

1 Six pieces on Taoism

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5 518. Western and Chinese thought

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7 The notions of fixed substance, an autonomous subject, truth as correspondence of ideas or
8 expressions with reality, in a static ontology of things, have been central in Western thought,
9 since the classical Greeks, e.g with the philosophy of Plato, which has reverberated in the
10 West. In Chinese Taoist thought, by contrast, central concepts were combination of opposites
11 and contrasts, in dialectics, processes of transformation, not knowledge but life in harmony
12 with nature, in a relational ontology (Clarke, 2000). Changes in philosophy that I liked in the
13 work of Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger, such as the 'being in the world, in 'Dasein' of
14 Heidegger and the 'in between' of people, prior to their identity, of Buber turned out to be
15 features of Taoism, which is reflected in the fact that both Buber and Heidegger studied
16 Taoism. I learned that without knowing it, I had been a Taoist philosopher, in philosophies of
17 learning, transformation, discovery, and language. Daoism is similar, in its dynamics, to the
18 thought of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. A central source of Daoism is the work
19 of Zhuang-Zi, a contemporary of Aristotle. For a long time, Confucianism was the dominant
20 philosophy in China, but there have always been connections between the three views of
21 Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, and currently there is a revival of Daoism (Clarke,
22 2000). Daoism was averse to the universal rules, strict rituals and bureaucratic hierarchy of
23 Confucianism, and professed a kind of anarchism, in 'wu-wei', which seems similar to what
24 Heidegger called 'releasement' (Clarke, 2000). That was not the free for all for self-interested
25 individuals, as in Western libertarianism, but lack of restraint in relations between individuals.

26

27 Daoism did not claim to achieve any ultimate, absolute truth. I adopt truth in the sense
28 proposed by Dewey of 'warranted assertibility'. For an argument, one should adduce logic,
29 and facts, and it should contribute to solutions to practical problems. It is a pragmatic notion,
30 as in Taoism. I still value logic, to clean up arguments, but I am against logicism, defined as
31 the claim that language can capture reality (here, the 'logo' refers to its original meaning of
32 'word', and does not refer to 'logic'). Meanings depend on context, on perspective, and shift.
33 For life, I have adopted the slogan 'imperfection on the move', and I think that is a good
34 characterisation of Daoism.

35

36 Admittedly, facts are problematic since they may be coloured by the theoretical perspective at
37 hand, but often theoretical disputes allow for shared facts. However, when people agree on
38 facts, those are still enclosed in their categorisation, with tacit 'background assumptions', and
39 the perspective remains myopic. I propose that truth claims must indicate the shadows,
40 indicate where the myopia, the boundaries, may lie. Art, and humour, may show up
41 boundaries, try to cross them, presenting things in a new light. Such boundary-crossing
42 humour plays a large role in Daoism.

43

44 In Western philosophy, the idea that language can distort, and that meaning is perspectival
45 and can shift is found in the philosophy of Nietzsche, the hermeneutics of Gadamer and the
46 deconstructionism of Derrida.

47

48 Clarke, J.J. 2000, *The Tao of the West*, London: Routledge.

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52

53 A key feature of Taoism is correlationism, or dialectics, improving the
54 understanding of something by correlating it to a contrasting thing. The classic
55 example is the contrast and complementarity of Yin, the principle of harmony,
56 care, submission, and Yang, the principle of action, war, conquest.

57

58 I must admit that while I understand what is written about Tao, when I turn to
59 Tao itself, for example the writings of Zhuangzi, I balk at the profuse use of
60 image and metaphor. It reads more like poetry than philosophy. I must also
61 admit, however, that in a different way I had problems of not understanding the
62 work of the likes of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas, and
63 there also, I had to resort to the secondary literature. I could not understand
64 Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* without resorting to Andreas Luckner's rendering of
65 it

66

67 A metaphor tells something in terms of something else. This can trigger the
68 transformation of thought, understanding something you did not understand
69 before, catapult you into a different frame of mind. In earlier work, also in this
70 blog, I proposed the notion of 'cognitive distance'. People develop thought on
71 the basis of innate potential, in interaction with others, along their particular path
72 of life. It requires interaction but remains individual. The interaction needs to
73 'cross cognitive distance', and this is facilitated by 'absorptive capacity',
74 assimilating thought at a cognitive distance, and by helping the other to
75 assimilate by means of rhetorical ability, with the use of metaphor.

76

77 The relational ontology of Tao requires metaphor. But metaphor only triggers a
78 shift of thought, which needs further formation, and in my perception, this was
79 often left hanging in the air, in Zhuangzi. But perhaps that says more about me
80 than about Zhuangzi, in my striving for achievement, result, a conclusion, a
81 closure, which I would not want to let go. To me, the meaning of life cannot be
82 to yield to emptiness and do nothing. I do acknowledge that life is 'imperfection
83 on the move', formulated by Zuangzi (2009: 72) as follows:

84

85 *My life certainly has its boundaries, while my consciousness by contrast is not*
86 *limited by boundaries. Pursuing something boundless with something that is*
87 *bounded, is without fail tiring. Knowing that, and yet acting from your*
88 *consciousness, implies that you are going to slave to the end of your life.*

89 That to me is fine.

90

91 Correlation to me is interdisciplinarity, connecting insights from economics,
92 sociology, psychology, political science, anthropology, physics and philosophy,
93 East and West.

94

95 According to Yong (2010), the stories and metaphors in Zhuangzi, about
96 craftsmen, politicians, sages, animals, mountains, in everyday language, serve to
97 illustrate and exemplify the central tenet that a moral agent must have the
98 natural disposition to recognise and respect the equal values of diverse ways of
99 life, natural dispositions of others. Monkeys live in trees, eels in moist
100 surroundings, and people in dry places. The Zhuangzi does not claim that this
101 ability to see and value different natural dispositions is an innate disposition, but
102 that it can be developed to become second nature, as sages do. From this, Yong
103 (2005), proposed a ‘Copper Rule’ to replace the famous ‘Golden Rule’, as
104 follows: ‘Do unto others as they would have us do unto them’ (not what I would
105 like done unto me)

106

107 Zhuangziii 2007, translated into Dutch and clarified by K. Schipper, Amsterdam: Augustus.

108

109 Yong Huang 2010, ‘Respecting different ways of life: A Daoist ethics of virtue in Zhuangzi,
110 *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 69/4, 2010-60.

111

112 Yong Huang 2005, ‘A copper rule versus the golden rule : A Daoist –Confucian proposal for
113 global ethics’, Academia, University of Hawai Press

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115

116 520. Dichotomies, polarities and language. published 23-9-2021

117

118 Taoism opposes dichotomies , such as true versus untrue, between which you have to choose,
119 and sees them as polarities, where you can choose a position in between. Not black or white
120 but shades of grey. This is part of a wider stance of getting away from rules (wu-wei) and
121 preconceived ideas, to ‘think out of the box’. Fox (2015: 65) uses an example of traffic lights.
122 They used to be red or green depending only on duration. Now they depend also on the time
123 of day, the length of queues and the weather However, rules are never complete, and depend
124 on circumstances. When a car in the line breaks down. the ordering fails. The point is that one
125 should always keep an open mind. to a different ordering.

126

127 This is also needed in communication, to understand, with the aid of metaphor, the different
128 perspective of someone else, whose values and ideas will always differ. Zhuangzi talks of
129 ‘goblet words’ that empty themselves in order to refill themselves (Fox, 2015: 66). Metaphor
130 is seeing something in terms of something else, i.e. the other’s perspective.

131

132 Taoism is skeptical, at best ambivalent, concerning language. Porat (2015) traces this to the
133 simple fact that language creates our view of reality, and does so by cutting it up, dividing it,
134 with words putting things into boxes, categories, while reality is an indivisible whole , and
135 thus cannot be put into words, is indescribable.

136

137 Here, I want to connect this issue with existing ideas concerning language from Western
138 philosophy of language. There one finds the *hermeneutic circle* , which professes a circular
139 to-and-fro between a *paradigmatic axis* and a *syntagmatic axis*. Hermeneutics means
140 interpretation of a text, called after the Greek god Hermes, who was the god of commerce,
141 travel and communication. The paradigmatic axis is composed of the generalised concepts, of

142 a cat, for example, and the *syntagmatic axis* of particular uses of the concept in specific
143 contexts, in sentences, this particular blue-grey striped cat on the mat. A dominant view is that
144 meaning can always be reduced to a general concept, the paradigm. The general concept may
145 be seen as having a variety of possible particular meanings, in things it may refer to. I
146 associate the notion ‘cat’ with my particular tabby, with blue-gray stripes. Particular things
147 may be odd, exceptional in some way, but remain seen to belong to the concept, and may in
148 their peculiarity shift the concept, in being included in the general notion, or may constitute a
149 new notion. This sounds like the idea, in Taoism, of a ‘goblet word’ (Fox 2015). One
150 misconceives the world if adhering to the paradigmatic axis with its fixed categories,
151 neglecting the fluidity, transformation, on the syntagmatic axis. The goblet is continuously
152 emptied and refilled

153
154 The French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure called the generalised inter-subjective order of
155 language *langue* and the individual subjective meaning *parole* (Saussure, 1979). In the
156 hermeneutic circle, general, public meanings or *langue* lie along the paradigmatic axis, and
157 particular, situation-specific meanings or *parole* along the syntagmatic axis. A general
158 concept, taken from the hermeneutic axis is inserted in a sentence, the syntagmatic axis, in a
159 specific action context, and becomes a particular. *Langue* becomes *parole*. In interpretation,
160 the *langue* of a text is interpreted in terms of the *parole* of the reader or speaker. A cloud of
161 potential reference condenses into a rain of particular ones. In the sentence the concept can
162 adopt new associations, which when adopted by others turns into an expansion or shift of the
163 general meaning, and is adopted in the public meaning along the paradigmatic axis. Reading
164 and interpretation can become creative. This is a model of how one can go from order
165 (*langue*) to disorder (*parole*) and back again, in an ongoing development. Openness to this
166 process is the ‘fluidity’ that Taoism aims at. General concepts change in the long run. Order
167 regulates disorder, but is shifted in its practice.

168
169 Thus, I do not reject generalised, intersubjective meaning, as Taoism seems to do, but propose
170 it as the freezing of a Taoist process of a variety of different individual, context-specific
171 meanings that shifts public meaning. It is still *wu-wei* in rejecting existing meanings and ideas
172 as fixed, but adds the role of shared meaning in communication.

173
174 Fox, A.2015, ‘Zhuangzi’s *weiwuwei* epistemology seeing through dichotomy to polarity’ in:
175 in: *New visions of the Zhuangzi*, (L Kohn, ed.), Three Pines Press.

176
177 De Saussure, F. 1979, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris: Payot.

178
179 Porat, R. 2015, ‘Layers of ineffability in the Zhuangzi: Why language should not be trusted’ in:
180 *New visions of the Zhuangzi*, (L Kohn, ed.), Three Pines Press.

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182

183 521. Monsters as metaphors

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184

185 In the preceding item in this blog I mentioned that the literature of Tao, in particular the
186 Zhuangzi, one of the central texts of Daoism, uses metaphors and stories to liberate us from
187 the shackles of established ideas and values. This is connected with the Daoist notion of ‘*wu-*
188 *wei*’. This is presented as a plea for inaction, but does not mean doing literally nothing but
189 getting freed from the shackles of established, pre-conceived goals, methods and values. It is
190 also called ‘wandering’, having no prior fixed goal or path. ‘The path emerges from the walk’.
191 It is a form of spontaneity. Rather than giving abstract argumentation, the Zhuangzi uses

192 illustrative narratives and parables of craftsmen, animals, trees, mountains, lakes, sages,
193 rulers.

194

195 Allinson (2015) proposes that in the Zhuangzi the metaphors are systematically built up from.
196 a range of ‘monsters’, freaks that serve to shock us out of taken-for-granted values. A monster
197 as a biological violation of the rule of nature stands for a violation of social rules (Allinson,
198 2015: 100). Being so different, the monsters have no fear, and can get away with saying
199 things that ordinary people cannot. Their shock creates a ‘suspension of conscious evaluation’
200 that in ordinary thought tends to lock us up. Another function of the monster is to indicate that
201 if the subnormal can achieve the deviation, anyone can (Allinson, 2015: 101). Use is also
202 made of narratives of sages, but these can be shrugged off as too good to be true. The monster
203 is an image and thereby subliminal more than discursive (p 112), sneaking past analytical
204 thought.

205

206 The monsters, Allinson shows, are built up in degrees of freakishness, starting with the case
207 of a mere cripple, who is otherwise normal, and performs the function of, say, a military
208 commander. This is followed by a more repulsive hunchback, and in the end a madman,
209 without bodily deformation, a mental monster, who shouts the most outrageous provocations.
210 One of his pronouncements is: ‘happiness is light as a feather, but no-one knows how to bear
211 it.’ Another trope is that of someone who is ugly and yet attractive to women, yielding the
212 opposite of beauty as a force of attraction.

213

214 Language, built up from established meanings, is imperfect, constrained and constraining, as
215 discussed in the preceding item in this blog. A monster who personifies the imperfection of
216 language is ‘No-lips’. He has a tongue to speak with, and wishes to communicate, but cannot
217 form appropriate words.

218

219 The Zhuangzi also uses humour to unhinge established values. To illustrate how we should
220 accept adversity in alacrity, it tells the following. Someone falls ill and gets terribly deformed.
221 When asked if he cares, he says that if the creator of things would transform his left arm into a
222 rooster, he would crow the daybreak, and if he would transform his right arm into a crossbow,
223 he would use it to shoot an owl and roast it for dinner.

224

225

226 Allinson, R.E. 2015, ‘How metaphor functions in the Zhuangzi: the case of an unlikely
227 messenger’, in: polarity’ in: in: *New visions of the Zhuangzi*, (L Kohn, ed.), Three Pines Press.

228

229

230 522. Tao, virtue, and politics published 25-9-2021

231

232 Politics includes, or should include, ethics. What is Taoist ethics, and how does it affect
233 politics?

234

235 Tao rejects universal, rigid rules, moral or otherwise. Specifically, it rejects benevolence and
236 righteousness. However, it has moral values of modesty, temperance, frugality, spontaneity,
237 alacrity, openness to others, recognition and acceptance of diversity between people. Those
238 values are enacted in following the way of Tao, immersing oneself in the ongoing
239 transformation process of nature. Tao is akin to the ethics of eudaimonia, the good life, of life
240 as a whole, in the development of character, as with Aristotle.

241

242 Ho (1995) explained that while Buddhism strives to eliminate the self, as a source of
243 suffering, denies its ontological reality, and seeks escape in Nirwana or emptiness, and
244 Hinduism seeks to transcend the self in Atman, a manifestation of Brahman, the single whole
245 of reality, which is unchanging, Tao does not deny or surrender the self, but seeks to become
246 the true self, free of social and mental strictures, the individual as different from others, in
247 ongoing transformation, and relishing it.

248
249 Politically, in contrast with Confucianism, Tao is against political direction, hierarchy and
250 authority. Tao is liberal, anarchic, against collectivism. One wonders how this sits with the
251 authoritarian rule that emerged in communism, and remains since the opening to a degree of
252 capitalist market liberalism. Xi Jinping's 'Chinese dream' is Confucian, with the unabashed,
253 patriotic display of military, economic and political power. What role does Taoism play in the
254 present thinking of citizens and of the communist party? One can see how communism and
255 central direction is consistent with Confucian thought, which was dominant during the Han
256 dynasty, 200 before to 200 years after Christ. But there has been a revival of Taoism since.
257 What remains, except the materialist, consumerist celebration of exercise and mindfulness,
258 the Tao of Pooh, that Tao has produced in the West? I have tried but so far failed to find a
259 source with a more positive report of remnants of Taoism in China. Perhaps the reader can
260 give me one.

261
262 Research has shown that in China there is a high level of trust in the political system , due to
263 the increase of prosperity it has brought, in contrast with the 'dissatisfied citizen'
264 phenomenon in most developed capitalist countries that have brought continuing prosperity,
265 although with the rise of prosperity that is emerging in China also (Wang, 2005). Ho (1995)
266 said that: 'Taoism and Buddhism have degenerated into materialism and superstition,
267 hopelessly out of touch with their philosophical roots'

268
269 The scientific revolution occurred in the West, not China, which lagged behind in those
270 centuries, while it was more advanced than the West before that time. There is a literature to
271 try and explain this. Some ascribe the falling back relative to the West to the Confucian
272 centralised bureaucracy and the associated inflexible teaching and examination system for
273 civil servants. Woo (1993) ascribed it to epistemological factors. For one thing, Chinese
274 thought was holistic, lacking the power of analytical thought. That is true, but thinking of
275 systemic coherence, with the system having emergent properties that the parts don't have, has
276 its value. Second, Woo claimed, the Chinese lacked the respect for facts, the experimental
277 method and the flourishing and application of mathematics. But artisanship flourished in
278 China, and that cannot be without a pragmatic regard for facts. Taoism, in particular, is
279 pragmatic. An economic explanation was that China got stuck in a relatively low equilibrium
280 of excess population, lack of capita land lack of labour-saving innovation that in the West
281 generated a demand for machinery. A legal explanation was that China had not developed
282 laws of property, including intellectual property, commercial laws, insurance, limited liability
283 companies. Businessmen had to fall back on kinship relations and personal relations with
284 officials and local interest groups (Woo, 1993: 136). There was no primogeniture, so that
285 accumulated profits were dissipated rather than re-invested.

286
287 Perhaps these forces together smothered any positive Taoist impulse of liberalism,
288 individualism, antiauthoritarianism, and dynamism. Tao was not strong enough to block
289 communism. But perhaps Taoism was oriented too much at the individual good life rather
290 than action in the world and entrepreneurialism. The call to surrender to the flow of the
291 natural self, as if that is always for the best, and only discard the obstacles of cultural and

292 intellectual preconceptions, is not exactly a call to action. And it is not clear how feasible that
293 is.

294

295 Ho, D.Y.F. 1995, 'Selfhood and identity in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism:
296 Contrast with the West', *Journal of the Theory of Social Behavior* , **25**/2, 0021-8308.

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298 Wang, Z. 2005, 'Before the emergence of critical citizens: Economic development and
299 political trust in China', *International Review of Sociology*, **15**/1, 147-63.

300

301 Woo, H.K.H. 1993, *The making of a new Chinese mind: intellectuality and the future of*
302 *China*, Hong Kong: China Foundation.

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304

305 523. Taoist spontaneity, children and rational reflection published 2-10-2021

306

307 Taoism strives for release from established ideas and customs, to keep open to a spontaneous
308 following of a path of going along with the universe as an ongoing process of
309 transformation. Tao holds up infants as a paradigm of spontaneity, openness to change, surprise
310 and immersion in the here and now.

311

312 (Cline 2015: 182) narrated the experiment with a famous violinist busking at a sidewalk in
313 New York who was ignored except by children who stopped and listened, and were dragged
314 along by their parents. Children are compared to a block of unheven wood, prior to the
315 destructive interference of socialisation, and we need to find our way back home to what we
316 knew originally. In their innocence they are safe to wild animals. The outcast, marginalised in
317 society, most escape the harm of socialisation. Children are harmed by the ambition, anxiety,
318 overprotectiveness and competition of their parents, losing their playfulness and ingenuity.
319 Chinese cultural meaning is dominated by Confucianism, the dream of a rich, prosperous and
320 powerful China, to which children must contribute.

321

322 Taoism aims to 'sit in oblivion', in a loss of self and conscious mentation, remaining empty,
323 letting thoughts come and go like clouds in the sky, flowing through life in free and easy
324 wandering, fluid and clear like water.

325

326 However, as an adult, can one go back to that stage of innocence and openness of an infant?
327 Kohn (2015) asked: how can we forget? In short term memory we forget, but in long term
328 memory, ideas, emotions, habits, reflexes and feelings get etched into neural pathways, in
329 different levels of the brain. We have autonomous systems regulating organs. In the mid-
330 brain, in thalamus, hippocampus and amygdala we have unconscious behavioural responses to
331 threat, impacting on blood pressure, blood flow and hormones. We have emotions by which we
332 are triggered. On the highest level of the brain we have the cerebral cortex, guiding our
333 movements and the locus of rational evaluation. Such unconscious routines are a blessing, in
334 freeing our conscious thought. We cannot consciously undo those routines. Kohn (2015)
335 proposes that what we can do is to inhibit their operation, to some extent, by diverting
336 attention from the stress and obsessions that emotions may cause. In psychotherapy this is
337 known as 'mindfulness'.

338

339 Old people who suffer from dementia do fall into forgetfulness, with neural pathways
340 becoming undone or clogged. They do acquire features of infantility. They enjoy hearing
341 tunes from their youth. Could that be achieved by some pharmacology? Would that be

342 enjoyable or only disconcerting?. Or is it the rational inhibition of stress that we should
343 exercise?

344

345 The overruling of child-like spontaneity and ease was needed to survive in evolution. But in
346 education one can try to preserve some of it.

347

348

349 Kohn, L. 2015, 'Forget or not forget? The neurophysiology of Zuowang', in: *New visions of*
350 *the Zhuangzi*, (L Kohn, ed.), Three Pines Press.