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IN THE QUEST FOR NATURAL LIVING: THE TAOIST AND JUNGIAN ROOTS OF ARNOLD MINDELL'S THERAPEUTIC PATH

Abstract. In this article, I would like to take a closer look at the philosophical meaning of the term “process,” which is a fundamental category in Arnold Mindell's psychology. The Taoist origins of this concept go back to the *Tao* – the principle of the universe. *Tao* is the process of passing into each other the opposite aspects of the monastically understood *Qi* energy. Mindell was also inspired by the analytical psychology of Carl Gustav Jung, which emphasizes the importance of archetypal, unconscious mental processes and their impact on the *ego* through random thoughts, fantasies or dreams. Mindell distinguishes between a primary process (mental content that we are aware of) and a secondary process (mental content that we are not aware of) to explain what connects a person with her natural living – an unadulterated existence through rigid boundaries between the two processes acquired during one's upbringing. The purpose of this article is to explore the Jungian and Taoist roots of Mindell's psychology and to characterize individual lives as confronting their entire processual being, thus becoming natural living.

Keywords: natural living; process-oriented psychology; *wu wei*; Arnold Mindell; Carl Gustav Jung; *Tao*

Can natural living be considered as the highest value in modern Western culture? The search for an answer to this question leads me to reflect on the philosophical meaning of the pursuit of living that can be described as natural. My starting point is the intuition that a person can discover the way to natural living by paying attention to a phenomenon that Arnold Mindell calls ‘process’ (I will discuss the specifics of this concept later). At this point, it is worth asking the question: to what extent can reflecting on one's everyday experience help a person along this path? By reflecting on everyday experience, I mean mental activity aimed at an increasingly complex understanding of reality. This activity is processual, and it gradually develops in a person the disposition to react in unconventional ways

to signals coming from the body and the environment – that is, by taking into account the specificity of a given situation, rather than merely reacting through rigid patterns of behavior internalized during one's childhood (Kimball 1980). Reflection on everyday experience is a process that can accompany a person throughout her life. The very notion of a process invites consideration on its subject. Since everything is changing around the human being, it is natural to ask: is there anything that always remains the same? The intuitive answer is: the subject, or, more empirically, self-awareness. Whichever way we answer, relying on everyday experience we can assume that the center of self-awareness, through reflection, shapes an individual's humanity and thus helps her return to her natural living – the idea which I will try to locate in Mindell's psychology. Apart from a typically philosophical reflection, I will also focus on the therapeutic role of a reflective, process-oriented living, which, as I see it, has a positive effect on the individual, by facilitating the release of her potential and the manifestation of her true nature.

Before considering Mindell's notion of a process, I want to illuminate the origins of process-oriented psychology. Mindell admits to three significant inspirations that directly affected his own thought. These are Chinese philosophical Taoism, Jungian depth psychology, and quantum physics. Due to the philosophical and psychological nature of this text, I will discuss the first two sources of process psychology and explore their connections through the hermeneutic method. As for the quantum nature of processes, I will briefly discuss some ideas revolving around cosmological issues, which deserve to be further developed in a separate essay (Mindell 2010). In what follows, I will understand the term 'natural living' as living in equilibrium with all aspects of the human being (for example, weakness, ability to love, desire for power) that come from the unconscious (Jung 2014).

Taoism is a branch of Chinese philosophy distinguished by its specific approach to life, which is particularly striking from a Western perspective. One of the most essential values of the Taoist art of

living is freedom (Ni 1993). It is essence of the *Tao*, the principle of the universe, which is understood as a path without beginning or end; a process that knows no rest, conditioning the existence of living beings and matter. Similarly, Taoist freedom has no beginning and no end. It is not freedom “from something” or “to something,” and it is not tied to any context (e.g., individual, social, cosmic). Freedom is the state of mind of a human being living in harmony with the *Tao*. Taoism tries to capture such a state, as we would say from a Western perspective. From an Eastern perspective, however, we would rather say that the *Tao* seeker is trying to leave space for freedom within itself, that it is possible to allow the chaos in consciousness to sort itself out. When this happens, freedom will emerge, unforced into the Taoist’s being. This concept of freedom does not resemble the Western ideal of freedom stretching between security and the fulfillment of desires. The Taoist feels truly free only when she “drops” herself (limited by various needs and desires), leaving nothing but the silence of existence (Ni 1993). The forty-eighth chapter of the canonical Taoist work, the *Tao Te Ching*, puts it succinctly and precisely:

“In the pursuit of knowledge,
every day something is added.
In the practice of the Tao,
every day something is dropped.
Less and less do you need force things,
until finally you arrive at non-action.
When nothing is done,
Nothing is left undone.
True mastery can be gained
By letting things go their own way
It can’t be gained by interfering” (Mitchell 2006, 50).

The ability not to interfere with the natural course of things allows a person to experience “true mastery.” Lao Tzu, master of the art of non-interference and semi-legendary author of the *Tao Te Ching*, expresses in this text one of the most profound truths of Taoism: the

path to the inner does not lead through what is outside, but through non-interference with what we really are, a dimension of mind filled with harmony and silence, giving rise to non-action (*wu wei*), the fundamental principle of the Taoist way of living (Loy 1985). This principle primarily concerns living in harmony with the nature of the universe as well as its rhythm (*Tao*).

Having clarified the Taoist way of being, I shall now investigate how it is related to the idea of natural living. First of all, Taoism emphasizes the individual discovery of a mental sphere in which only freedom exists. This realm transcends the *ego*, thus revealing the possibility of a completely different way of experiencing the world than the culturally-conditioned one. Now, can it really be said that the Taoist lives naturally if, even hypothetically, she is able to transcend the culturally-shaped human condition? It seems that the very fact of transcending the culturally-conditioned *ego* justifies an affirmative answer. A being able to transcend what is cultural will be able to lead a natural living. Let us consider two different perspectives on this issue: (1) First, what exactly is natural living? In my view, I assume that it should be distinguished from cultural living, which in turn I identify with our everyday existence. If we accept this, we have not defined in detail what natural living is, but have only indicated what it is not. Earlier, when writing about reflection on everyday experience, I suggested that it might help human beings to return to a natural, unconstrained living. Following up on this intuition, I note that natural living is a way of being that is freed, through individual reflection, from absolute dependence on cultural influence, and is thus spontaneous – grounded in the present moment and oriented toward mindfulness (Yu 2008); (2) Following Jung, we will note that natural living is not only a way of existence that transcends culture enclosing it within the framework of personal reflection. It is, first of all, the art of balancing individual reference to both culture and nature. This is how one can remain at the same time conditioned and free from culture. The above situation is very well illustrated by the example

of spiritually and socially mature people who can find themselves in the world and lost in the human being (Jung 2014). Both ways of thinking about natural living bring to mind the mode of being of a person of supreme virtue, mature and innocent at the same time:

“Can you coax your mind from its wandering
and keep to the original oneness?

Can you let your body become
supple as a newborn child’s?

Can you cleanse your inner vision
until you see nothing but the light?

Can you love people and lead them
without imposing your will?

Can you deal with the most vital matters
by letting events take their course?

Can you step back from your own mind
and thus understand all things?

Giving birth and nourishing,
having without possessing,
acting with no expectations,
leading and not trying to control:

this is the supreme virtue” (Mitchell 2006, 12).

The natural living of the Taoist exudes freedom, showing the world from the perspective of a clear, non-violent mind. Is such a state of mind worth the effort that a person practicing the *Tao* puts into inner development? It is difficult to give an unequivocal answer. The reflective living does not always lead to the experience of happiness; moreover, it does not have to coincide with the path to a natural living, which in itself may not be worth any effort put into developing one’s personality. The question also arises as to whether it is worth overcoming the *ego* shaped by culture at all? Worthiness aside, it is possible that transcending the cultural self becomes a necessity at a certain stage of individual development. If so, then it ceases to be significant whether we choose development or the latter chooses us.

Another source that Mindell draws from, which is as significant as Taoism, is Jungian depth psychology. According to Jung, the process of reflective living is a path to consciousness development referred to as individuation (Jung 2014), which can be framed as a process of human becoming. Let us now consider the specifics of Jung's image of the human being. Given the relation of depth psychology to process-oriented psychology, this will help uncover essential elements of Jung's account. As a psychological image, Jung's characterization shows the connection between the psyche of a human being and the collective dimension; as a philosophical portrait, it reveals the path a human being must follow to achieve a state of freedom and realize the meaning of existence through spiritual development, based on the creation of a coherent dialogue between the *ego* and the collective – the dimension of archetypes. This dimension, as understood by Jung, remains for the most part outside the consciousness that accompanies a person on a daily basis. It becomes present only when a supra-individual force – an idea, image or symbol – impacts the individual (Jacobi 1999). Through these media, the archetype, the basic element of the collective unconscious, affects people's minds, shaping their reactions to various events, such as those of a political, religious or cultural nature. The collective unconscious is the mental sphere shared by all people, which contains the archetypes – primordial images that penetrate in the form of symbols into the collective or individual consciousness (Jung 2014). They impact perception, intuition, feeling, and thinking: sometimes positively, bringing inspiration beyond the capacity of the average human imagination; at other times negatively, depriving the being “possessed” by them of sober judgment and moral scruples. Manifestations of the collective unconscious can also be encountered in dreams, in which it reveals itself through the characters of mythological heroes, universal motifs, stories involving gods, demons, and other supernatural, oneiric entities. Shaped by it, dreams can affect the conscious side of a person's mental existence and her attitude to the meaning of life (Jacobi 1999). Thus, the mysterious

images of dreams, as well as the symbols and ideas experienced on waking, become determinants of reflective living that are difficult to ignore. Reflection on them has accompanied the more inquisitive representatives of our species for a long time.

The experience of the non-obviousness of life in the social world haunts the individual organically intertwined with the collective consciousness when, for one reason or another, she is forced to look into the darkness of her psyche. A person who directs her attention only outwardly may fail to perceive the world hidden within herself, and thus evade the call which the unconscious bestows upon her. This call almost never reveals a straight and settled path. A being stuck in the casemates of social conventions usually fails to notice that apart from its predictable world, created by “everyone,” there is another one; the one it carries within itself, although one can also perversely express it – outside itself. Situating itself only within the domain of social reality, it resigns itself to moving towards inner wholeness – this is the actual existence outside of itself. It follows that, in the context of psychological development it is primarily the exploration of the inner sphere that becomes significant for the individual. Jung does not believe that complete detachment from society is a necessary condition of development – individuation. According to him, a person only needs to create a distance from the social, facilitating her descent into the depths of her psyche, where she can experience the unconscious (Jung 2014).

Some experiences in everyday life contain something ephemeral, not obvious. Dreams, fantasies, strange premonitions or predictions are examples of such experiences. Rarer than these, but also haunting everyday life, are visions, revelations, or *quasi*-meditative states that are not the direct result of the spiritual practice of the person experiencing them. These experiences reveal to her a dimension of the unknown. In ordinary life, individuation is made present precisely through them (Jacobi 1983). In Jung’s view, the way to the interior of the psychological *terra incognita* is through facing oneself, or more

precisely, one's dark side. The metaphor of a mirror may be helpful in understanding the idea of this confrontation. An old Slavic proverb warns that staring into a mirror for too long reveals the devil. Let us imagine that this reflection is our other self, ourselves, as if in a distorting mirror. On the one hand, we do not recognize ourselves, because we no longer appear there as we perceived ourselves before. On the other hand, it is still us, or rather, as Jung puts it, our shadow – the darkness of the psyche that hides secrets, in which unnoticed good and evil bud, blossom and die. The shadow contains emotions, feelings or desires that are not ordinarily revealed. It takes its form in dreams, personal fantasies, or inexplicable fears. Sometimes it is helpful if some of the content that the individual suppresses in herself has a positive character. This is the case when a person grows up in an environment that promotes brutality and harm to animals or people. This causes the individual shaped by such a context to be unaware of her good qualities, for example, cheerfulness, altruism, or compassion. Moreover, the shadow is connected with both the fate of a particular person and the contents and images, of a collective nature, that symbolize absolute evil (images of emptiness, nothingness, Satan). In the latter context, the shadow takes the form of an archetype, affecting the person in contact with it. The archetype of the shadow affects, through unconscious impulses, the person who, by means of it, inflicts pure, archetypal evil to her fellow man or experiences it within herself (Jung 2014). The ability to confront this evil is an extremely valuable step on the path of spiritual development. The expansion of consciousness during the process of individuation, leads to a person's recognition of the dark, previously unconscious side of the psyche. Subject to a process of differentiation, such a mental wholeness offers the individual an experience of the meaning of existence, stemming from the understanding that he or she is inseparable from both good and evil (Odorisio 2015).

The heroic dealing with one's own shadow is not, in Jung's view, the end of individuation. A person must face several more archetypal

“demons,” lurking for her freedom. The most significant of these are: *anima* – the image of femininity in the soul of man; *animus* – the image of masculinity in the soul of a woman; Wise Old Man – the archetype of cultural wisdom; Great Mother – the image of nature, its life-giving and destructive aspects; and the self – the archetype of mental wholeness. All of them affect the individual in the process of individuation, and the most significant of them, the archetype of the self, allows the reflective human being to experience fullness and freedom, and thus to connect her consciousness with what is hidden, unconscious. This connection is, in Jung’s interpretation, the goal of the Taoist path of spiritual development (Coward 1996), to which the Swiss psychiatrist referred in his reflections on the concept of personality: “The undiscovered vein within us is a living part of the psyche; classical Chinese philosophy names this interior way »Tao« and likens it to a flow of water that moves irresistibly towards its goal. To rest in Tao means fulfilment, wholeness, one’s destination reached, one’s mission done; the beginning, end, and perfect realization of the meaning of existence innate in all things. Personality is Tao” (Jung 2014, 7829).

Having discussed the philosophical and psychological origins of process-oriented psychology, I will turn to a detailed presentation of selected elements of Mindell’s thought in order to relate it to the idea of natural living.

Mindell’s process-oriented psychology draws on Taoism and Jungian psychology to explore the subtle phenomena of human mental life. Mindell understands the concept of a process as the observer’s experience of the changeability of phenomena, and illustrates it with the metaphor of a moving train. What interests him are not the individual stations, but the journey itself, its direction and destination: in other words, the process (Mindell 2011). This way of thinking determines Mindell’s perception of the human being. For Mindell, the human being appears as a dynamic entity that comes to know

reality through three equally significant perspectives: the ordinary perception of objects, animals, or persons (“Consensus Reality”), the experience of life as one experiences a dream (“Dreamland”), and the profound awareness of reality (“Essence”). The first perspective comes down to our everyday existence in the world of phenomena, where such things as common sense, social conventions, and scientific research play an important role. This is the reality of everyday life. The second perspective is situated in the sphere of the subjective experiences of an individual. It includes, for example, daydreams, waking fantasies, visions, or mysterious events that happen to a person who is sensitized to them. The third perspective is the most difficult to describe because it alerts the individual of non-dual feelings in the form of an eye-catching, a captivating landscape or exhilarating, sublime music (Mindell 2000).

Let us now look at Mindell’s concept of a process. He distinguishes between primary and secondary processes, the former including all thoughts, feelings, sensations, behaviors, and actions of which the subject is aware. A secondary process, on the other hand, comprises thoughts, feelings, sensations, behaviors, and actions that the person is largely or completely unaware of. This distinction is reminiscent of Jung’s opposition between consciousness and unconsciousness, which shows the primary differentiation of the human psyche. Mindell focuses primarily on the view of man as a psychophysical being experiencing the flow of various information through so-called channels, which include the visual, auditory, proprioceptive, motor, relational, and world channels. Each of these is responsible for receiving and transmitting signals between the subject and her body and environment. This is how a person acquires knowledge and interacts with what is known. The distinction between primary and secondary processes accentuates the distinction between what we identify with in our lives and what seems completely foreign to us (Mindell 2011). Mindell, while remaining consistent with the basic tenets of depth psychology, considers that the pursuit of mental

wholeness, and thus the expansion of one's sense of identity, is vital to harmonious human development. The therapeutic function of process-oriented psychology lies largely in the fact that it frees the individual from a narrow sense of identity contained in her primary process, which is conditioned by culture (Mindell 2010).

Considering the difficulties his patients encountered in becoming aware of the various aspects of secondary processes, Mindell formulated the concept of an edge – a boundary of individual identity that is often an obstacle to discovering repressed, forgotten, or undeveloped aspects of one's being. There may be several causes for the formation of edges. Some of the primary causes include social and cultural norms of thinking, feeling, and behaving; personal belief systems; limitations of physicality; lack of appropriate role models and skills; negative experiences that prevent creative action; negative, difficulty-focused thinking; the fact that our secondary process reminds us of the behavior of a person we do not want to identify with; fear of humiliation, rejection, or punishment; our one-sided (negative) perception of our secondary processes; and unwillingness to leave our comfort zone. As such, an edge is not a problem in itself. However, sometimes it leads to various kinds of difficulties for the person, related, for example, to the premature attempt to integrate primary and secondary processes, as in the case of a young man who, while trying to prove his bravery, clashes too soon with opponents stronger than himself (Mindell 2011). To use Jung's categories, the integration of both aspects of a process (primary and secondary) develops individual personality and strengthens one's contact with the archetypal self, which is the most significant goal of individuation. We may conclude from this that Mindell and Jung situate the purpose of human development in the pursuit of a sense of mental wholeness.

The notion of a process is further associated with the Chinese terms *Tao* (the process of transformation of the natural order) and *wu wei* (the non-interference with the natural course of things).

The former, if identified with Mindell's process, shows a connection between the process of an individual and the process of nature in that individual. Hence, person and nature constitute a dynamic unity and following the process will eventually lead an individual to a natural living, a way of existence that transcends cultural and social norms of behavior. This kind of existence, according to Lao Tzu, requires no special effort, and is thus characterized by a pristine simplicity that comes from non-action (*wu wei*). Non-interference leads one to abandoning the patterns of action and thought acquired during upbringing, which liberates a person's mind, making it free and quiet. Natural living begins precisely when entanglement in the identification with the world of culture ends, thus enabling the will of the individual to grow out of the "will" of nature – that is, the process of the *Tao*.

Mindell's path is that of a therapist trying to understand aspects of human existence that are very difficult to grasp. Although the simplicity of a process makes it almost a truism, a philosophical account of this concept should focus on its developments since ancient times (e.g. Heraclitus of Ephesus, Lao Tzu). Mindell's careful observation of the way of existence, which a person's process leads her to, allowed him to shape psychotherapy in new ways informed by Taoism and Jungian psychology. In my understanding, Mindell's process-oriented psychology directs the person towards an unhindered life emanating with freedom, which, in the most precise sense of this word, we can consider natural.

In this text I have tried to show the connection between Taoism, Jungian depth psychology and Arnold Mindell's process-oriented approach. Avoid interference with the natural course of things, strengthening the relationship with the collective unconscious, as well as following the process, which Mindell also calls "working with the Dreaming Body" (Gates 2001), help the individual to find the point of balance within herself. The discovery of the inner point of equilibrium, in turn, promotes a psychophysical condition that will

provide a person in search of the meaning of existence (or at least some life reflection) with a solid point of departure from the overcrowded palace of artificial grandeur, and enable her to go wherever she wants.

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DOI 10.21697/spch.2022.58.A.11



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Received: 14/04/2022. Reviewed: 19/10/2022. Accepted: 24/10/2022.