

Basic aspects of daoist philosophy

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Abstract This paper will outline three basic themes of Daoist philosophy: (a) Daoist non-anthropocentrism or the notion of *dao* 道 (or *tian dao* 天道) (b) Daoist non-agency or *wu wei* 無為, and (c) the Daoist “acosmotic” notion of *ziran* 自然. It explores how these themes are not only cosmologically relevant, but also epistemologically, existentially, and, in particular, socio-politically significant.

Keywords Daoism · Non-anthropocentrism · Non-action (*wu-wei*) · Self-so (*ziran*)

This paper will outline three basic themes of Daoist philosophy: a) Daoist non-anthropocentrism or the notion of *dao* 道 (or *tian dao* 天道) b) Daoist non-agency or *wu wei* 無為, and c) the Daoist “acosmotic” notion of *ziran* 自然.

Daoist non-anthropocentrism: the notion of (tian) dao

A paradigmatic expression of Daoist non-anthropocentrism is found in the 25th chapter of the *Daodejing* which culminates in the famous lines: “Humans follow the earth as a rule, the earth follows heaven as a rule, heaven follows the *dao* as a rule, the *dao* follows its self-so as a rule.” (*ren fa di, di fa tian, tian fa dao, dao fa ziran*, 人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然) This passage is a succinct summary of the *cosmological* aspect of Daoist non-anthropocentrism. Humans are conceived of as living in simply organized agricultural communities, and the sustenance of their life is based on the conditions set by the “earth”. They literally live of the land; and their activities, such as what they do where at which time on the fields, are structured and

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ordered by the natural conditions of the ground they inhabit. The “earth” has to be ploughed in spring, tended to in the summer, and harvested in the fall. Basically all human activities in an agricultural society follow the rhythm of the earth as their immediate environment. The earth, in turn, follows the natural patterns of “heaven”, such as the sequence of day and night and the cycle of the seasons. The cosmos as such is believed to be an orderly and regular *natural process* or “way”—referred to as *dao* or *tian dao*—which operates in self-sustaining and self-reproductive circularity. Rather than having any privileged natural role or function, humankind is embedded in encompassing natural contexts which determine the conditions of its survival. Humans are not in a position to impose their rules as “masters of the earth”, but have to follow the non-human rules of the earth and of *tian dao*. In accordance with this non-anthropocentric cosmology, Daoist philosophy, as well as ancient Chinese Philosophy in general, refrained from introducing strict distinctions between a human culture and a trans-human nature.

The *Daodejing* focuses extensively on the cosmological aspects of Daoist non-anthropocentrism. Other Daoist works, in particular the *Zhuangzi*, point to various further dimensions of this non-anthropocentrism. One of them may be called an *existential* dimension. Several well-known stories in the *Zhuangzi*, such as that depicting Zhuang Zhou playing music after the death of his wife and thereby celebrating her participation in the transformation of all things (in the *Zhi Le* 至樂 Chapter 18.2¹), point out that human life should be understood as merely a segment within the incessant alteration of life and death. This alteration reshapes all shapes and assigns no preference to the human shape. As another well known passage in the *Da Zong Shi* 大宗師 chapter (6.5) outlines, the human body will be dissolved after death, and its parts will later become composite parts of animals or plants. The human shape, human life, and, indeed, individual human existence, are integrated into a permanent (*chang* 常) process of change (*hua* 化). Human existence is thereby deprived of any foundational or essential human identity.

An allegory in the *Shan Mu* 山木 chapter (20.8) describes the unnerving existential experience of the interwovenness of individual human life into the cycle of life and death that permeates *tian dao*. Zhuangzi, when hunting a large bird and about to shoot it, realizes that it is just in the process of catching a mantis, who, in turn, is just about to devour a cicada. Shocked by the immediate visualization of the interconnected transitoriness of all individual forms of life, Zhuangzi runs away, only to find the game keeper of the hunting reserve pursuing him and trying to catch him. This ironical end of the scene illustrates, of course, how Zhuangzi himself is merely another segment of the endless succession of life forms constantly feeding of one another. The hunter is himself being hunted; there is no end and no beginning, and, most importantly, no *center* to the alternation of life forms in the context of *tian dao*. The story thus illustrates the existential anguish of experiencing that humans not only cannot avoid their own death, but, what is more, that they are dissolving into a non-human or trans-human nature. In death, we not only cease to live, but also to be human or humanoid. In this existential respect, Daoism differs considerably

¹ The numerical indication of passages of the *Zhuangzi* in this essay follows the electronic edition of the text on the website *Chinese Text Project* at <http://ctext.org/zhuangzi/>.

not only from Christianity, which conceives of the human soul as eternally indestructible, but also from (ancient) Confucianism, where, after death, humans, as ancestral deities, still maintain some sort of species continuity. The existential dimension of Daoist non-anthropocentrism thus “shockingly” confronts humans with the eventual loss of their humaneness.

A third dimension of Daoist non-anthropocentrism is *epistemological*. The *Daodejing* proclaims what may be called a “negative cultivation” of human knowledge. It advises its intended audience (actual or prospective rulers during the historical era of its composition) to refrain from developing a specific understanding, or, in contemporary terms, a specific interpretation of the world. The text not only famously dismisses the correspondence of *dao* or *tian dao* to the “names” (*ming* 名) of human language (as, for instance, in chapters 1 and 37), but, more concretely, advocates a minimization of knowledge (“To know not-knowing is the highest.” *zhi bu zhi shang* 知不知上, chapter 71). It proposes to engage in a process of unlearning. Chapter 48 says: “One who engages in learning increases daily. One who hears of the *dao* diminishes daily.” (*wei xue ri yi, wei dao ri sun* 為學日益, 為道日損).

These lines of the *Daodejing* are, admittedly, typically terse, slightly enigmatic, and open to various readings. However, I think that they can be understood as variations of one of the core topics of this text, namely the “emptying of the heart-mind” (as expressed in a “Daoist imperative” in chapter 3: “Empty your heart-mind!” *xu qi xin* 虛其心). Chapter 20 of the *Daodejing* illustrates this topic with poetic imagery. Here, the ruler, while taking part in a public festivity and mingling with the population, is described as “like an infant that does not yet smile” (*ru yinger zhi wei hai* 如嬰兒之未孩) and as having “the heart-mind of an idiot” (*yu ren zhi xin* 愚人之心). The Daoist sage negatively cultivates himself so as to return to the state of the minimal or “idiotic” human consciousness of a newborn baby who has not yet adopted a “mature” human perspective on the world. In other words, the sage rids himself of the intellectual, cultural, and emotional knowledge that he has acquired as a human so that he will be able to shed his anthropocentric biases and to attain what Feng (1961, pp. 80–81; Feng 1947, p. 78) has called “a posteriori non-knowledge” (*hou de de wu zhi* 後得的無知).

The topic of the “emptying of the heart”, and thus of negative epistemological cultivation, is equally prominent in the *Zhuangzi*, but here it is discussed in much more detail. One passage of the philosophically central *Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論 chapter (2.11), which has been understood as expressing a Daoist “relativism” or “scepticism” (Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996), is, in my view, not really concerned with such matters, but rather indicative of Daoist epistemological non-anthropocentrism. This is the passage in A.C. Graham’s (2001, p. 58, translation slightly modified) translation:

When a human sleeps in the damp his waist hurts and he gets stiff in the joints; is that so of the loach? When he sits in a tree he shivers and shakes; is that so of the ape? Which of these three knows the right place to live? Humans eat the flesh of hay-fed and grain-fed beasts, deer eat the grass, centipedes relish snakes, owls and crows crave mice; which of the four has a proper sense of taste? Gibbons are sought by baboons as mates, elaphures like the company of

deer, loaches play with fish. Mao Qiang and Lady Li were beautiful in the eyes of man; but when the fish saw them they plunged deep, when the birds saw them they flew high, when the deer saw them they broke into a run. Which of these four knows what is truly beautiful in the world?

I think that a closer observation of the passage reveals (particular when taking its immediate context in the *Zhuangzi* as well as the philosophical and conceptual context of Daoist thought into account) that it neither defends the respective relative validity and relative merits of differing knowledge claims nor sceptically encourages us to question the validity of whatever we hold to be true. In fact, I think if we take a good look at the imagery and the humour of the passage, it is rather obvious that it neither defends nor questions any knowledge claims. Actually, the passage undermines the specifically human tendency to operate in the “mode of knowledge”. Rather than defending or questioning specific forms of human knowledge, it ridicules with “idiotic irony” (Moeller 2008) the human attitude of looking at everything in terms of right or wrong. Humans not only live in places fitting human needs, eat food fitting the human appetite, and mate with partners they are attracted by, but, unlike animals, on top of that they often unnecessarily, and potentially unhealthily, conceive of all these aspects of their natural form of life in terms of “knowledge” about how to live—and they then go on to promote them as the “right” or “proper” way to live.

Once one assumes a “mode of knowledge”, one is prone to a) trying to impose what one knows onto others, and b) quarrelling with others who claim to know things differently or “better” or “truly”. The above passage mockingly illustrates a major difference between animals and humans: animals live how they live without claiming to know how to live. They never engage in arguments about the respective merits of their food or habitat, they never try to convince other animals to change their diet in accordance with any “eating ideology”, and they also never sceptically question if the partners they mate with are really right for them. Humans, on the other hand, tend towards an “anthropocentric epistemology” and replace the art of living with the dubious art of “*knowing* how to live”—which may then threaten social harmony since it easily leads to “relativist” conflicts or sceptical indecision.

With the above passage the *Zhuangzi* illustrates a problem of human knowledge claims. In the text, this problem is addressed in a rhetorical question by the fictitious Daoist character Wang Ni: “How do I know that what I call knowing is not not-knowing? How do I know that what I call not-knowing is not knowing?” (Graham 2001, p. 58) Evidently, rather than sceptically or relatively qualifying human knowledge claims in the various manners found in the Western philosophical tradition, this passage occurs in the context of a Daoist plea for the not-knowing “empty” or “idiotic” or “infant-like” heart-mind. The infant-like heart-mind does not consciously alienate itself from its immediate activity by relating to it in the form of the “knowledge” of human-centered interpretations. Speaking in postmodernist terms, it refrains from developing a humanist “master narrative”.

The *Qi Wu Lun* chapter places this allegory within the larger context of its “deconstruction” of the philosophical and political debates about *shi* 是 and *fei* 非, i. e. affirmation and negation in the human realm. The *Zhuangzi* does not aim at taking

sides in these debates about what to affirm and what to negate, but rather at finding a way to avoid such human perspectives and to adopt the non-anthropocentric perspective of *tian dao*. The *Qi Wu Lun* chapter (2.5) states: “Thus, by not taking a vantage point, the sage looks at it from the perspective of *tian*.” (*shi yi sheng ren bu you er zhao zhi yu tian* 是以聖人不由，而照之于天). The same passage also calls this perspective more poetically “the pivot of the *dao*” (*dao shu* 道樞). In my own writings, I spoke in this regard of the Daoist “zero-perspective” (Moeller 2004). The Daoist zero-perspective neither identifies with nor contradicts or doubts human knowledge claims, but abstains from them.

The core Daoist notion of *dao*, or, more specifically *tian dao*, implies, I believe, a thoroughgoing non-anthropocentrism of various dimensions—which I just outlined. In this respect, my understanding of Daoist philosophy differs from one of the major contemporary Daoist philosophers in China. In his book on *The Humanist Spirit of Chinese Philosophy* (Chen 2012), Chen Guying 陳鼓應 presents an emphatically humanist vision of Daoist thought. I have the highest respect and esteem for Chen’s reading of Daoism, which is shaped by his desire to reconcile Daoism and Confucianism, by his lifelong historical and philosophical research, and, not the least, by his personal experiences and political views. I also feel great sympathy for his project of shaping a New Daoist philosophy for our times. I disagree, however, with his opinion that the “humanist thought and spirit of ancient China”, as represented by Daoism, “and contemporary Western humanism share similar viewpoints.” (Chen 2012, p. 136) In particular, I disagree with his conjecture that Daoism thereby, like Western humanism, indicates a worldview based on human agency.

Daoist non-agency: the notion of *wu wei*

A second major Daoist theme that runs counter to common prevalent conceptions of a basic component of modernity is *wu wei* or “non-action”. Contemporary public discourse often demands the empowerment of the individual and its agency. The *Daodejing*, however, highlights the importance of non-agency by repeatedly recommending *wu wei* (and particularly so in the Guodian manuscript version of the text, see Moeller 1999, pp. 285–302).

In the *Daodejing*, as well as in texts associated with the Huang-Lao Daoism of late Warring States and early Han times, the notion of *wu wei* is first and foremost a political maxim that a ruler should adopt when trying to fulfill his primary task, namely bringing “order” (*zhi* 治) to his state and to the world. Chapter 3 states most succinctly: “Enact non-action, and nothing will not be in order.” (*wei wu wei, ze wu bu zhi* 為無為，則無不治) Of course, as most scholars agree, the maxim of non-action does not mean that nothing is done or that nothing ever happens in the human realm. It rather expresses the paradoxical idea that greatest efficacy is achieved by non-interference or by allowing all events and all activities to unfold naturally and unimpeded.

The notion of *wu wei* is not merely a negative principle of non-engagement, but positively implies the establishment of political order and fruitful social activity.

However, it certainly excludes any considerations of a politics based on enacting the *will* of either those in power or those who are being ruled. Politics is neither supposed to serve a “general will” nor to be a playing field for ideological intentions. Unlike such modern will-based conceptions of politics, Daoist paradoxical political activity is concerned with managing and ordering social or human *needs*. One may point to the final lines of chapter 12 as a paradigmatic (and rhymed) expression of the Daoist approach to politics as “need-management”: “Thus the sage (ruler) cares for the belly, and not for the eye.” (*shi yi shengren wei fu, bu wei mu* 是以聖人為腹不為目) The need-orientation, rather than will-orientation, of a Daoist politics based on *wu wei* makes it incompatible with a politics geared towards the “liberation” of humankind from whatever stifles the expression of what, in a Kantian sense, it should will.

The need- rather than will-orientation of Daoist politics and the notion of *wu wei* do not imply an advocacy of tyrannical or despotic rule (although Hanfeizi and the Legalist school twisted Daoism into such a direction) or of the curtailment of human activity. In fact, as a notion of paradoxical efficacy, *wu wei* aims at enhancing human potential through non-agency and by eliminating conscious control. The *Zhuangzi* contains numerous illustrations of this “logic”: the minimization of individual willpower and the practice of “forgetting” one’s personal inclinations and intentions bring about a perfection of one’s capacities. The so-called “knack stories”, such as that of Cook Ding cutting up an ox (3.2), of the swimmer at the Lüliang waterfall (19.10), and of woodcarver Qing making a bell-stand (19.11), depict this technique quite astoundingly. Woodcarver Qing (Zi Qing 梓慶), for instance, goes through a long process of physio-psychological “fasting” (*qi* 齋) before he sets out to work and carve a perfect bellstand. The process of fasting is clearly an exercise of “emptying the heart-mind” which returns Qing to an infant-like state in which he is totally unaware of his social personality and no longer wilfully controls his body. This total loss of intentionality, and, indeed, control, increases his ability to act with maximum “automaticity”—to use a contemporary psychological term denoting everyday modes of action which are performed by “inactive” conscious control. Such inactive activities—for instance steering a car or typing on a computer—are often paradoxically “unlearned”. They are acquired by a practice which makes us increasingly “forget” to wilfully and intentionally observe and guide our behaviour; and thus they resemble the “fasting” process of woodcarver Qing as described in the *Zhuangzi*.

A prime example for the efficacy of *wu wei* activity is language learning. As children we acquire a language most easily by practicing it largely unintentionally and without the conscious will to learn. As adults, when trying to learn a foreign language, we make a “free decision” to do so, and then invest a lot of effort in memorizing the vocabulary, studying the grammar, and exercising the pronunciation. However, it is virtually impossible for most adult language learners to master a language by applying this “active” learning method as perfectly as we were able to when learning our first language as a child by “automaticity”. The Daoist notion of *wu wei* emphasizes the superior efficacy of childlike activity based on non-agency in comparison with the rationally controlled agency that adults tend to adopt.

The Daoist “acosmotic” notion of *ziran*

The notion of *ziran* is closely connected with the notion of *dao* (*tian dao*) and the maxim of *wu wei*. As quoted above, chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*, ends with the line “the *dao* follows its self-so as a rule” (*dao fa ziran* 道法自然). Somewhat ironically, it thereby breaks with the pattern of the preceding lines which link the human realm, the earth, heaven and *dao* into a chain in which each element “follows” or is moulded after another, higher ranking one. The notion of *ziran* breaks with this quasi-causal pattern: the *dao* operates simply “self-so”; there is no ultimate cause, “unmoved mover” or divine demiurge behind it. In the terminology used by Roger Ames and David Hall, *ziran* thus indicates an “acosmotic” worldview. They say: “The classical Chinese are primarily acosmotic thinkers. By ‘acosmotic’ we shall mean that they do not depend in the majority of their speculations upon ... the notion that the totality of things (*wan wu* 萬物 or *wan you* 萬有, the ‘ten thousand things’) has a radical beginning...” (Ames and Hall 1995, p. 184).

As an acosmotic notion, *ziran* disappoints what Friedrich Nietzsche called the philosophical *Ursachentrieb* or “causality drive”. According to Nietzsche, the history of Western philosophy has been haunted by the search for an “ultimate origin”, or, to use a phrase often used today, for “root causes”. According to Nietzsche, such a search resembles the logic of a dreamer who hears a cannon shot and then, in his dream, invents a story to explain this noise. And, as Nietzsche says, this story is more often than not “a very short novel in which the dreamer himself is the protagonist.” (Nietzsche 1980, p. 96, my translation) For Nietzsche, the “causality drive” has been responsible for the inventions of a humanoid God as the origin and cause of all things—and for the secular variation of it which assumes that humans can understand ultimate causes, and, once they have done so, steer the world, and particular society, in the way that they want. The notions of “cause” and “steering” are intertwined into a simple steering mechanics of cause and effect.

Several passages in the *Zhuangzi* follow chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* by “deconstructing” the notion of an ultimate cause. Perhaps the most famous of these is the allegory of the “pipes of heaven” at the beginning of the *Qi Wu Lun* chapter (2.1). Here, we see once more a Daoist master “emptying his human heart-mind”. When questioned about what he is doing, he replies with an allegory about three kinds of pipe music. Firstly, there is the flute music of humans who blow through bamboo pipes. Then there is the pipe music of the earth, made by the wind when it blows through all kinds of holes and hollows. Finally, the “pipes of heaven” are not straightforwardly depicted, but, as it is often the case in the *Zhuangzi*, only indirectly by a rhetorical question:

Well, (the pipe of heaven) blows in ten-thousand variations and lets (the ten-thousand things sound) by themselves. When all things take (their sounds) from themselves, who should stir them up? (Graham 2001, p. 49)

The implied answer is that unlike in the preceding two examples no one blows this greatest of all pipes—everything in the world “ultimately” makes its own sound. Parallel to chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* the final image of the allegory disappoints

the “causality” expectations built up by the first two images of the pipes of humans and of the earth (in structural similarity to the three steps often constituting jokes). Unlike in the case of these pipes, there is no blower behind the pipes of heaven. The greatest, all encompassing pipe—the cosmos—just blows by itself; there is no cause to it, and no origin.

Moreover, the image of the pipe is another illustration of the basic structure of (*tian*) *dao*: it is an empty center surrounded by fullness, i.e. it is non-presence (*wu* 無) integrating the presence around it (*you* 有). As numerous core images in the *Daodejing* show, (*tian*) *dao* functions on the basis of an empty center; it is like a pot, a door, or a wheel (*Daodejing*, chapter 11), or like a bellows (*tuoyue* 橐籥, *Daodejing*, chapter 5) or a valley (*gu* 谷, *Daodejing*, chapter 6). (Moeller 2004, pp. 27–43) The pipe of heaven, just as all these other structures, is an image of the self-generating pattern of *wu* and *you*. This structure does not imply causation, origination, or creation, but self-generation and self-reproduction. Guo Xiang’s commentary to the allegory of the pipe of heaven explains:

This is the pipe of heaven. Well, regarding the pipe of heaven, how should there be yet another thing? When things such as those hollows (of the earth) and holes in the bamboo (flutes of men) come together with all things that exist, then in their unity they form the one heaven. Nonpresence (*wu*) is nothing but nonpresence; and therefore it cannot bring presence (*you*) into existence. When the present does not yet exist, it cannot produce existence. Given this, who should then bring existence into existence? (What exists) exists as one piece through itself. (*Zhuangzi jishi* 1954, p. 24)

In more abstract terms, the Zhi Bei You 知北遊 chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (22.10) explains that there is no ultimate origin or *telos* of the world: there is “no start and no end” (*wu shi wu zhong* 無始無終), and “the emergence of a thing cannot have preceded things” (*wu chu bu de xian wu ye* 物出不得先物也). (Graham 2001, p. 164) In his comments on this passage, Guo Xiang points out that, accordingly, things emerge by way of *ziran* or “self-so” (*Zhuangzi jishi* 1954, p. 332), i.e. by self-generation, or, as we can also say in more technical language, by *autopoiesis*.

The three major Daoist themes discussed here—the non-anthropocentric worldview encapsulated in the notion of (*tian*) *dao*, the notion of *wu wei* as a concept of efficacy based on non-agency, and the notion of *ziran* representing acosmotic or emergent self-generation—are closely related to one another and mutually constitutive. These themes are not only cosmologically relevant, but, as we saw, also epistemologically, existentially, and, in particular, socio-politically significant.

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