place the natural within the overall economy of cosmic power that operated within the Daoist cosmos. In such a cosmos, nature was simply the expression of self-generative power, that is to say the capacity of a thing to change itself by means of itself. Such capacity for transformation was not to be feared but rather to be marvelled at. The *Zhuangzi* (c. 4th century B.C.E.), for instance, contains many famous stories in which people who are disabled or mutilated feature as protagonists. Consider the story of Ziyu, who in his old age, became so hunched over that his abdomen was higher than his head. His friend Zisi, Master Ssu in the translation below, ask whether he resents the way in which the creator is changing his bodily form:

“Do you resent it?” asked Master Ssu.
“Why no, what would I resent? If the process continues, perhaps in time he’ll transform my left arm into a rooster. In that case I’ll keep watch on the night. Or perhaps in time he’ll transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet and I’ll shoot down an owl for roasting. Or perhaps in time he’ll transform my buttocks into cartwheels. Then, with my spirit for a horse, I’ll climb up and go for a ride. What need will I ever have for a carriage again?” (trans. Watson 1968: 84)

The effect of this story is to discredit the notion of a normative bodily nature. There is no “officially authorized” version of what a human body ought to

be like. The activity of the “creator” is not to provide an authentic or original bodily form, but to transform what already exists. Although the Dao is the model or normative pattern (*fā*) for the operations of the cosmos, the nature of this pattern or principle is not to provide a fixed template for how things should be. Rather, it provides the capacity for transformation within an overall economy of cosmic power. The normative models that the *Zhuangzi* draws upon, therefore, are the seemingly magical or marvellous transformations that occur within the natural world, and the concomitant fables of fish who become birds and humans who dream they are butterflies. Such fabulous stories about the natural world are not to be understood as miraculous aberrations from the norm, but rather as the norm itself revealed in its most spectacular and glorious form.

An interest in the transformative capacity of nature fed directly into the development of an interest in rare herbs and “magical” substances such as seeds, fungi, minerals and metals that were thought to have transformative properties. As the Daoist tradition developed, it witnessed the revelation of countless recipes and formulae for compounding elixirs of immortality from such natural substances. The *Biographies of Spirit Immortals*, compiled by Ge Hong (283-343) and other compilations of hagiographic texts from this period bear witness to many examples of nature’s rare transformative powers (see Campamy 2006). Ge Hong’s special interest in the various forms of alchemical transformation led him to write his autobiography, entitled *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi*), in which he explains how he devoted his life to the attainment of longevity through an eclectic combination of dietary, alchemical, exercise and other practices. For Ge Hong, nature could be classified according to the transformative power it had when one ingested it. In the highest category were elixirs of immortality based on cinnabar (mercury sulfide); next were drugs, generally rare mountain fungi, and finally common herbs and foodstuffs (Arthur 2006: 100).

The transformative powers of nature were not, however, readily available to the untrained or the uninitiated, but had to be sought with the proper invocations and rituals and at the cosmologically appropriate times:

If you desire to seek excrescences and herbs, entrance in to the fmaous mountains must be done either during the third or ninth moons, since these are the months when the mountains are open and produce the divine medicines. Refrain from going on days when the mountains are hostile. . . .

It is essential to wear a belt with the Numinous Treasure talismans, have a white dog on a leash, and carry a white chicken. if a peck of white salt and an Open the Mountain talisman are placed on a large rock, and a bunch of Wu hops is held a you enter the mountain, the gods of the mountain will be pleased and you will

certainly find excrescences. (*Baopuzi* ch. 11; trans. Ware 1966: 185-6; quoted in Arthur 2006: 101)

As his passage makes clear, nature may well harbour transformative powers, but they are not readily available to the masses. Rather they require specialized knowledge and discipline in order to be appropriated for the human spiritual quest. Nevertheless, what is instructive from this passage, is that nature is not viewed either as a simple resource to be exploited in the most efficient manner possible. Nor is nature viewed as something to be protected or preserved in some immaculate state. Rather nature is a resource and a partner in the religious quest of the individual. Religious ritual here functions as a kind of technology that aids the individual in his quest to decode and compound nature's transformative power.

Further insight can be gained into this relationship by consider this fragmentary biography of Ge Hong's teacher Zheng Siyuan:

Zheng Siyuan was Ge Hong's teacher. Once among the mountain cliffs he obtained two tiger babies; their mother had died. The Lord . . . fed them until they were full-grown. Shortly a male tiger came to the front of the hermitage: it was the two tigers' father. The three tigers came to and fro [round his hut] and followed him around. [Later] he carried [his] medical herbs on his back, lifted scriptures and books up, retired on Mount Guacang and left [the world] as an immortal. (Trans. Bumbacher 2000: 338)

In this brief account, Zheng's relationship with nature is characterized in terms of reciprocity. Looking after the two baby tigers until the arrival of the father is presented as the one relevant event that preceded his retreat into the mountains and his eventual transformation in to an immortal. What is interesting is that the account presents no causal explanation that formally links these two events. It is not even stated that these two events have any connection to each other. Yet the fact that this small biography relates simply these two events clearly invites the reader to draw a connection between them. The connection is perhaps the mountain itself as a location of strange phenomena. Zheng obtained the two baby tigers while up on the mountain cliffs. Later he retired to the mountain and became an immortal. The implication is that the mountains themselves, that is to say, the remote and hidden places of nature are locations for sacred transformation. The text does not draw an absolute distinction between these remote places and the domesticated world of human society, for Zheng takes the two babies into his care rather than allow them to wander freely on their own. Instead the text seems to be saying that the world of nature and the world of religious meaning are not indifferent to each other: there are deep, fascinating and perhaps strange connections between these two worlds that cannot easily be quantified or formulated. The nature of these

connections is thus best exemplified in biographical form, and focuses not on general laws of nature, but rather on the the particular characteristics of specific interactions. In this case, a man looked after two tigers, was discovered by their father, and then became an immortal. There can be no general taxonomy of nature or natural science that easily makes sense of such a narrative. Rather, the spontaneity of the cosmos lends itself to unusual coincidences and odd quirks of transformation. Moreover, such spontaneous transformations are not the exception to some abstract principle, divine law, or natural science. They are not, in fact, the exceptions to any rule, but the rule itself.

From this investigation into the Daoist imagination of natural spontaneity, it will follow that a different set of ethical norms must present themselves in regards to human interactions with the environment, as compared to the West. The Western tradition is that of a divine lawmaker who created the world by command. He subsequently issued commands to the people setting out the framework by which people ought to live in accordance with the divine creation. Such commands were not to be regarded as capricious but rather as cohering with the principles by which the world was created in the first place. God's authority as lawmaker thus rested on his authority as creator. This authority embodied by the church and, subsequently, the secular state, led to the formulation of an ethico-legal tradition based on the notion of absolute principles couched in the abstract with punishments to be exacted by the state for the transgression of laws. The response to environmental degradation from within such a framework is to establish laws criminalizing, say the dumping of toxic waste, and establishing penalties for those guilty of such crimes.

The closest Chinese parallel to such a framework would be the codification of Daoist morality that occurred largely under the influence of Buddhism and the establishment of Daoist monasteries. Of the various ethical codes that are extant, the most important is known as the *180 Precepts of Lord Lao*, many of whose precepts were incorporated into subsequent moral codes. The *180 Precepts* has been studied in terms of its demonstration of concern for environmental ethics (Schipper 2001) and, in fact, more than twenty of the precepts are directly concerned with the natural environment:

14. You should not burn [the vegetation] of uncultivated or cultivated fields, nor of mountains and forests.
18. You should not wantonly fell trees.
19. You should not wantonly pick herbs or flowers.
36. You should not throw poisonous substances into lakes, rivers, and seas.
47. You should not wantonly dig holes in the ground and thereby destroy the earth.
53. You should not dry up wet marshes.

- 79. You should not fish or hunt and thereby harm and kill living beings.
 - 95. You should not in winter dig up hibernating animals and insects.
 - 97. You should not wantonly climb in trees to look for nests and destroy eggs.
 - 98. You should not use cages to trap birds and [other] animals.
 - 100. You should not throw dirty things in wells.
 - 101. You should not seal off pools and wells.
 - 109. You should not light fires in the plains.
 - 116. You should not defecate or urinate on living plants or in water that people will drink.
 - 121. You should not wantonly or lightly take baths in rivers or seas.
 - 125. You should not fabricate poisons and keep them in vessels.
 - 132. You should not disturb birds and [other] animals.
 - 134. You should not wantonly make lakes.
- (Schipper 2001: 82-3; See also Kohn 2004: 136-144)

In answer to the question why the earliest Daoist communities were concerned with the state of the natural environment, Schipper draws the conclusion that the natural environment functioned as a kind of sanctuary, in the sense of a sacred space, and in the sense of a place of refuge from the human world. But the implications of attributing a sacred quality to the natural environment are quite different than in the Western tradition. In the West to say that something is sacred implies an inviolable taboo punishable in extreme terms. To say, for instance, that life is sacred, leads Catholics to the conclusion that abortion and capital punishment are evil in an absolute sense. It leads also to restrictions on the use of embryonic stem cells and a whole host of concomitant moral issues concerning "the right to life."

But the *180 Precepts* are not couched in such absolute terms at all. Firstly, the form of the legal code is "You should not . . ." which immediately indicates that there were many people who in fact were doing the type of things that were forbidden to the Daoist. The implication here is that the Daoist is expected to adhere to a higher standard than the ordinary person. There is no indication that the act of making a lake is somehow intrinsically evil in and of itself, and for that reason ought to be prohibited among all people regardless of their religious affiliation. Rather the implication is that the rules ought to be rather more narrowly construed: that the true follower of the Daoist religion ought not engage in these activities. The most important reason for this was that Daoist ethical codes were chiefly developed as an aid to monastic living. As such they represent the religious community's ideal vision of itself over and against the common society (Juergensmeyer 1990: 554; Kohn 2004: 11). There is not the sense here that religious rules are universally applicable to all stations of life. Rather, they are an aid to the formulation of an ideal community which will assist the individual to participate in the overall goodness of nature and cosmos. The rules function

not as inviolable cosmic laws but as a practical benefit to ordinary humans with “limited sensory and intellectual faculties” (Kohn 2004: 13).

Secondly, the use of the adverb “wantonly” suggests also that there are times when digging holes or bathing in streams are permissible, or even desirable. From this it is legitimate to infer that the ethical framework is not one of an absolute morality. There is room built in for some interpretative flexibility. Altogether, one can say that this ethical code demonstrates a more fluid approach to the natural environment than one finds in the generally absolutist legal and ethical codes that developed in the West. Underlying this relative fluidity in the approach to ethics is the notion that the landscape itself is a fluid process rather than a static substance:

The earth was understood as a supportive, biological matrix that delivered water, the vital biological fluid, so as to support life. Water was created in the mountains, and distributed through the rivers. When water flowed evenly and steadily, this was conducive to life. When water flowed too much or too little, this was conducive to death. The landscape (in Chinese, literally, “mountains and streams” *shan-shui*) stored, processed and distributed water through the network of mountains and streams. (Miller 2008: 35)

The environmental aspect of ethical codes such as the *180 Precepts* are thus designed to foster an approach in which the human relationship to the natural environment can be optimized so as to promote an overall harmony and flourishing. The fluidity of nature and the necessity of responding flexibly to systemic changes in the landscape meant that the Daoist’s ethical code *vis-à-vis* the landscape could not be too absolute.

The third reason for the Daoist’s flexible approach to ethics was that the Perfected Daoist, that is to say, the one who has attained the highest correspondence with the Dao, occupied a “transmoral or supramoral” state, “going beyond the demands of human society in a spontaneous sense of cosmic oneness” (Kohn 2004: 13). Moral rules, therefore, can only be considered as adjuncts along the path of moral perfection. The truly perfected Daoist, one alive and respondent to the rhythms and spontaneities of the cosmos, has no need of ethical codes, but is intuitively aware of how to respond to any given situation.

IV. Conclusions

This essay has attempted to demonstrate that the fundamental approaches to ethics and morality in both China and the West are bound up not only with conceptions of religion and ultimate truth, but also with conceptions of nature.

One dominant theme in the West is to see nature in terms of an original goodness that precedes human manipulation. This theme is bound up with Biblical views of divine creation by a divine lawmaker. In contrast to this view, the Chinese tradition contains two important threads that mitigate against such an abstract conception of the original goodness or authenticity of nature.

The first is the Confucian concept of sincerity, which although thoroughly implicated in Confucian metaphysics, took a different tack to the Western construction of an abstract authenticity. Rather, sincerity came to be understood as embedded as much in the concrete material reality of the world as any kind of abstract metaphysical principle. Such a material world was characterized, moreover, by a metaphysics process rather than a mechanistic metaphysics. Sincerity was thus not about coherence with some absolute original nature, but rather about practical actualization in the realm of concrete reality.

The Daoist concept of spontaneity lends even less support to the idea of an original goodness or authenticity to the natural world. Here spontaneity is not a miraculous deviation from some cosmic norm, but rather the rule to be followed in a complex and seemingly chaotic system. Although ethics and nature are related, as in the Confucian tradition, the spontaneous character of the natural world lends itself to a celebration of transformation and change rather than normativity and stasis. Consequently although practical rules and ethical norms may be formulated as guidelines for the faithful, they are not to be interpreted as absolute rules derived from some principles of "natural law."

The goal in both Confucian and Daoist conceptions of the cosmos is the unity of humans and heaven / nature (*tian ren he yi*). By now it should be clear that this principle is quite different from that of "respecting nature" or "preserving the environment." Rather, it suggests that the processes of nature are to achieve their full fruition in concert with the human social world. This is because both humans and nature are part of the continuity of material force (Qi) by means of which the cosmos continues to function and evolve. There is, therefore, less reason in the Chinese cultural imagination to suppose that the authenticity of nature, in Western terms, has any ultimate ontological value. Consequently, painting grass or mountains green does not invoke the same kind of metaphysical violations as it does in the Western social imagination. One cannot really say that painting the grass green goes against what nature is "supposed" to be. The idea of "supposing nature," that is to say, attributing some concept of authenticity to the natural world apart from the human social world, is an imaginative activity that is not so easily supported in the Chinese moral imagination.

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