

THEME: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art

The Pace of Aesthetic Process: A Comparative Approach

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“Those who cannot feel the littleness
of great things in themselves are apt
to overlook the greatness of little
things in other.”¹

Kakuzo Okakura, *Book of Tea*

Traditionally, western theory of art has been equipped with a set of dualisms such as subject-object, artistic process-artistic product, active artist-passive spectator, that has supposed a rejection of a plenary notion of the human integrated with nature and the cosmos. In this context, John Dewey, who presented his theory of art in 1934 in *Art as Experience*, showed how the “art has been set in a remote pedestal”, separated from the low activities which we realized in our ordinary lives. He refused the way aesthetics has separated the live creature from the world in which it lives, and proposes a new approach which begin from the raw, from nature and everyday development. The aim of this paper is to focus interest in Dewey’s notion of rhythm, because this characteristic set the pace of the aesthetic process.

In this sense, this paper explores Dewey’s proposal from a comparative approach, because the rejection of art-centred discourse to the rich aesthetic dimensions of ordinary is not common in all cultural traditions. Western conceptions of art, supposing as they do a chasm between art and nature raw, cannot be adequate to different aesthetic practices. I begin defining the deweyan notion of rhythm in contrast to the vital energy (气) of Taoist aesthetics. Both Dewey and Taoists postulate that Human beings are affected and participate in nature’s rhythms and the reality is a continually changing balance. Secondly, I would like to consider a specific classic Chinese work of aesthetics, elaborated by Shí Tāo (石涛) in the seventeenth century, which was developed fundamental aspects of rhythm in capturing the spirit resonance of the world and revealed its immensity through the method of the one-stroke. Through this paper’s presentation, I wish to show the importance of the rhythm in the creative process,

¹ Okakura, Kakuzo. *Book of Tea*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2007, p. 6.

because rhythm marks not only our interaction with the environment and with other people, but also the impulse of the aesthetic world-making process.

I. Listening to Mountain Brook (山麓听泉图): Rhythm



1. Listening to Mountain Brook
山麓听泉图

Dewey wrote *Art as Experience*² in his mature period, when the term ‘experience’ had come to mean a process in nature, as Thommas Alexander sais, a “shared social activity of symbolically mediated behaviour which seeks to discover the possibilities of our objective situations in the natural world for meaningful, intelligent and fulfilling ends.”³ That is, Dewey aimed to understand the quest for aesthetic experience in the natural world of human action. Thus, in the first chapter, called “The Live Creature”, Dewey gives the fundamentals to place aesthetics in life, a life that “goes on in an environment, not merely in it because of it, through interaction with it”⁴.

Dewey seeks to remind us of the constant involvement of the live creature with its world. For him, our senses are extensions of our need for continuous, organized activity which maintains and develops our equilibrium. Our embodiment as organisms shapes the conditions of the aesthetics.

When the rhythmic interaction of individual and world comes to be consciously experienced as a developmental process culminating in the kind of

² Dewey, John, *Art as experience. The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. X. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1987. Through this work, published in 1934, Dewey criticized western aesthetic theory which has separated the existence of the works of art as products that exist apart from human experience. Artistic objects have been separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience and have been set in a remote pedestal, “a wall is built around them that render almost opaque their general significance, with which aesthetic theory deals”². In contrast, all art, as Dewey understands it, is the product of interaction between living organisms and their environment, that is to say, is the product of having an experience.

³ Alexander, Thommas, “John Dewey”, *A Companion to Aesthetics* (David E. Cooper ed.). Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1992, p. 119.

⁴ Dewey, John, *op. Cit.*, p. 19.

organic integrity and wholeness which makes the event sensed as deeply meaningful, pervaded by a qualitative continuity which uniquely distinguishes the experience as such, then one has had an experience. Therefore, Dewey commence to think about the aesthetic placing in the life-world as a whole⁵. Nevertheless, the notion of experience has adhered various meanings, which make it difficult Dewey's notion. Experience has been considered by different philosophers and thoughts in different times, and has supposed diverse criticisms to Dewey's aesthetics⁶.

In this sense, this approach considers the pace because this notion return the creative process to that raw nature, place the aesthetic in the context of the rhythm of life. First of all, I will define main points of Dewey's notion of rhythm, drawing a comparison with Taoist notion of qì. Both notions, although present differences, display suggestive similarities which offer new ways of considering creative process. Secondly, I consider the main aspects of the attitude that characterize this creative process in both proposals, pay special attention to the convergences, that is, the emphasis in the spontaneous freedom of life which is expressed in art.

Dewey examined closely the notion of rhythm in the chapters seven and eight of *Art as Experience* ("Natural History of Form" and "Organization of Energies"). Defining rhythm as a universal scheme of existence, underlying all realization of order in change⁷, Dewey characterizes it as a quality of life and nature. Human beings are affected and participate in nature's rhythms, from sunrise and sunset to circadian rhythms⁸. In fact Dewey carries out a genealogy of human interaction with the environment through these flux: firstly people, being aware the rhythms of nature, become farmers and relate these rhythmical cycles with their needs and community life; subsequently, when human beings introduced new economic models, man generates new rhythms, new ways of interacting with the environment. In other words, the intimate participation of man in nature's rhythms induced him to introduce rhythm

⁵ "He does not start by isolating some unique experience or subjects as aesthetics and then attempt to find its essential properties, but by an ecological approach, which locate the aesthetic within the life-world as a whole, Alexander, Thommas, "John Dewey and the Aesthetic of Human Experience" *Classical American Pragmatism*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999, p. 166

⁶ It is important to stress that many of these criticisms have been due to misunderstanding of the notions which he introduced.

⁷ Dewey, John, *op. Cit.* p. 154

⁸ Circadian rhythm is a biological process driven that displays an endogenous, entrainable oscillation of about 24 hours. These rhythms are driven by a circadian clock, and rhythms have been widely observed in all living beings. Endogenous means that rhythms are determined genetically and are generated by own organism. Although organisms have an on-going relationship with external cycles, adjusting their process to environmental process.

where they did not appear. In this way, rhythm does not restore the continuity art and life, but shows why this separation is affected and imposed. There is not distinction between art and nature, and this kind of division is conventional and artificial. Through rhythm Dewey characterizes creative process not only as a phase or medium to achieve an artistic product, but as the harmonization which directs the interaction with our environment.

Similarly, we can find that one of the main points of Taoist aesthetics is the vital energy. Chinese paintings have never been separated or set against nature, but artists' aim is to grasp the vital movements through natural rhythms. It is important to consider that Chinese think that there is a life-force, qì (氣), which animates the forms of the world. Qì is the fundamental substance which constitutes the whole physic world. All that is in the world is a form of that primal energy, and Chinese paintings communicate this vibratory nature through the rhythm. The reality is a continuously changing balance. There are not clearly delimited living beings or situations, but a play of force in ceaseless interaction. The universe is always in tension and the artist communicate that from his own context.

However, this context does not imply subjectivity, artist must penetrate into the mysterious and capture the things through their spirit and not through artists' eyes. The universe is always in tension and the artist captures that tension in every particular time and from his context of interaction. That is the representation of qì (氣), the second classical canon of Chinese painting, and a key idea in Chinese thought. Qì-yun (氣運), which literally means the circulation of energy, is a fundamental notion to understand Chinese medicine, painting or philosophy, but also their traditional practice of life.

Likewise, according to Dewey's philosophy, life supposes energy and attention, but also pulses or stimulus; life is an endless process of interacting and interchanging through which man dynamically participate in natural rhythms and, being aware, create new rhythms. Nonetheless, this supposes a difference because, although Dewey place the beginning of aesthetic response in artist's ongoing surroundings, he focuses the development of creative process in new rhythms which artist creates. In contrast, for Taoist aesthetics every line in nature is alive and the artist must capture that vital rhythm.

Taoist aesthetics introduce this notion through Dragon Veins, the vital lines which draw the form of the landscape, similarly to energy in the reality. In all traditional Chinese art, we find these invisible threads or connectives which vitally hold the painting together. Thus, Dragon Vein refers to the aesthetic interdependence of the parts made through the use of stroke and line. Both stroke and line are the main expression methods for Chinese landscape painters, whereby the structure of pictures are composed. The drawing is precise but also indefinite: through its delicate lines makes flow the vital energy, through its shading in ink create an image that embodies movement and quiet. Instead of painting the details, Chinese painters always simplify the complex landscape nature and only show a general overview of landscape to observers through



2. The River and Sky. 江天山色图

the use of ink and brush. Lines-strokes have the strong expressive force in Chinese paintings, a particular way that makes us to ride Dragon Veins. For that reason, it is not only a style of painting, but a popular belief which address the harmonious relationship

between human beings and cosmos. The cosmic forces, energy or harmony are in some way made manifest in them.

Briefly, I contrast Dewey's notion of rhythm with the Chinese notion of *qi* (氣). Obviously, this presentation does not accurately reflect the deep of Dewey's thought and the suggestive richness of taoism wisdom, which means without words, in fact this was not my intent, but it gives an approach to an important aspect of creative process, frequently forgotten. Despite the divergencies, both proposals share two main points: the starting point, that is, nature is an ongoing process, the "reality" is a changing equilibrium in which everything is formed by energy; and creative process is initiated from this vital rhythm; and this led us to another point, the attitude.

From this changing and rhythmical environment, Dewey and taoist aesthetics undertake that creative process starts when human beings participate in this vital energy with a particular attitude. And, although this particular attitude has similarities between two proposals, Dewey's attitude does not require the emptiness which Taoism defends. Creative process, in Dewey's aesthetics, starts from aesthetic attitude, that is, a full act of perceiving what happens in our lives when we are both most alive and most concentrated on the engagement with the environment, with its energy. In a similar way, communicating the *qi* (氣) implies a particular mood, characterized by inner peace and silence. Chinese painters begin the creative process with a specific attitude, stopping to think, which makes possible to capture this rhythm. Experiencing the *qi* (氣) of objects, the vital movement of its spirit, painters try to communicate it through the rhythm, movement and tension which introduce in their paintings.

Therefore, Dewey and taoist aesthetics seem to be separated because of different way of considering this attitude. On one hand, Dewey says, at every single moment, every living creature experiences the world and its vital rhythms; Taoism, on the other hand, talk about listening the silence through the harmony of things. Racionero explains this Taoist idea with Pan-yun-tuan garden image. "People who have walked along Pan-yun-tuan garden, knowing about this natural rhythm. [...] Its sudden changes suspend our breath and stop the time; the silence of sea between the rocks, the noise of insects when fruit falls" Thus, with every natural event everything change its rhythm, human beings included.

Whereas Dewey focuses on the conscious activity, Taoist aesthetics in the non-action, *wu wei* (無為). However, although the literal meaning of *wu-wei* is not have-act, we must understand as under-acting, without-leading, not-striving. Taoist painters seek the emptiness, to become the mirror of natural rhythm. Only when human beings leave their desires and identify themselves with the original emptiness, perceive the rhythm and the law of change and then they can represent that circulation. Painter has to show the great law of transformation, the creator eternal activity, the vital breath of yinyang (陰陽); through the ink and brush.

Thus, both theories put emphasis in vital rhythms and energy, as although they present different ways of developing creative process, not only share their basis, from which start this process, everyday experience, but also their attitude. The aesthetic attitude and do not confine attitude to any partial or specialized view but recovers the interest and worth of things as they are; using art to communicate this appreciation in its wholeness and vividness. Taoist claim a concentrate attitude, as well as Dewey does, and both address how the observation of changes in nature extends to inner changes in human beings: feelings, thoughts, moods, nothing remains. Everything is changing and taoist does not claim not to do anything, but do in correspondence with the course of events, similarly to Dewey, flow through the *dao* (道), not counter to it.

II. Stone Wave: *Shí Tāo*⁹ (石涛)

To illustrate this proposal I would like to introduce the life and work of *Shí Tāo*¹⁰, who embodies this dynamic conception of the change. He assumed the art of painting to achieve the unity: both, the unity of human beings and the unity of environment. Although he is less known for his written work, his main essay on painting, *Hua Yü Lu*¹¹, as Oswald Sirén asserts¹², “is one of the most extraordinary contributions to the discussions of the theory and practice of painting”. The terminology is largely borrowed from Taoism and his sources of inspiration was Taoistic writings and the Classics, particularly I Ching, the Book of Changes, from which he has taken over some of the cosmological ideas. In this sense, Oswald Sirén sais how “painting is to him a

⁹ Shi Tao, Tao-chi and also under other appellations such as Shih-kung Shan-jên or K’u-kua ho-shang, “the Monk of the Bitter Cucumber”. [Sirén, Oswald, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, Mineola: Dover, 2005, p. 182].

¹⁰ Life of Shi tao: . He was born under the Ming dynasty in 1642, though mainly active during the Ch’ing dynasty.

¹¹ *Hua Yü Lu* quotations have been extracted from the included English translation passages in Sirén, Oswald, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, Mineola: Dover, 2005, pp. 185-190.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 182.

microcosmic activity, a miniature parallel to the creative activity of the macroscopic forces, which express themselves in the movement of the heavenly bodies and in all the living organisms of nature”¹³



3. Mountain Hut. 卓泉图

Shi Tao presented the one-stroke theory in the third period of his life¹⁴. However, it is important to take into account that Shi Tao, due to his strong personality and self-awareness, never subjected himself to trends, and this was seen through out his life¹⁵. Because of his numerous trips, he never developed “provincial tastes”, but created ,or as he said discovered, a particular way of carrying out creative process. In Shi Tao work’s both theory and practice, nature and people, found a perfect union. His theory and practice are united by the life of the painter. Through his creative experience he makes his theory and let flow his thought by means his paintings. Shi Tao developed a painted work, characterized by its variety and internal unity, and his original style. Theory and practice are elaborated to extend one another, for that reason, I consider his one-stroke proposal in both of them at the same time.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 183

¹⁴ In this point, I follow the teory which explains his work throug three periods: a) Firstly, entitled “Adhering to my own way” (1651-1685), Shi Tao’s work is unconventional, developed a cutting approach in painting ; b) Secondly, called “Neither to establish nor abandon a law” (1686-1692), he stated how in the vast universe, painting must not adhere to any rigid a law; c) In third period, “The one-brushstroke theory came from me” (1693-1707), one brushstroke was enough to make a delicated painting. [You-Feng (Ed.) *100 Masters of Chinese Painting. The Pioneer of the Modern Chinese Painting. Shi Tao*. Paris: Libraire Editeur, 2004, pp. 2-7].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7

The first point to consider is where does this theory comes from? Shi Tao asserted that “the one-brushstroke theory came from me”. From his own experience of life, Shi Tao discovered this principle which characterized the creative process. According to Shi Tao, there is a primordial all-inclusive creative art, *i hua*, which all refer to the origin of cosmic creation¹⁶. The author discovered it by following his heart, instead of adhering to traditional methods, because

“in painting one should follow the heart (mind). If one cannot completely enter into the reason and render all the details of beautiful landscapes and figures, the characteristics of birds, animals, grass and trees, or the designs of pavilions, buildings and terraces, the great principle of the all-inclusive creative painting cannot be grasped”¹⁷.

Therefore, its meaning and application must become a matter of individual experience, because it is not a method that may be intellectually defined. One-brushstroke technique came from the nature and the painter took the heaven and earth as master. Penetrating into Shi Tao’s pictorial universe is not easy because his work embodies different aspects of nature and rhythm. But it must not be understood as mere naturalism, because he did not look for a surface resemble, but as a universe where combines vital breaths (气).



4. Book-reading by Pine Window
松窗读书图

¹⁶ Sirén, Osvald, *op. Cit.*, p. 183.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185

“The movements of the wrist must be freely revolving, they must transmit the richness of the ink and dominate the open spaces; they must start out as if cutting, draw in like ripping, form circles and squares, straight lines and curves, make swellings and hollows, beak and cut resolutely, move horizontally and transversely like water that penetrates deep, or like rising flames of fire, and they must do it all naturally without being in the least forced.”¹⁸

Shi Tao’s proposal was to capture breaths (气) that animate everything, and for that reason he uses the perfected method, the brushstroke (笔).

“Everything has its constant principle but has also its variations. The method should also include transformations. If one knows the constant principle, one can modify it by variations, and if one knows the method, one is also skilled in transformations.”¹⁹

The brushstroke has multiple features because of its thickness and fineness, because of the emptiness which represents form and volume. Due to its drive conveys rhythm and movement; its game of shadows suggests light and shade (陰陽); the instant execution, without retouching, introduces vital rhythm²⁰. Shi Tao says “painting receives (depends on) the ink, the ink depends on (receives) the brush, the brush depends on the wrist, the wrist depends on the heart (mind), just as Heaven creates life and Earth makes it mature.”²¹ In Chinese Philosophy, as François Cheng explains²², the primordial breath separate from the primordial chaos and generate two breaths, *yīnyáng* (陰陽), from which rise all beings²³; and Shi tao translated this traditional Chinese philosophy to his paintings. Thus, the one-brushstroke, similar to *yīnyáng* (陰陽), comes from the primordial chaos and contain all brushstrokes²⁴. And this idea of brush-ink is not only related with the notion of *yīnyáng*, but also with the idea of mountain-water (山水)²⁵, which represents the two opposites of nature. The brush is a way of expression, but also

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 186

²⁰ Cheng François, *Vacío y Plenitud*. Madrid: Siruela, 2004, p. 221.

²¹ Sirén, Osvald, *op. Cit.*, p. 187.

²² Cheng François, *op. Cit.*, p. 223.

²³ Cf. *I Ching, The Book of Changes*. This book of Chinese wisdom contains a body of commentaries which reflects this Chinese vision of nature, according to which life arises out of, and is nourished by the dynamic interplay of opposites, creating the innumerable forms and conditions of life.

²⁴ Cf. *Dao De Jing*, Moss Roberts (trad.), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, stanza XLII, p. 116: “The number one of the Way was born. A duad from this monad formed. The duad next a triad ade; The triad bred the myriad, Each holding yang, and held by yin, Whose powers’ balanced interaction, brings all ten thousand to fruition.”

²⁵ It is important to consider that this couple of opposites (mountain and river) mean the notion of landscape in Chinese culture.

the form of an organic whole, in which the creative process is related to the rhythms of universe. Being involved in the vital rhythm, human beings find their own way of expression²⁶.



5. Crying Long and Loud in Wind
临风长啸图

“Painting is the great method to be in harmony with everything in the world. It gives the very essence of the aspects of mountains and rivers. Like the Great Creator it gives shapes to everything, be it old or new. It gives the circulations of the Yin and the Yang. It borrows brush and ink to draw innumerable things of Heaven and Earth and puts one into a happy frame of mind.”²⁷

Shi Tao created fascinating illustrations of things in daily life, things that viewers were able to feel but unable to express by whatever means. Great examples of this is his exquisite representations of bamboo and orchids, which show the simple, asymmetrical balance of the leaves and branches, where the apparent disorder is provided with an evocative coherence. This probably accounts for the everlasting charm in Shi Tao’s works, still close to life and appealing today²⁸.

²⁶ Cf. The great chapter from Cheng, François, *op. Cit.*, pp. 231-236, entitled “Mountain of Brush and Oceans of Ink”, in which the author offers a great explanation of the relationship between these opposites.

²⁷ Siren, Osvald, *op. Cit.*, p. 187.

²⁸ You-Feng (Ed.), *op. Cit.*, p. 6.

III. Landscape Melodies (山水清音): Rhythm in the Creative Process

To conclude, I would like to address some points that summarize this proposal. In this sense it is important to emphasize that my goal has not been introduced an unnatural or forced relationship between ancient wisdom of Taoism and complex thought of John Dewey, but has been stressed how rhythm is the impulse of aesthetic world-making.

Firstly, Western aesthetics, as well as Philosophy, has elaborated a theory of concepts, building over practice, nature or everything else which cannot be controlled by measures and static ideas. We sometimes feel afraid or ignore this matter because nature, rhythm or energy cannot be fixed in notions of knowledge. In contrast, Dewey's proposal was to replace the role, which has occupied the epistemology, with the nature of an aesthetic of learning²⁹. Dewey asserted that there are two kind of philosophies, and defend one of them which "accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities to imagination and art."³⁰



6. Landscape Melodies
山水清音

Similarly, Taoism explain how we need to drop this epistemological reign and to be aware that human being not only have knowledge interactions:

All that has been learned adorns the Way
And engenders delusion
Hence those strong and true keep commitment,
Shun deceit
staying with the kernel that's real
and shun flowery adornment

²⁹ Alexander, Thommas. *The Human Eros. Eco-Ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence*. New York: Fordham University, 2013, p. 74

³⁰ Dewey, John, *Art as Experience, op. Cit.*, p. 41.

choosing the first, refusing the last³¹

Secondly, as a result of the first point, I propose restore, as Dewey did, the continuity in the creative process between art and life, human beings and nature, theory and practice from this notion of rhythm, which is not strange in other non-western traditions. The Chinese painting, as I have presented, was very closely bound up with a philosophy of life, which start from this notion of rhythm. What is more, as Marcel Granet said, all chinese wise people never introduce abstract ideas to explain reality, but they seek the rhythm which led us to participate in and to understand it³².

Thirdly, I would like to justify why the notion of rhythm. From an anthropological and biological context, this notion seems to be everywhere. Every culture, every human being, nature participate in natural rhythms, are affeted by them; different traditions and people have elaborated different ways of participating in these. A great example of this, it has been showed through the Shi Tao's theory-practice of the brushstroke (笔). He developed his own style combining in a whole fullness-emptiness, line-volume and creating a microcosmos, whose essence is similar to Chinese macrocosmos. Thus, one-stroke is not only a technique, but a philosophy of life showed in a character, 笔.

Creative process must not be bound by abstract concepts or fixed forms, because, as Van Meter Ames said, life is most spontaneous in immediate experience which can freely take on one form or another³³. Our surroundings are changing, our lives are ongoing processes, and every work of art or aesthetic practice suppose a temporary organization of energies. The point of balance is a living, which is as real as it is indefinable. We experience a sense of rhythm, of order in this confusion and we can face whatever we fear, whatever challenges or threaten us. Here and now this dynamic balance may expose us to conflict and confusion, which threatens to overwhelm us, and we may find the subtlety and delicacy and beauty and appropriateness of life and death to be fulfilled.

'It is the penetrating eye that gives clear vision, the acute ear that gives quick hearing, the discriminating nose that gives discernment of odours, the practised mouth that gives the enjoyment of flavours, the active mind that acquires knowledge, and the far-reaching

³¹ *Dao De Jing*, Moss Roberts (trad.), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, stanza 38, pp. 106-107.

³² Granet, Marcel. *El pensamiento chino*. Madrid: Trotta, 2013, p. 77.

³³ Ames, Van Meter, "Art for Zen and Dewey", *Proceedings of the IV International Congress of Aesthetics*, Athens, 1960, p. 746.

knowledge that constitutes virtue. In no case does the connexion with what is without like to be obstructed; obstruction produces stoppage; stoppage, continuing without intermission, arrests all progress; and with this all injurious effects spring up. The knowledge of all creatures depends on their breathing. But if their breath be not abundant, it is not the fault of Heaven, which tries to penetrate them with it, day and night without ceasing; but men notwithstanding shut their pores against it. The womb encloses a large and empty space; the heart has its spontaneous and enjoyable movements. If their apartment be not roomy, wife and mother-in-law will be bickering; if the heart have not its spontaneous and enjoyable movements, the six faculties of perception will be in mutual collision. That the great forests, the heights and hills, are pleasant to men, is because their spirits cannot overcome (those distracting influences).³⁴

³⁴ Zhuang Zi, "What comes from without", *Zhuang Zi*, 9. Chinese Text Project, Chinese and English Translation James Legge. <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi>:

目徹為明，耳徹為聰，鼻徹為顫，口徹為甘，心徹為知，知徹為德。凡道不欲壅，壅則哽，哽而不止則跖，跖則眾害生。物之有知者恃息，其不殷，非天之罪。天之穿之，日夜無降，人則顧塞其竇。胞有重閭，心有天遊。室無空虛，則婦姑勃谿；心無天遊，則六鑿相攘。大林丘山之善於人也，亦神者不勝。