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DIALECTICAL TIME: TAOISM AND THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

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The complex of cosmological, ethical, intuitive and practical orientations known as Taoism seems to have its origins in the earliest emergence of Chinese civilization. Recent scholarship such as that of Nathan Sivin⁽¹⁾ has shown how difficult it is to arrive at a definition of Taoism because the term has been used in such vague and varied ways both throughout Chinese history and in twentieth century scholarship. Furthermore, so many of the apparently distinct worldviews and practices of Taoism are, on close inspection, to be found outside any context which could be described as Taoist, however defined. In spite of this difficulty, which is a reflection of the particularly complex way in which Chinese traditions have historically merged, overlapped and mutually influenced one another, it is desirable to consider Taoism as a specific, continuously developing cultural amalgam of popular religion, orthodox liturgy, and esoteric teachings (chiefly the Lao-tzu, the Chuang-tzu, and the I-ching).

In its more refined formulations Taoism sees an undifferentiated, timeless void which gives birth to the One - the ultimately unitary totality of reality, a potentiality of forms from which emerge pairs of opposite principles whose poles are contained in each other. The dynamic, dialectical interactions between opposites make up the phenomenal world of change, flux and process, which is only apparently constituted of discrete, separate objects and events.⁽²⁾ The relationship between timeless eternity, containing within it all possibilities, and the actual object-events of phenomena in time, is represented by two time-mendals - the Sequences of Earlier Heaven and Later Heaven. The interplay of the two "was understood as a sacred marriage between Heaven and Earth, the coming together of the eternal order of time with the actual just-so moment, indicating "fields of probability" within which synchronistic events could occur".⁽³⁾

Time was understood as inherent in the phasing of endless transformation of the cosmic whole, the unfolding of an immanent, imperceptible, timeless infinite into the contingent flux of phenomenal reality. The totality of actual object-events at any moment of time is both "accidental" and also imbued with meaning. As C.G. Jung observed, the I-ching sees meaning in "the configuration formed by chance events". He noted that "synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers".⁽⁴⁾ This contrasts with the dominant, post-Renaissance, western scientific concern with abstraction from the contingent and explanation in terms of causal relations, in a world in which time is thought of as a linear homogeneous advance.

The Chinese conception of time manifesting meaningful configurations was connected with the view of numbers as representing not merely quantity but quality. Numbers are symbolic, and the

unfolding of events mirrors an underlying cosmic pattern. These beliefs were based in the traditional Chinese concern for government "to be in harmony with the movement of the universe".(5) The complicated cycle of rituals undertaken by the Emperor with regard to the seasons unified the natural and social order in a process that can be described as dialectical: time is both cyclical and seasonally regenerative but also an unfolding motion from particular qualities to their opposites, developing higher syntheses through the process of transformation.

It is interesting and significant to note how many philosophers of modern physics have found the view of reality generated by modern scientific research to coincide with Taoist conceptualisations. David Bohm, for example, describes the ontology and epistemology which modern physics requires as "unbroken wholeness in flowing movement, for in the implicate order the totality of existence is enfolded within each region of space (and time). So, whatever part, element, or aspect we may abstract in thought, this still enfolds the whole and is therefore intrinsically related to the totality from which it has been abstracted. Thus, wholeness permeates all that is being discussed from the very outset".(6) The ontology that emerges implicitly from modern physics is that of an ultimately unified matter-energy in flux, a four dimensional pattern of inter-related object-events where past, present, and future are aspects of an interconnected totality. As Fritjof Capra puts it, in this unitary cosmos "every particle consists of all other particles" which self-interact. "Particles are not isolated grains of matter but are probability patterns, interconnections in an inseparable cosmic web." Furthermore, just as Jung saw the Taoist notion of synchronistic events as acts of creation in time, Capra says, "all matter is involved in a continual cosmic dance," and "every subatomic particle not only performs an energy dance but also is an energy dance, a pulsating process of creation and destruction".(7)

The closest similarities to this ontology in Western philosophical traditions are to be found in Hegel's philosophy and in "dialectical materialism" which developed from it. The likelihood that Hegel was influenced by Chinese thought has been commented upon by Joseph Needham,(8) whilst John Blofeld recognises the parallel between Taoist and Marxist thought.(9) We cannot go in depth into the significance of such conceptual similarities in traditions emanating from such widely varied cultural contexts here,(10) but the point made by Deirdre Green with respect to the different traditions of mysticism can be taken as equally apposite to the various forms of "dialectical thinking":

"Scholarly appraisals of mysticism, considered as a cross-cultural phenomenon, have ranged from the view that all mysticism is basically the same, to the standpoint that there are as many types of mysticism as there are religious traditions..... The question of whether different examples of mysticism are the same or not, has to be considered firstly on the level of the phenomenological experience itself; secondly on the level of the interpretations placed upon the experience; and thirdly on the level of the ontological source of the experience.(11)"

This "ontological source of the experience" can be taken to include the social context within which forms of thought emerge. W. Mays has written the following about Hegel's conception of time:

"Hegel's position [is] essentially different from that of Kant. This is clear from his statement "It is said that everything arises and passes away in time, and that if one abstracts from everything, that is to say from the content of time and space, then empty time and empty space will be left.... But everything does not appear and pass in time, time itself is this becoming, arising and passing

away.... Time does not resemble a container in which everything is as it were borne away and swallowed up in the flow of a stream. Time is merely this abstraction of destroying. Things are in time because they are finite; they do not pass away because they are in time, but are themselves that which is temporal. ... It is therefore the process of actual things which constitutes time." For Hegel time taken by itself and represented as being independent of things, becomes an "abstraction of externality" - the time of ordinary common sense and science.(12)

Actually, the abstract, external time of Newton and Kant that Hegel exposes to dialectical critique is the experience of time in western science (until the emergence of relativity and quantum theory) and western social life.

The contrast between the infinite and finite in Hegel is close to that between non-being and being in Taoism. Yet in a sense Taoism is closer to dialectical materialism than to Hegel, for in Hegel the Idea is the ultimate reality, phenomena being in a final sense unreality, as objectification and simultaneously alienation of Spirit. Rather like some versions of dialectical materialism, Taoism does not make phenomena secondary or illusory: it is more a "dialectical pantheism" for which neither "spirit" nor "matter" is fundamental as in western idealisms and mechanical materialisms respectively. Being and non-being interpenetrate. Suzuki relates the story of a monk who asks what is the Great Source of all things, and then comments that "this conception of Great Source as existing separately somewhere is the fundamental mistake." (13) Similarly, Lao-tzu says: "'Nothingness' is the name for it prior to the universe's birth. 'Being' is the name for it as the Mother of the Myriad Objects. Therefore, when you seek to comprehend its mystery, it is seen as unending void; when you seek to behold its content, you see that it is being." (14) Again in the words of Yung-chia Ta-shih's "Song of Enlightenment":

"Emptiness negatively defined denies a world of causality,

All is then in utter confusion, with no orderliness in it, which surely invites evils all around;

The same holds true when beings are clung to at the expense of Emptiness,

For it is like throwing oneself into a flame, in order to avoid being drowned in the water.(15)

As Marie-Louise von Franz observes, the mutual dependence or entailment, and reciprocal creative causation of the polarities eternity and time, are common to Jung's thought and Taoism. Speaking of the two time-mandalas considered earlier, she writes: "The Earlier Heaven corresponds to what Jung called acausal orderedness; it is timeless. The Later Heaven deals with the lapse of time. Time in it is a 'field' which imparts to all things which coincide within it a definite quality. It mediates.... between the possible and the actual meaningful chance-event." She adds that the "notion of 'blind' chance" is characteristic of a deterministic view of reality.(16)

Joseph Needham terms the ontology of Taoism "organic naturalism", and he and his associates have argued that it provided a basis and impetus for Chinese Science. It orientated the attentive mind toward investigating all phenomena, in an empirical and intellectually "democratic" spirit, since the Tao permeates everything. As reality is conceived of as a seamless, interwoven web,

Taoism allowed a susceptibility toward a comprehension of "field" and "action at a distance" hence the early discovery in China of magnetism and the causes of tides. Its non-dualist ontology prevented medicine from operating within a preconceived mind/body dichotomy: rather as in Wilhelm Reich's theory of an integral, libidinous "life-force" in the human being, physiological, psychic, mental or spiritual levels of human reality/experience are thought of as mutually constitutive. The presumption of interrelatedness between all parts of a totality made possible such discoveries as acupuncture. Though the structured needs of traditional Chinese society prevented science from developing to an extent comparable with the modern West, the underlying ontology of Taoism may now be more appropriate to modern scientific understanding than the dualistic, mechanistic world-view that has dominated the post-Renaissance epoch in the West.

The belief in an ultimate unity of spirit and matter, consciousness and unconsciousness, humanity and nature, ensured that Taoism saw human history as both an "objective" developmental process and also an ethical concern. To flow spontaneously with the Tao is to understand it both rationally and intuitively in order to arrive at an inner self-integration within an harmonious social existence. Rather in the way that David Bohm(17) connects the need for an unbroken, unfragmented epistemology in science with the need for a human "inner measure" so Taoism sees spontaneity and harmony not as pure passivity but as a gliding with the inherent nature of processes, transcending false boundaries, unreal fragmentations and a general "war of all against all" in the flowing, cosmic totality.

Human experience of time, as of all facets of existence, takes place on many levels. One possible mode of categorisation (18) - by no means the only one, nor exhaustive - might be according to a) immediate, "day to day" experience, b) an abstract world-perspective upon society and history, and also nature, and c) a subjective conception of the self's "life-project". These three "levels" could be seen as being related, as experiential projections, to an individual's activity within the particular form of society in which he/she lives, on the following three social levels: a) the characteristic forms of everyday work and personal interactions, b) the type of overall process of social development and social "reproduction", which includes the experience and understanding of nature that social processes entail, and c) the consequences of a) and b) for the individual through socialisation and social conditioning of consciousness, psyche, and the orientation of the ego toward its entire life-span. This last concerns the projection of ego into the future, and, in societies embracing religious conceptions of salvation or immortality, into eternity.

Very briefly, we could sketch the prevailing experiences of time in modern western society (putting aside the obvious variations that exist between groups and individuals) as follows.(19) Experience in a) is reified and repetitive in most institutionalised contexts. Work and bureaucratic organisation are characteristically repetitive, fragmented, and regulated according to an abstract, standardised, homogeneous and quantifiable temporality. Commercialised ("commodified") forms of entertainment, fashion, and cultural activity also tend to conform to a standardised, fragmented abstraction and repetition. Consumption of commodities is shaped into a compulsive, repetitive channelling of desires and satisfaction of needs, which corresponds to a fragmented and unintegrated psychic organisation. The "fetishism of commodities" also establishes the imaginative appreciation of cultural forms as isolated, decontextualised activities. However, desires for flexibility, spontaneity, qualitatively variable and multidimensional temporality, for creative self-development and for human interactions that stem from authentic subjectivity,

conflict with reification. Experience in b) is predominantly in terms of an alienated, external idea of linear progress. A certain contradiction between a) and b) ensures that c), the impulse to "get somewhere (or do something) in life" entails a peculiarly western anxiety regarding "rationalised" time, a tendency towards obsessive compulsions connected to particular patterns of psychic repression.(20)

In complete contrast "primitive", classless communities experience a) as a flexible durée, an organic burgeoning time corresponding to a society undivided into mental administration and physical execution of activities, and without a rigid separation of work from leisure – whose rhythms therefore are experienced as being in the main subjectively determined.(21) The question of what is the prevalent experience of b) in primitive societies has been and is the subject of much controversy and analysis. A long tradition has seen primitive experience of "world-time" as a continual recreation of past time in the present, in a form that is cyclical. Cycles are repeated in such a way that the succession of "nows" in one (e.g. annual) cycle, reproduces earlier ones.(22) Peter Rigby, by contrast, has the following statement concerning the Ilparakuyo and Maasai:

"Temporal concepts of life cycles, days, months, years, generations, and age-sets are incorporated in a very specific historical manner in a social formation which has managed to retain its singular identity not through conservatism and the mere reproduction of the past, but in the creative use of the past in the praxis required for adaptation to an always uncertain future.... The very fluidity of Ilperekuy concepts dealing with time and history are therefore a condition of continuing and successful pastoral praxis. ... Ilparakuyo and Maasai consciousness of "time in historicity" is dialectical, and to that extent it is antithetical to the "metaphysical mode of thinking" characteristic of bourgeois philosophy. It is similar, on the other hand, to what Engels identified as conceptions of history and time in "this primitive, naïve, but intrinsically correct conception of the world" characteristic of ancient Greek philosophy," first clearly formulated by Heraclitus: everything is and is not, for everything is fluid, is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away".(23)

It seems generally agreed therefore that primitive conceptions of time are not of a linear, homogeneous continuum, though whether they are multi-cyclic,(24) spiral-like, or permanent "now times" remains problematic; there is also a powerful tradition of argument that maintains primitive cosmologies are characteristically non-dualist, dialectical fluxes for which time is inherent, not external. The primitive experience of c), according to Martin Spencer, is inherently limited, as there are no "extended vistas of future time.... [and] no eternity of time to contemplate in which the fate of the ego [has] to be resolved".(25)

Taoism seems to retain elements of a primitive cosmological orientation, seasoned and sophisticated by thousands of years of Chinese civilization. We cannot go into this issue in depth here, but can note the general historical connection of Taoism with egalitarian social principles. There was a tendency for Taoism to stand against (and be despised by) the conservative, Confucian ruling classes at the same time as overlapping in some characteristic attitudes with the orthodox cosmologies of the imperial state.(26) The last point connects tantalisingly with the observation of Ernest Mandel and others, that "In the table of ruling classes known to history [the classical Chinese state] is certainly the closest to the primitive functions of the 'servants of the community'".(27)

Thus, if in spite of representing popular sensibilities Taoism "modelled relations with the gods on the usages of the imperial bureaucracy", (28) this may be because state rituals developed from classless, primitive rites. Marcel Granet writes:

"If the Yin and the Yang form a pair and seem to preside jointly over the rhythm of the world order, it is because these ideas are derived from an earlier age in which the principle of rotation had sufficed to regulate a society divided into two complementary groups.... In fact we know that a new era was inaugurated by a festival consisting of a mock battle between two chiefs, supported by two seconds. The two sides represented the two moieties which had shared the control of society by exercising it alternately. (29)

In more poetic vein, Blofeld seems to be making a related point:

By no means all [Taoist] beliefs and practices are of great worth. Some are too bizarre to call for more than a smile, which is scarcely surprising when one considers their enormous antiquity; yet, embedded in much charming moonshine is a precious core of wisdom and exalted spiritual aspiration so striking as to make me almost ready to believe that an "Ancient Wisdom" was once dispersed throughout the world of which scattered fragments still remain. Huang Lao Taoism may be thought of as a kingdom wherein peasant-like neivety prevails throughout the far-flung provinces; in the central area lies a smiling parkland embellished with hills and streams where poets and lovers of nature's mysteries roam; and, in the midst of this, stands a citadel of wisdom so sublime as to lead beyond the world of mortals to the secret heart of Being. (30)

NOTES

1) E.g. Nathan Sivin, "On the Word 'Taoist' as a Source of Perplexity with Special Reference to the Relations of Science and Religion in Traditional China", History of Religions 17 (1977-8). 303-30.

2) See John Blofeld, Taoism: The Quest for Immortality (Mandala Books), UnwIn Paperbacks, London, 1979, pp. 2-5.

3) Marie-Louise von Franz, Time: Rhythm and Repose (Thames and Hudson, London, 1978), p. 29.

4) C.G. Jung, Collected Works, Volume 11 Psychology and Religion: West and East (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958), pp. 591-2, paras. 969 and 972; cf. von Franz, pp. 26-7.

5) George Thomson, Studies in Ancient Greek Society, Volume 2 The First Philosophers (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1955), p. 65.

6) David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order (Ark Paperbacks, London, 1983), p. 172.

7) See von Franz, pp. 20-1 and 28, where passages are quoted from Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics (Berkeley, 1975), pp. 203, 241, 244 and 295.

- 8) Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China, Volume 2 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1956), pp. 77, 201, 291, 303, 423-5, 505.
- 9) Blofeld, p.5; cf. also The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths, ed. R.C. Zaehner (Hutchinson, London, 1959), pp. 406 -12.
- 10) But see Tim Cloudsley, "The Social Structuration of Time in Thought and Experience", unpublished paper given at a conference of the Association for the Social Studies of Time (ASSET) in March 1984. Conference papers are available at reproduction cost from the association office, 18 Victoria Park Square, London E2 9PF.
- 11) D. Green, "Mysticism and the Sevenfold Castle", Shadow 2 (1985), p. 59.
- 12) W. Mays, "Temporality and Time in Hegel and Marx" in The Study of Time II, ed. J.T. Fraser (Springer-Verlag, New York, 1975) p. 99.
- 13) D.T. Suzuki, The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind (Rider, London, 1983), p. 134
- 14) Blofeld, pp. 3-4.
- 15) D.T. Suzuki, Manual of Zen Buddhism (Rider, London, 1953), p. 96.
- 16) von Franz, p. 29.
- 17) Bohm, pp. 22-5.
- 18) For a similar categorisation, see M. Spenser, "Social Science and the Consciousness of the Future", Theory and Society 11 (1982), p. 690.
- 19) See also Tim Cloudsley, "Consciousness and Experience of Time Within an Alienated Division of Labour", paper given at a conference of the Association for the Social Studies of Time in April 1985; see note 10.
- 20) See Leonard W. Dobb, "Time: Cultural and Social Anthropological Aspects" in Timing Space and Spacing Time, Volume 1 Making Sense of Time, ed. Tommy Carlstein et al. (Arnold, London, 1978), pp. 58-9, for "a generalization suggesting that societies that are future-orientated in this respect tend to be more 'complicated' and 'puritanical' if those words may be used loosely".
- 21) See E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism", Past and Present 38 (1967), pp. 56-97.
- 22) See Cloudsley, "Social Structuration", and the discussion of ideas about primitive experience of time in the work of Lévy-Bruhl, Evans-Pritchard, and others in Peter Rigby, "Time and Historical Consciousness: The Case of Ilparakuyo Maasai", Comparative Studies in Society and History 25 (1983), pp. 428-56.
- 23) Rigby, pp. 450-1. The quotations from Engels are from Dialectics of Nature (International Publishers, New York, 1940), pp. 27-8.
- 24) See e.g., Simon Harrison, "Yams and the Symbolic Representation of Time in a Sepik River Village", Oceania 53 (1982-3), pp. 141-62.

25) Spencer, pp. 684 and 687.

26) Sivin, pp. 322-3.

27) Ernest Mandel, The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx (Monthly Review Press, London, 1971), p. 131.

28) Sivin, p. 323.

29) Quoted in George Thomson, p. 68, from Marcel Granet, La pensée chinoise (Paris, 1934), pp.26 and 105-6.

30) Blofeld, p. vi.