

REFLECTION OF SECONDARY RESEARCH: STUDY OF THE NOTHINGNESS IN TAOISM, BUDDHISM AND PHYSICS

KAIXIANG ZHANG

DAO (道) and WU (无)

Taoism is the indigenous philosophy school and religion in China; nonetheless, the definition of Taoism is branching. Unlike the Buddhism, the Taoist religion emerged hundred years after the establishment of the philosophy school and did not inherit the philosophy of Taoist school, but based on the doctrine of Fang-xian, which aims at seeking the way of immortality. The “Taoism” and “Taoist” that revolving around this study is focused on the Taoist school, that mainly thrived between The Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE) and The Warring States Period (475-221 BCE). During the Spring and Autumn Period, scholars in China started to institute their schools and debating the way of developing the kingdoms. Lao-Zi, the author of Dao-De Jing, is considered as the founder of Taoism. Later in the Warring States Period, Zhuang-Zi and Lie-Zi followed the idea of Lao-Zi and further developed Taoism while turning the attention from politics to the freedom of mind.

“Dao” would be the most crucial idea of Taoism, which brought forward in the Dao-De Jing by Lao-Zi. Dao in Chinese would probably be “the way,” which is the general order of the universe. Nonetheless, even Lao-Zi himself was not sure the name of it, “I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the Dao (the Way or Course). Making an effort (further) to give it a name I call it The Great.¹” He thought that the Dao does not possess an actual figure, but do exist in the universe somehow. Moreover, he accentuated the limitation of language, so in the first chapter of Dao De Jing, he had already declared that if the Dao can be expressed in word, then it no longer be the eternal “Dao” (that is one of the interpretations of ‘道可道也，非恒道也’). When the idea passed to Zhuang-Zi, he explained that “The Dao is real and conclusive, but it does not objectively do anything, and it is formless; the Dao can generate infinitely but cannot be held, can be known but cannot be seen.²” (This is my interpretation, though the translations are multiple. We could imagine the Dao in this context somewhat as water; it is fluid and translucent. However, the difference is, the Dao cannot be defined in the physical world; it is uninterrupted and freer than anything.)

The unspeakableness of the Dao also conducted to the Taoist aesthetic idea that the most significant things are behaving contrarily to how great they are as same as the Dao hidden in no name, rather than showing how great they are, which will consequently lead to conflict. As in Chapter 41 of Dao De Jing: “The largest square doth yet no corner show; A vessel great, it is the slowest made; Loud is its sound, but never word it said; A semblance great, the shadow of a shade.³” Meanwhile, Lao-Zi developed the mystique of Dao in the first chapter as well. He stated that “being” and “nothing” are the two aspects of Dao that came out of the Mystery (玄).

1 Lao-Zi. *Dao De Jing*. Chapter 25: 吾不知其名，字之曰道，强为之名曰大。

2 Zhuang-Zi. *Zhuang-Zi*, Chapter of “*Da-Zong-Shi*”: 夫道，有情有信，无为无形，可传而不可受，可得而不可见。

3 Lao-Zi. *Dao De Jing*. Chapter 41: 大方无隅；大器晚成；大音希声；大象无形；道隐无名。

Although “being” and “nothing” are equally attributed from Dao, he believed that “nothing” is the origin of the world: “All things under heaven sprang from It as existing (and named); that existence sprang from It as non-existent (and not named).⁴” As for Zhuang-Zi, he further demonstrated this relation: “The myriad things come forth from nonbeing. Being cannot bring being into being; it must come forth from nonbeing, and nonbeing is singularly nonbeing.⁵” Therefore, in the Taoist idea, nothing is the part of Dao that time-sequentially occurs before being. Apart from time, both of them are an integral part of Dao, which are assuredly existing.

Lao-Zi believed that “The Dao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things.⁶” Thus, we could regard the Dao as the zero of nature as well as “all things.” Wang Bi, a scholar in the Three Kingdoms period interpreted this sentence as “All things and forms have the only origin, and this ‘one origin’ is derived from ‘nothing’; therefore all things could be counted as nothing.⁷” Nothing or no-name (无名) is the noumenon of the Dao, the beginning of everything. Back to the first chapter of Dao De Jing, Wang annotated that if we can empty ourselves and being in the state of void, we could sense how did the world gradually appear from the ultimate tininess.

EMPTINESS

Emptiness in Chinese (Kong 空) primarily means the cave or hole, which further develops to describe empty or hollow things. On account of the theory of Mādhyamaka (a branch of Mahāyāna) which believed everything is empty, came into China earlier, the scholar then translated शून्यता (Śūnyatā) to Kong.

Different from Taoism, the contrast of being and nothing is not established on the cosmology but set on the existence of ourselves. For objecting the hierarchy designed by Brahmanism, Śākyamuni stood for negating the ultimate origin of the universe. Ātman (self, 我), the early Buddhism believed that it means eternal or Īśvara (capable of, 自在), whereas the people are trapped by five heaps (pañca-skandhas, 五蘊), which are form (rūpa), sensations (vedanā), perceptions (saññā), mental activity (saṅkhāra), and consciousness (viññāṇa). Consequently, people are in the condition of anātman (non-self, 无我), which is emptiness.

To the Mahāyāna, the theory became to believe that the intrinsic property (svabhāva, 自性) of everything is empty. In the Diamond Sutra (Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, 《金刚般若波罗蜜经》), there is a verse said: “So I say to you – This is how to contemplate our conditioned existence (saṃskṛta dharma, 有为法) in this fleeting world: like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream; like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream. So is all conditioned existence to be

4 Lao-Zi. *Dao De Jing*. Chapter 40: 天下万物生于有，有生于无。

5 Zhuang-Zi. Zhuang-Zi, Chapter of “Geng-Sang-Chu”: 万物出乎无有。有不能以有为有，必出乎无有，而无有一无有。

6 Lao-Zi. *Dao De Jing*. Chapter 42: 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。

7 Wang, B. The Annotation of *Dao De Jing*. Annotation of Chapter 42: 万物万形，其归一也，何由致一，由于无也。由无乃一，一可谓无。

seen.⁸ Comparing to early Buddhism, Mahāyāna denied the substantiality of the world. To take a specific look at Mādhyamaka, the scholars like Nāgārjuna said in the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā: “There is no conditioned existence does not derive from the direct and indirect causes (Hetu and Praṭītya); therefore all of the dharma is empty.”⁹ They believe that every phenomenon is generated from causes, so the phenomenon itself does not possess the intrinsic nature, but could easily be changed by the continually varying causes.

Nonetheless, the theory is not repudiating the existence of the phenomenon, though the intrinsic nature is absent. As Seng-Zhao, the Chinese scholar who studies Nāgārjuna explained: “All things originate out of the combinations of causes and conditions. Thus they cannot be regarded as original existence; at the same time, they arise, change, and demise upon certain conditions, so they cannot be said as non-existence.¹⁰” However, the things are still the conditioned existences; they are ephemeral and illusory. For the Mahāyāna, only the people who have realised that there is no absolute existence or non-existence, can eventually reach the state of harmony and achieve the liberation (nirvāṇa).

(Despite from Mahāyāna, different Buddhist sects are holding a distinct interpretation of emptiness, due to the limited research time, I did not excavate further to the other branches.)

COMPARISON OF THE NOTHINGNESS (EMPTINESS) IN TAOISM AND BUDDHISM

Through Chinese history, Buddhism as the alien religion the came from India regularly interacted with the indigenous culture system such as Taoism and Confucianism for the integration. Hence, for scholars on two sides, they both tried to assimilate the idea from the others, and Quanzhen School is one of the results produced by this movement. However, as the founder of Chinese Yogācāra, Xuan-Zang said: “The doctrines of Buddhism and Taoism are divergent. How can we use the Buddhist theory to understand the Taoist one?¹¹” Indeed, resemblances and intersections are existing between Taoist and Buddhist philosophy, but the cores are different.

Comparing the difference of nothingness in the context of Taoism and Buddhism, the most obvious one, which has already mentioned, is that whether it is the ultimate origin. For Taoism, “Wu” is the starting point of the universe, while Buddhist believing there is no such original thing, but “śūnyatā” is the commonness of ourselves and everything. Eran Dror interprets the difference of the void between them as: “Buddhism is primarily interested in liberation from suffering, and uses the metaphysics of emptiness for that purpose. Daoism, on the other hand, seems primarily interested in grasping the Oneness of the Dao, and the emptiness of the self is primarily a means for achieving that end.¹²” The Taoist nothingness is relating to cosmology, and the Buddhist emptiness comes from the inspection of self. In another perspective to see this difference, the opposite is also occurring in the definitions of the existence. For Taoism, Zhuang-Zi believed that everything in the universe is created by

8 Johnson, A. *Diamond Sutra - A New Translation*. Chapter 32.

9 Nāgārjuna. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Chapter 22, Investigation of Tathagata.

10 Seng-Zhao. *Zhao Lun (Treatises of Sengzhao)*: 物从因缘故不有，缘起故不无。

11 Dao-Xuan. (n.d.). *Ji-Gu-Jin-Fo-Dao-Lun-Heng*, Volume C. The Emperor Wendi of Tang ordered the Master Xuan-Zang to turn Lao-Zi into Sanskrit.

12 Dror, E. *Emptiness: A Comparative Review of Classical Daoist & Buddhist Thought*.

the other things dependently. Therefore it is impossible to achieve the nothingness. Contrarily, the emptiness in Buddhism (based on the theory of Mādhyamaka) is caused by the loss of intrinsic nature, which means things are the compositions of the direct and indirect causes. As they exist dependently and changeable, they are empty. As a result, the theory of nothingness is reversed.

Referring to the similarities between Taoism and Buddhist, one of them is the “negativity.” This term is mentioned in both Eran Dror and Yao Zhi-Hua’s article. While Dror speaking with the viewpoint of ultimacy, that: “Because both these traditions, among all the major philosophical schools East and West, have adventured into the domain of negativity, ultimate reality—be it Dao or nothingness, nirvana or emptiness—has to be expressed in negative terms¹³”, Yao contrast this two schools with another two which were existing in the same period: “Similarly, in the eyes of orthodox Confucian and Hindu scholars, both Daoism and Buddhism were seen as passive, negative, and even destructive to intellectual and social norms. These scholars condemned them as heresies and were determined to eliminate their influence on Chinese and Indian minds.¹⁴” (Rather than using the term of ‘negativity,’ I think it would be more proper to use ‘other-worldly’ (出世). The nothingnesses in both domains have nothing to do with the worldly affairs; they are the nature of this universe.)

NOTHING OF REALITY, REFLECTION WITH FRANK CLOSE’S NOTHING

The Taoist regards Dao as the existence, but it is “fleeting and indeterminable” (恍惚). The Dao is “the form of the formless and the semblance of the invisible¹⁵,” which cannot be named. It just like the shadow on the bubble, the smell brought by the wind, we know there is something, but while we want to tell what it is, it immediately eluding away. Therefore, the description of the Dao reminds me the Leibnizian–Heideggerian question that Yao Zhi-Hua mentioned in his article *Typology of Nothing: Heidegger, Daoism, and Buddhism*: “Why is there something rather than nothing?¹⁶” As for the physicist Frank Close, he found it is truly a difficulty to try to imagine nothing. He questioned: “What is the universe for the never-to-be-born or those now dead?” (Close, 2009) I think that it is hardly possible to use the perspective as the existed being to think this question. The premise is invalid, because how we question it is built upon the existed knowledge. Perhaps there is a universe, or not, or further speculation; it is neither existent nor inexistent because this judgment is inside our knowledge boundary. As he said: “The paradox of creation from the void, of Being and Non-Being, has tantalized all recorded cultures.” (ibid.)

In his book, *Nothing: A Very Short Introduction*, we can see the arguments of ancient Greek philosophers, the question from the Rigveda, and even while the history gradually getting close to the modern world, generations of people are still using the science to find out this enigma. There were new names, new terms, and new theories popping up while I was flipping the page. It seems like the human being has been facing an immense matryoshka doll for thousands of years, with encountering the smaller doll over and over again — every time we realise that our sights have not reached the end line yet.

13 ibid.

14 Yao, Z. *Typology of Nothing: Heidegger, Daoism and Buddhism*. p. 79.

15 Lao-Zi. *Dao De Jing*. Chapter 14: 无状之状，无物之象。

16 Yao, Z. *Typology of Nothing: Heidegger, Daoism and Buddhism*. p. 87.

The explanation of the vacuum is one of the attracting points to me. Admittedly, the question of the existence of the vacuum is extraordinarily complex, and Frank Close finally answered to the question of whether there is the vacuum is: it depends. As he wrote: “depending on your point of view, either ‘no’ (in that the void is actually filled with an infinite sea of particles together with quantum fluctuations) or ‘yes; there are many different types of vacuum’ (i.e. depending on how the medium that is the quantum vacuum is organized).” (ibid.) He thought that the current physics would lean to the latter one. Nonetheless, the answer is still relative to how we define the vacuum. If we want to approach the genuine emptiness, it is impossible based on the received knowledge.

In the ancient Greek time, Aristotle and his student Theophrastus believed bodies are real and exist relative to the spaces; thus, “this also implies that there can be no such thing as a vacuum as removing all the matter has removed the container.” (ibid.) On account of the limitation of the science, it is quite right at that time if we do not consider field, energy or anything subtler which came afterwards. What if we count the presence of the field? Close explained the result of leaving only one matter left in the universe, the thing that will happen with the field is that: “the gravitational field from that remote body would fill all of the otherwise ‘empty’ regions.” (ibid.) This phenomenon somehow reminded me of the theory of the Dao: “Dao generates one, one generates two, two generates three and three generates everything.¹⁷” It is as if the domino, once the first one has been pushed over, the whole will be affected.

As for quantum physics, the current research shows that the complete void is impossible to achieve. Close introduced the “uncertainty principle,” which is one of the fundamental properties of nature: “it is not possible to measure both the position and momentum of a particle with arbitrary precision.” (ibid.) Due to this principle, we could only measure either the position of the particle or its kinetic energy, while another one will be unknowable. The closest condition to the void is regarded as “ground state,” that “the vacuum is the state where the amount of energy is the minimum possible.” (ibid.) Finally, he stated that “our quantum vacuum is like a medium and never truly empty,” (ibid.) so we could realise the vacuum in some standards, but the nothingness is still unapproachable.

Another point that I am interested in is the origin of the world. Frank Close made a general summary based on the modern physics before talk about it: “having surveyed over 2,000 years of ideas, we have arrived at the modern answer: ‘Everything came from nothing.’” (ibid.) However, in the pages, after he introduced the dimension, which brought the new ideas out. The universe that we are living or perceiving is three-dimensional; hence, the time for us is shifting on a line, which is strung by past, now and future. Close simplified the Hawking and Hartle’s imagination of the higher dimension universe (as a four-dimensional surface of a five-dimensional sphere), that “there is no expansion, no beginning: the universe simply exists.” (ibid.) Perhaps in the universe of higher dimension, the expansion of the time is no longer valid.

Generally speaking, throughout the whole book, the central concept that I gain is that human’s cognition is very restricted. Even though the modern physics can give a rational answer, we are still encountering with so many mysteries of the universe, so this single

17 Lao-Zi. *Dao De Jing*. Chapter 42: 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物.

answer maybe just like a stone that barely stayed with a hole on a vast net. The question of the creation is too big to be answered; at least we could not find a convincing one yet. As Close said: “We may have given a name to the big question, but that is not the same as understanding the answer.” (ibid.) This sentence instantly recalls my mind back to how did Lao-Zi describes the Dao: “I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the Dao (the Way or Course). Making an effort (further) to give it a name I call it The Great.¹⁸” Perhaps as what Zhuang-Zi said because we are not independent of the “being,” therefore the edge of nothingness is hard to be approached. For me to speak, human’s understanding of the universe is developed with more perspectives, but somehow the development also makes me feel uncertain, because we do not know if there is an endpoint or not, or the paradox is the destination.

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