

# Daoism as Philosophy: Zhuangzi and Real Philosophy

PHAVISMINDA Journal  
Volume 8 (May 2009): 115-123.

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## Introduction

Scholars regard the origins of Daoism to be, unfortunately, dim and its nature considerably obscure. Some think that it started with the eremitism, presumably with Yangism, that began during the Chunqiu 春秋 period (770-481 B.C.E.).<sup>1</sup> Others assume blithely that Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子, as the master-pupil tandem, founded and expanded the thinking of daoia 道家,<sup>2</sup> and proceed to say that in order to understand philosophical and religious Daoism, it is imperative to study the ideas of the two figures. Regarding its nature, we have views about Daoism as a philosophy based solely on the thinking of both Laozi and Zhuangzi as presented in the texts attributed to them, as a political philosophy based on Huang-Laoism 黃老, the syncretic form of Daoism developed during the Han 漢 period (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), and as a form of religion which essentially began and intensified during the Wei-Jin 魏晉 period (220-420 C.E.).<sup>3</sup>

These facts concerning Daoism, specifically about early Daoism, make it hard for one who studies Daoism to grasp the essence of the tradition, and if she uses the later conception of the "school",<sup>4</sup> that of *daojiao* 道教, to understand its doctrines, principles and especially its seminal thinkers, she would surely, alas, not be closer to – let alone not getting to – the truth of things. Although modern scholars have tried to distinguish the forms of Daoism (philosophical and religious) really clearly, it is undeniable that its nature is still as elusive and, in light of what has been mentioned, difficult to identify as ever.<sup>5</sup>

The view I present here is predicated upon the conjecture that it is Zhuangzi (399?-295? B.C.E.) who must have formally begun Daoism.<sup>6</sup> There is a view that he did, because the "Neipian" 內篇, the "Inner Chapters" of the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》, do not mention and refer to Laozi or the *Daodejing* 《道德經》 anywhere in it and it would seem, as some recent research suggests,

that the latter was composed later in time than the former.<sup>7</sup> With this, I reckon that since Zhuangzi, as I will show, worked, that is, thought, as an analyser-critic of the dominant pre-Qin 先秦, Warring States 戰國 (481-221 B.C.E.) philosophies, and as he started Daoism, early Daoism may have been what one would today term real philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

I present a view of early Daoism as real philosophy, that is, philosophy which does not stop at the exercise of description but one that continues to do analytical-critical thinking. This view is supported by an understanding of Zhuangzi, arguably the first (the original) Daoist, as a critical thinker rather than a mystical philosopher. That is, Zhuangzi was not a philosopher because he thought about *dao* 道, or ultimate reality, and sought union with it; he was because he was a critical thinker.

### Zhuangzi as Mystical Thinker

Although the idea that Zhuangzi as an ancient Chinese mystic has been contested by several scholars (both Chinese and Western) through underscoring his seemingly relativist and sceptical views – thus making him one who engaged in the philosophical issues of Eastern Zhou 東周 China (770-221 B.C.E.) – it has been a consensus that he was truly a philosopher because he contemplated the presence of *dao*<sup>ultimate-reality</sup> and sought union with it. Perhaps like most oriental mystics, his mystical-religious view is regarded as inextricably linked to his philosophical viewpoint. And this means that one cannot comprehend Zhuangzi's philosophical points unless she grasps his mysticism. The view, moreover, is that since Zhuangzi was concerned with uniting oneself with the Great Thoroughfare, with *dao*, through the exercise of certain practices, the elements of his philosophy are informed fundamentally by this (desire of) union.

Those who hold the view interpret the following as expressive of Zhuangzi's suggestions for mysticism and should inform the general conception of his thinking:

[With Kongzi 孔子 as his mouthpiece]... 'Unify your attention. Rather than listen with the ear, listen with the heart. Rather than listen with the heart, listen with the energies. Listening stops at the ear, the heart at what tallies with thought. As for 'energy', it is the tenuous which waits to be roused by other things. Only the way accumulates the tenuous. The attenuating is the fasting of the heart.'<sup>9</sup>

'I make progress,' said Yen Hui.

'Where?' said Confucius.

'I have forgotten about rites and music.'



'Satisfactory. But you still have far to go.'

Another day he saw Confucius again.

'I make progress.'

'Where?'

'I have forgotten about Goodwill and Duty.'

'Satisfactory. But you still have far to go.'

Another day he saw Confucius again.

'I make progress.'

'Where?'

'I just sit and forget.'

Confucius was taken aback.

'What do you mean, just sit and forget?'

'I let the organs and members drop away, dismiss eyesight and hearing, part from the body and expel knowledge, go along with the universal thoroughfare. This is what I mean by 'just sit and forget.'

'If you go along with it, you have no preferences; if you let yourself transform, you have no norms. Has it really turned out that you are the better of us? Oblige me by accepting me as your disciple.'<sup>10</sup>

While these passages seem to show Zhuangzi's predilection for the praxis of bimodal mysticism,<sup>11</sup> the kind in which the inner, subjective world of the mystic and the objective world do not contradict but get affirmed and the "worldly" dimension does not get denied, it is perhaps important to recall the historical milieu where the Daoist thinker ruminated. Pre-Qin China's violent conditions prompted many to deliberate on what to do with the chaos surrounding them. Thus, it might be best to read these passages and those related to ancient Chinese mysticism as ones that suggest a specific way of "flight" away from the harsh realities and, as such, although they appear as proposals for experiencing union with the ultimate reality, *dao*, the passages imply the yearning for the ultimate end of dealing with the world by "numbing" the self. In other words, the text's passages transcend the purely mystical view, as their proposed mysticism is a direct response to the nasty and disturbing Warring States matrix and context.

That Zhuangzi's "mysticism", in actuality, ought to be traced back to its practical origin tends not to contradict the vision of Zhuangzi as a critical thinker, since we can view these two elements as indispensable facets in the thinking present in the Inner Chapters. They are different yet not opposite, not contradictory, for Zhuangzi, in my view, while dealing seriously, critically with the philosophical views of the Confucians and the Mohists, ushered in his own



guiding proposals. The mystical-escapist, most probably Yangistic, way is among the many he tries to identify particularly in the "Neipian". And as a pre-Qin philosopher, Zhuangzi was unique in that he responded to the dominant paradigms of the times. He questioned, challenged these daos, which is what made him a critical thinker, and in our view, a real philosopher.

### Zhuangzi and Critical Thinking

The idea underlying my claim here is that Zhuangzi, while dealing with the urgent social and intellectual problems of his time, on the whole recognised well considered thinking. He mulled over the prevalent philosophical, intellectual and practical proposals, that is, the sort of thinking which underpinned the ways of the Ruists (the Confucians) and the Mohists, the two prominent groups of thinkers who proffered ways and means to order a society beset with the unwieldy corruption, strife, and chaos. Zhuangzi is that one Warring States thinker who affirmed and cherished the (presence of) ideas that cared about doing something to rectify a deeply perturbed society. It is this that reinforces the hypothesis that Zhuangzi himself exercised analysis and thinking critically. He proposed his point of view that the suggested *daos* of the various ruminators are equally valid ways, but by doing so, he also, by deduction, felt the force of each of these ideas. He was that one thinker who seems to urge the exercise of thinking, especially thinking critically. He writes in the philosophically-oriented chapter, the "Qiwulun" 齊物論:

What does the Way rely upon that we have true and false?  
 What do words rely upon, that we have right and wrong?  
 How can the Way go away and not exist? How can words  
 exist and not be acceptable? When the Way relies on little  
 accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have  
 the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mo-ists.  
 What one calls right the other calls wrong; what one calls  
 wrong the other calls right. But if we want to right their  
 wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is  
 clarity.<sup>12</sup>

The meaning of critical thinking I assume here is that mode of thinking which springs from scepticism. It is second-order thinking and one that suspends belief, judgement until indubitable truths exist for consideration and acceptance. Prior to agreeing or often rejecting anything and remaining in the doubting state,<sup>13</sup> it is one that analyses ideas or norms and questions them:

Nieh Ch'ueh asked Wang Ni, "Do you know what all things agree in calling right?"



“How would I know that?” said Wang Ni.

“Do you know that you don’t know it?”

“How would I know that?”

“Then do things know nothing?”

“How would I know that? However, suppose I try saying something. What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don’t really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don’t know something I don’t really in fact know it? Now let me ask you some questions. If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of a loach? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live? Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Mao-ch’iang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations?”

Zhuangzi’s thoughtful consideration of the “ways of other men” is noteworthy here, but it is the hesitancy of conceding immediately that marks the brilliance of his thinking in this passage. And this is a significant feature of his philosophy, as this is the form of scepticism seen as itself an end. It is therapeutic scepticism.<sup>14</sup> It is therapeutic in that it is designed to instil unceasing doubt in the mind, thereby making one to adopt open-mindedness. Furthermore, it is a state of mind that recognises the limits of one’s cognitive ability to know things, everything and the ability to cognise certain things but yet not the whole, since that is unachievable through the use of finite human faculties.

But to return to the main thesis that Zhuangzi indeed practiced thinking critically and consequently proposed it, let us relate this sceptical attitude and stance of Zhuangzi’s thought to some recent interpretation of his thinking. Several modern interpreters compare Zhuangzi’s entire project with that of the deconstructionists’. They reckon that Zhuangzi intended his



philosophy to abandon reason and to dissolve any rootedness of entities to anything, citing specific passages in the text (specifically from the "Xiaoyaoyou" and "Qiwulun").<sup>15</sup> But I doubt that this is what Zhuangzi did and meant. It seems more likely that, because he engaged in debates with the thinkers of his time, he saw the (bright) logic behind the proposals of those men. As a critical thinker, he acknowledged the rationale which supported and moved their ways, but at the same time, Zhuangzi, also questioned them, challenged the validity of the suggested ways for ordering society:<sup>16</sup>

There is left, there is right, there are theories, there are debates, there are divisions, there are discriminations, there are emulations, and there are contentions. These are called the Eight Virtues. As to what is beyond the Six Realms, the sage admits its existence but does not theorize. As to what is within the Six Realms, he theorizes but does not debate. In the case of the Spring and Autumn, the record of the former kings of past ages, the sage debates but does not discriminate. So [I say] those who divide fail to divide; those who discriminate fail to discriminate. What does this mean, you ask? The sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others. So I say, those who discriminate fail to see.<sup>17</sup>

As a sceptic, he did not even have to present his own *dao*<sup>way, guiding-discourse</sup>. He did, as suggested by the sections of the "Neipian". But it is by doubting the ways of the Mohists and the Confucians that he was able to see the practical nature of their *daos*, or the unviability of their proposals. Zhuangzi wasn't describing what was occurring; he was thinking and this is the more important legacy that he probably left for the tradition, for Daoism, where he was categorised later during the Han period.<sup>18</sup>

Now, as for Daoism as a form and practice of real philosophy, it probably is clear by now that through a depiction of Zhuangzi as a critical thinker, Daoism is to be viewed as a way which encourages analysis, real thinking. It is to be regarded as a tradition that fosters openness and then deeper consideration of views and probably later a formulation of one's own views about things. And this is probably the reason why Daoism is generally regarded as a school that heavily criticised Confucianism. The form of scepticism that it advocates makes it a philosophy which does not just do description. Since describing entities, realities or ideas, though useful, does not really use reason, Daoism goes beyond description; it attempts at cultivating in people mindfulness, by which we mean critical analysis and thinking.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Most scholars suspect Daoism really began with this form of response to the maladies of the time.

<sup>2</sup> Others have questioned this relation and pairing of the two thinkers in the school. For a discussion on this, see Karyn Lai, *Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 71-73.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief history of Daoism, see James Miller, *Daoism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003). Available online at <http://www.daoiststudies.org/dao/?q=node/681>.

<sup>4</sup> Referring to Daoism as a “school” should be done with caution. This is because it is most likely that there never was a fully-formed, organised Daoist school, *dao*jia. Only the Confucians and the Mohists had *jias*.

<sup>5</sup> J.J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thoughts* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 16-22.

<sup>6</sup> I regard his act of founding as “formal”, since, assuming he actually wrote the “*Neipian*”, it is Zhuangzi’s ideas which crystallised the Daoist mode of thinking.

<sup>7</sup> A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (Open Court, 1989), 170-174, 215. The Primitivist chapters, it must be noted, however, are the sections akin to the *Daodejing*.

<sup>8</sup> To categorise “thinking analytically and critically” as (the only) real philosophy may be seen as a biased claim, since there exists, I suppose, different ways of doing philosophy. It is my assertion, however, that for philosophy to be true, i.e. useful and practical, it ought to display ways of reasoning and having this exercised by every human mind. “Description,” such as what continental existentialism does, has its own merit, but philosophy, in my view, is not such enterprise.

<sup>9</sup> A.C. Graham, trans., *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981; Hackett, 2001), 68.

<sup>10</sup> Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Roth, “Zhuangzi,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.); available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/zhuangzi/>.

<sup>12</sup> Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (Columbia University Press, 1968); available online from <http://www.terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html#2>.

<sup>13</sup> It should be recalled that scepticism, like relativism, is self-refuting. That is, absolute, radical scepticism becomes tenuous since it regards nothing to prove anything, which necessarily implies that it itself is unprovable, untenable. Zhuangzi’s version of scepticism, however, seems self-sustaining.

<sup>14</sup> See articles of Paul Kjellberg, Lisa Raphals and Eric Schwitzgebel in Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Essays on Relativism, Skepticism and Ethics in the Zhuangzi* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> See for example Youru Wang’s *Linguistic Strategies in Daoist Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism: The Other Way of Speaking* (London: Routledge, 2003). Though Zhuangzi may be an anti-rationalist like, as P.J. Ivanhoe and Karen Carr have demonstrated, Kierkegaard, he wasn’t an irrationalist. Ivanhoe and Carr, *The Sense of Antirationalism*.

<sup>16</sup> There is even a passage in the “*Tianxia*” 天下 chapter that shows Zhuangzi’s survey, appraisal and analysis of the philosophical turmoil during the Warring States era. Some scholars think this was written by Zhuangzi himself.





These various policies are scattered throughout the world and are propounded in the Middle Kingdom, the scholars of the hundred schools from time to time taking up one or the other in their praises and preachings. But the world is in great disorder, the worthies and sages lack clarity of vision, and the Way and its Virtue are no longer One. So the world too often seizes upon one of its aspects, examines it, and pronounces it good. But it is like the case of the ear, the eye, the nose, and the mouth: each has its own kind of understanding, but their functions are not interchangeable. In the same way, the various skills of the hundred schools all have their strong points, and at times each may be of use. But none is wholly sufficient, none is universal. The scholar cramped in one corner of learning tries to judge the beauty of Heaven and earth, to pry into the principles of the ten thousand things, to scrutinize the perfection of the ancients, but seldom is he able to encompass the true beauty of Heaven and earth, to describe the true face of holy brightness. Therefore the Way that is sagely within and kingly without has fallen into darkness and is no longer clearly perceived, has become shrouded and no longer shines forth. The men of the world all follow their own desires and make these their "doctrine." How sad! - the hundred schools going on and on instead of turning back, fated never to join again. The scholars of later ages have unfortunately never perceived the purity of Heaven and earth, the great body of the ancients, and "the art of the Way" in time comes to be rent and torn apart by the world. (Watson, Complete Works of Chuang Tzu; available from <http://www.terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu3.html#33>)

<sup>17</sup> Watson, Complete Works of Chuang Tzu; available online from <http://www.terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html#2>.

<sup>18</sup> It is in the Shiji, a Han text, where we find the Daoist thinker placed under. He is interestingly, though strangely as well, placed together with Laozi and the Legalists Shen Buhai and Hanfeizi.

This research has been done through the scholarship given by UNSW and through the supervision of Dr Karyn Lai.