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**Lao Tzu and Nietzsche: Wanderer and Superman\***

by Park Yn-hui

I have been asked to talk on Taoism. But, as the title of my paper indicates, I shall be dealing with both Lao Tzu and Nietzsche. My intention, however, is not to do a comparative study, but to put Taoism in a better perspective through a comparison between two thinkers. Given tonight’s audience, most of whom have a cultural background quite foreign to the background from which Taoism sprang and has been developed, this comparative approach to Taoism seems appropriate.

To relate Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, to Nietzsche would appear at first glance as surrealistic as to connect, in the fashion of Salvador

Dali, a sand beach to a melted watch. They are as far apart in space and time, and, as it will be seen, in their ideological stands as two thinkers can conceivably be. At a closer look, however, several similarities strike us: the fragmentary and unsystematic character of their writings and presentations of their thought in the form of aphorism or literary expressions; the essentially ideological orientation they took; the heretical and radically revolutionary aspect of their thought, and more. What is the most fascinating and astonishing, however, is their common and almost identical interest in and views on language, which are strikingly similar, if not identical, in their general outline, with those of the most influential and prevailing philosophers of today such as Quine, Goodman, Kuhn, Foucoult and Derrida, for instance. For these reasons alone, Lao Tzu and Nietzsche seem to deserve a fresh look and evaluation. They are very close to us, and their thought is profound and seems to be genuinely relevant to us.

Both Taoism and Nietzsche’s thought are too complex to be classified in a single category. It is no accident, on the one hand, that Taoism is often considered at once as philosophy, as religion and as ideology, and, on the other hand, that for a long time Nietzsche has not been considered a philosopher in the strict sense of the term, but rather as a man of

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[page 48] letters or as an ideologue. In fact, both Taoism and Nietzsche’s thought have two distinctive dimensions or aspects. They are both philosophical and ideological. As philosophies, they shed light on language; to be more precise, on the relationship between reality and language. It is in the light of the concept of Tao in Taoism and that of the Eternal Recurrence in Nietzsche that their philosophy of language leads them to redefine the relationship between Nature and man, or between the universe and ourselves. In other words, they are led to take a certain religious or ethical position. The concept of In-Action in Taoism and the concept of Will-to- Power in Nietzsche have to do with this practical question. Finally, as ideologues, they propose two different values of life, or goals of life, which are embodied in the concept of Wanderer and of Superman. The burden of the present paper is to show the similarities and differences between Taoism and Nietzschean thought, and further, to make a quick evaluation of each of them.

1. TAO AND THE ETERNAL RECURRENCE

The beginning verse of Lao Tzu, or Tao Teh Ching, the Taoist equivalent to the Old Testament, is about Tao; and the end of The Will-to-Power, Nietzsche’s posthumous book, considered as the expression of his cry- stalized ideas, is about the Eternal Recurrence. That the most important concept in Taoism is the concept of Tao has never been questioned by any scholar of Taoism. But the concept of Eternal Recurrence has no such weight in the writings of Nietzsche. It is, however, generally agreed that this concept is essential to the grasp of the overall structure of Nietzschean thought. It is against this background, and in the light of this concept, that the complexity and the meaning of his thought can be better under--stood. Both concepts are ontological. They denote or name the one and ultimate reality taken as a whole. The most famous statement of Taoism is the very beginning verse of Tao Teh Ching, which says: “The Tao that can be told of is not eternal Tao.” It is taken for granted among scholars of Taoism that this Tao, the ultimate reality, cannot be described in language, because Tao is an indivisible whole and because any linguistic representation is necessarily conceptual, divisive, and thus distorting. As Chuang Tzu, the most famous disciple of Lao Tzu, says, “The universe is but one mark.”² For Nietzsche the Eternal Recurrence, on the other hand, is described as “a sea of forces of flowing and crushing together, eternally [page 49] changing, eternally flooding back, with years of recurrence, with an ebb and flood of its forms.”³ The Eternal Recurrence is, then, the unbroken, continuous and thus non-substantial nature of ultimate reality taken as a whole.

If the idea that reality is one and an indivisible whole is all that the ontology of Lao Tzu and Nietzsche is intended to mean, there is nothing profound and new in it. If they mean more than this idea, and intend to say that reality as it is can never be completely conceptualized and thus put into words, this idea is not new either. For we find more or less the same idea in Plotinus, Bergson and Heidegger, let alone in most educated people and artists. And yet the profound meaning and originality of these two concepts can be discovered only when we realize that these concepts have to do less with the description of reality than with the description of the relationship between reality and its linguistic representation. What is new and great in these ontological concepts is an enlightening and astonishingly profound up-to-date philosophy of language, more precisely a theory of the relationship between reality and its linguistic representation.

What Lao Tzu and Nietzsche are primarily concerned with is to help us see the gap between reality and its linguistic representation, even though we are doomed to represent reality in language. If this is all that there is in the ontology and philosophy of language in Lao Tzu and Nietzsche, this idea still lacks profound meaning or insight and appears rather trivial, for, upon a little reflection, we discover that by definition tnings can never be identical with a language representing them. However shocking it was, Kant was right when he argued that we are destined to see things only through the windows of transcendental categories. Goodman follows Kant when he writes in very recent years that ‘‘We can have words without worlds, but not worlds without words or symbols.”4 One may even say with Derrida that ‘‘things escape us always.”5 The thought of Lao Tzu and Nietzsche on language is exactly in line with the above recent day philosophers of language.

But looked at differently, the trivial truth of the relationship between reality and its linguistic representation is awakening and, indeed, revolutionary. With such a trivial truth, Kant, Goodman and Derrida have shocked us. What does this mean? Why is this view revolutionary? We are often, as Nietzsche pointed out somewhere, lured and thus deceived by language. As a result, we tend to take what represents as though it were what is represented. As Nietzsche writes. “The concept of ‘pencil is confused with the thing ‘pencil.”6; yet, there is no such entity or idea or eidos or substance or essence as “pencil” separable and distinctive from [page 50] other things continuous with it. What we take to be a real “pencil” is nothing other than a conceptualized thing. “There is,” Nietzsche goes on to say,’’neither ‘spirit’ nor ‘reason’ nor ‘thinking’ nor ‘consciousness’ nor ‘soul’ nor ‘will’ nor ‘truth’ : all are fictions that are of no use.”7 As Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu argued, there are no such Confucian moral entities as ‘righteousness’ and ‘benevolence’. And yet, from Plato up to Husserl, throughout the Western philosophical tradition, the existence of fixed and eternal realities has never been seriously questioned and doubted, and the ultimate philosophical goal has been finding out such realities called ‘substance,’ ‘essence’, ‘truth’, ‘eidos’ or, ‘meaning’, or ‘ideas’. From the point of view of Lao and Nietzsche, as well as the recent philosophers just mentioned above, these realities or entities are in reality philosophical spooks. Lured by the neatness of language, as Nietzsche denounces, “even philosophers are caught in the linguistic net.”8

To say that our conception of reality is necessarily dependent upon our language is to say that our conception of reality, and, by extension, our knowledge and our truth are relative. Since our language is not natural, but conventional, made by us according to our need, and since our need depends on our natural and cultural condition, our ‘world’ or our views on reality or realities are relative through and through. It is relative to our human perspective, relative to a culture, relative to a person, relative to a condition of that person in a given time. What is called ‘perspectivism’ in Nietzsche is intended to show this relativity of all our knowledge, our conception of reality. It is this relativity that Chuang Tzu attempts to illustrate in his many amusing and often funny parables. We, human beings, believe in the objective beauty of, say, Cleopatra, and run after her, but dogs, birds and skunks and even cockroaches are quick to run away. Blind to this relativity, we are as narrow-minded as Chuang Tzu’s frog in his small and dirty well, who believes that he is in an ocean and that he is the greatest. Conflating reality and our conception of it, we become stupid, just like Chuang Tzu’s monkey, who is confused in counting the number of meals he gets.9

At this point, Taoism and the thought of Nietzsche cease to be philosophies, and appear as critiques of ideology. The function of philosophy in a narrow and strict sense, to which I ascribe myself, is to elucidate confusing concepts and to disentangle them. It consists bascially in what is called ‘conceptual analysis.’ On the other hand, by ideology I understand our overall beliefs about the world and our overall system of values. The philosophy, more specifically the philosophy of language of [page 51] Lao Tzu and Nietzsche, unveils the ideological character of our beliefs and values as they are found in the prevailing thought in the West, exemplified in the Western philosophical tradition as well as in Christianity, and in the dominating thought in the East, which is best illustrated in Confucianism. For both Lao Tzu and Nietzsche, the theoretical and moral picture that Christianity and Confucianism present as objective truth is not objective, but subjective in some sense, and thus ideological. It is their task to unmask it, to criticize it; that is, to use recent philosophical jargon, to deconstruct it. Philosophy takes on a therapeutic, debunking and liberating function.

2. IN-ACTION AND THE WILL-TO-POWER

According to Nietzsche, “We are still being constantly led astray by words and concepts into thinking that things are simpler than they are, as separate from one another, indivisible and existing each on its own. A philosophical mythology lies hidden in language, and it breaks out again at every moment, however careful one may be.”10 Where are we astray? We are astray in our beliefs, in our values and in our goals. Thus Chuang Tzu, too, writes in referring to Confucianism, a rival philosophy of Taoism: “As I look at the master, the first principle of benevolence and the parts of approval and disapproval are intrinsically mixed and confused together. . . . How is it possible that I shall know how to distinguish among them?”11 The benevolence and the righteousness which Confucius presents as if they were real entities somewhere in the moral realm are in fact merely linguistic fictions which have no counterpart in the actual and real world. For Nietzsche the Christian God, who justifies the traditional metaphysical and moral order, is also a linguistic fiction. It is for this reason that Nietzsche says: “I am afraid we shall not get rid of God until we get rid of Grammar.”12 It is in this manner that the philosophy of language of Lao Tzu and Nietzsche transforms itself into, and develops as, radical critiques of the existing philosophical, religious and moral beliefs and thus unveils the true nature and meaning of these beliefs, not their objective but their ideological character.

But, according to the philosophy of language of Lao Tzu and Nietzsche, whatever beliefs and values we may hold are logically doomed to be ideological in the sense that they are never able to be true and objective pictures of reality. If so, on what ground could they criticize? According to Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, there are right ideologies, [page 51] healthy ideologies, which have to replace the wrong and sick ideologies. It is here that Lao Tzu and Nietzsche become more than analysts and critics of ideology, and thus present themselves as new ideologues.

From the Taoist perspective Confucianism is wrong, firstly because it confuses ideology with objective reality, forgetting that it is one of many possible ways of looking at reality and man, and more importantly, because it is fundamentally erroneous. From the Nietzschean perspective Christianity is bad, firstly because it also mixes up reality with ideology, not realizing that it is one of many alternative pictures of the world and life, and more importantly, because it is fundamentally sick in character.

In essence both Confucianism and Christianity are philosophies of life concerned with teaching us the best way to live. But both teachings are unacceptable. On the one hand, if the goal of Confucianism is to provide us with the way in which men could realize their fullest happiness in peace and freedom in a society, in the universe, the Confucian doctrine is self-defeating. Confucianism teaches us how to regulate our every action, indeed our life, according to and in compliance with infinitely complex and various rules. But to conform oneself to a certain rule or regulation is to force oneself, and thus not to act and to live freely and spontaneously. And to have rules and orders is to divide things and differentiate them. Thus, to live according to Confucianism is to live artificially, not freely, and to conduct ourselves according to the Confucian teachings is to become divisive and thus to break harmony and peace rather than to find them. Confucianism is essentially disruptive. Confucian rules and regulations are against, as it were, the lawless law of Tao.

On the other hand, although Christianity is believed to be the way toward salvation, it is in fact, according to Nietzschean analysis, a sick ideology invented by the impotent, sick with rancor and resentment. Christianity is at once a disguised means of self-consolation devised by unhappy and frustrated slaves and a sneaky instrument invented by them in order to satisfy their need of revenge against their strong, healthy masters. The moral values derived from and justified by Christian doctrine are traps cast to catch the masters and to poison them. In accepting Christian values, we have accepted the values of a sick herd. With it life is seen as suffering rather than joyful. Christianity is an ideology of anti- life.

Taoism and Nietzsche’s thought appear as two doctrines of at once liberation and therapy. Lao Tzu and Nietzsche intend to free us from our ideological prison, and to help recover our health and happiness. [page 53] Critics of the existing ideologies, they become advocates of new and better ideologies. It is at this juncture of their direction of thought that the concept of In-Action in Taoism and the concept of Will-to-Power in the thinking of Nietzsche take on their true meaning and significance. And it is also at this point that the difference between Lao Tzu and Nietzsche becomes greater. What then could an alternative ideology be? Is there any alternative ideology in place of the ideologies which are denied? In-Action in Taoism and Will-to-Power are two different answers. They are two proposals of how to live, how to relate ourselves to Nature, to the universe at large, to ourselves, to our desires and to our neighbors. Therefore, they are theories of action, thus practical in nature. Lao Tzu and Nietzsche are ideological therapists.

In-Action is still a principle of action, a principle of how to live, how to determine our conduct. Thus, it appears as an ethical or moral principle, for moral or ethical principles are principles of how to decide right and good action. But moral principles are principles dealing with our conduct in relation to others within a given society. From this point of view Confucianism is essentially ethical in character, and its rules are moral. In contrast to Confucian moral rules, In-Action is the principle of action in general, or of the ultimate action. It is the most viable principle of action not in relation to other persons within a society, but in relation to everything, to persons, to a society, to things, to Nature and to the universe at large. It shows not how to achieve moral good, but how to achieve the Good in general, the ultimate Good. It is in this sense that Taoism, insofar as it is a philosophy of In-Action, is a religion in the broadest sense of the term, and the concept of In-Action is a sort of religious concept rather than an ethical concept, even if Taoism does not accept any transcendental world, any other world than this world. As a principle of action, the principle of In-Action does not say that we should restrain ourselves from doing anything, which is absurd. It only says how we should do things. It consists in acting, doing according to Tao, according to the way things are, and according to the way we are. It teaches us how to live and to act in harmony with the nature of reality. To follow Tao is then to adjust ourselves to the natural and cultural orders and to our condition in a given time, instead of forcing them into our desires and goals. In plain words, it means to do things and to live naturally, not artificially; spontaneously, not formally. It is for this reason that Taoism is anti-intellectual and anti-cultural.

The concept of Will-to-Power in Nietzsche is the concept which corresponds to the concept of In-Action in Taoism. This interpretation of [page 54] the concept of Will-to-Power might be objectionable, for in the philosophical scheme of Nietzsche the Will-to-Power refers to the ultimate nature of reality. It is described as denoting the essential character of the ultimate reality, whose structure is described as the Eternal Recurrence. Ultimately we are said to be Will-to-Power, and everything is said to be Will-to-Power. The concept of Will-to-Power must then be understood as ontological rather than ethical or practical. However, to the extent that Nietzsche demands us to act always in order to fulfill our Will-to-Power, which is our very nature, the concept of Will-to-Power can better be interpreted as practical, if not ethical in the narrow sense of the term, even if this concept has an ontological meanings. There seems to be no contradiction in keeping two senses of the term at once. What is the Will- to-Power as the ultimate principle of action? Just as in the concept of In-Action, the principle of action of the Will-to-Power is less moral than religious, even though Nietzsche denies the existence of God, for it is a principle of action depicting how to realize the ultimate Good, how to take up our life in the scheme of the universe. Like Lao Tzu, Nietzsche is concerned with trans-ethical good, not good in life, but the Good of life. The Will-to-Power stresses individuality, self-affirmation, and active control of the external and internal force. From this perspective Lao Tzu and Nietzsche oppose each other.

3. WANDERER AND SUPERMAN

Wanderer and Superman symbolize two different ideal types of man in Lao Tzu and Nietzsche respectively. With the difference between these two types, the difference between the Taoist ideology and the Nietzschean ideology reaches the irreconcilable conflicting point. It is in these two types of man that the principle of In-Action in Lao Tzu and that of Will- to-Power in Nietzsche are projected.

Although the importance of the concept of Superman in Nietzsche’s thought is well recognized and widely known, the concept of Wanderer or So-Yo-In in Taoism has not been fully recognized as one of the central Taoist concepts. In the writings of Taoist literature, the concept does not appear as frequently as the concept of Tao and that of In-Action. Only once does this concept appear in the title of the first chapter of Chuang Tzu, the second best known book in Taoist literature. Even here it is neither discussed nor explained. However, the idea of wandering and by extension, the idea of wanderer, seems to be fundamental. It is in this [page 55] concept that the entire thinking of Taoism seems to be crystallized. It appears that the whole point of Taoism is to offer us the wanderer, the idea of wandering as model of man, to teach us to become Wanderers, which is the exact counterpart of Superman in Nietzsche. Who are they? How to characterize them?

Wanderer is the one who spends his whole life wandering, and wanders through his life. To be sure, here, to wander does not mean to get lost, but to walk around the fields and woods of life, without forcing his external conditions and himself. For him, to live is just like taking a walk without any fixed goal or set of goals, which can be enjoyed in and for itself at every moment. Life has no other purposes or goals than itself, just as a man who takes a walk on a week-end has no particular and well defined aims, no obstacles to overcome and to endure in order to achieve something other than his walk. Just like the man who enjoys his week-end walk in the fields and woods, for the Wanderer his wandering in itself is a value, every moment he spends and every place and thing he visits and sees are to be enjoyed and admired in and for themselves. They are by themselves an end-in-itself. Each moment is an eternity and each experience is felicity. For the Wanderer, life is a feast, a poem, a song. He is like a poet admiring the high mountains and clean running brooks. He is just like a man who enjoys every quiet moment at the bank of a pond in which his fishing line is cast. The Wanderer is the one who follows Tao and he is a perfectly happy man.

But then, who is Superman? He is not like a happy Wanderer, for he despises this kind of life. For Nietzsche “Happiness is invented by the herd-man of contemporary life.”13 He holds such a herd man in contempt. Often Superman seems to denote in Nietzsche’s writings the famous “blonde beast” roaming through the wilderness, terrifying foxes, cats, rabbits and rats, or a medieval conquerer who dances like Dionysus, annks and intoxicates himself after the conquest of his enemy’s territory, for Nietzsche exalts such persons as Napoleon, Cesare Borgia, the Roman conquerers, and other people who are physically powerful. But in many other places, Superman also refers to such persons as great artists and great thinkers. Who then is Superman exactly? What is the common feature between militaristic men and creative men? Nietzsche writes:

It is particularly illuminating to substitute for ‘happiness’ (toward which everything that lives is supposed to strive) the term ‘power’. Thus they strive for power, more power. Pleasure is only a symptom of the feeling of power achieved, a consciousness of difference. They do not strive for plea- [page 56] sure, pleasure comes in when they achieve what they strive for.

Pleasure is an accompaniment, not a motive.14

He goes on to say:

What is pleasure but an excitation of power feeling, through an obstacle which is all the stronger if there is a rhythmic obstruction and resistance which increases the excitation. Thus pain is inherent in all pleasure.15

Superman is, then, the man of power, the man who finds his pleasure in overcoming every obstacle, internal or external, and thus experiences pleasure in the constant and perpetual expansion of his power. Since the Will-to-Power is the very essence of man and, for that matter, of everything, to be Superman is to live up to one’s own nature, to live in authenticity, if one may borrow an existentialist term. Since, ultimately, there is no meaning, but Eternal Recurrence, meaningless change, Superman affirms himself and challenges this meaninglessness. It is in such challenge that he finds him own greatness. “My formula for greatness in men,” Nietzsche writes, “is amor fati. And “Superman,”

Nietzsche goes on, “is the meaning of the earth.”7 Just like Wanderer, Superman does not admit other worlds than this world; and just like Wanderer, Superman does not think that the absence of the other world entails the meaninglessness or value of life. Both Wanderer and Superman affirm life and find its meaning. However, the way in which the meaning is found differs. Wanderer finds this meaning in maintaining, or better, in recovering harmony with Nature and with himself, whereas Superman does so in achieving, or better, in experiencing power in perpetual trans- cendance. Wanderer is a man of peace and reconciliation, whereas Superman is a man of conquest and tension, and finds satisfaction in such a tense state. Wanderer is passive, self-effacing and relaxed, while Superman is aggressive, self-affirming and nervous. Wanderer and Superman are not always good company.

How can this difference between two types of man, embodying two values, be explained? This difference reflects two different conceptions of man in his different relation to Nature. The Taoist ideal of man, Wanderer, reflects the conception of man as an integral part of nature, not entirely different from other creatures. Man is not a special creature, which has a divine or metaphysically special status within the chain of Being or within Tao. In fact man is only part of Nature. The Nietzschean ideal type of man reveals the conception of man according to which man has a legitimate right to exercise his power over Nature and over anything insofar as [page 57] he is capable of doing so.

The difference in the conception of man between Lao Tzu and Nietzsche can be characterized in terms of the difference between the humility of the Taoist Wanderer and the arrogance of the Nietzschean Superman. Thus construed, Wanderer is typically oriental in his attitude and temperament as illustrated in the Oriental classics and tradition, whereas Superman is characteristically occidental. Insofar as Wanderer ultimately seeks harmony with and within Nature, his ideal is not so different from either the Confucian ideal or from the Hindu or Buddhist laeals. Insofar as Superman strives for more power, for his perpetual expansion, his ideal is not really different from the Christian ideal, which seeks man’s ultimate answer not in the present and here, but in the future, in an another world of transcendance. This suggests the ideological character of these two conceptions of man and two different conceptions of the value of and in life. Even if both Taoism and the thought of Nietzsche are presented as the two most radical critiques of the two prevailing ideologies of their respective societies and cultures, they are not entirely free from the ideologies they criticized and debunked. It appears that they were also prisoners of their respective societies, and thus remain as ideologies.

Victims of their own culture, which is perhaps the ultimate fate of all thought, Taoism and the philosophy of Nietzsche fascinate us beyond their societal and cultural boundaries, and beyond the confines of narrowly defined academic philosophical circles. The reason is that they are more refreshing and relevant than ever, than any other great thought. Their reflection on language is surprisingly up to date, and their critiques of other ideologies are profound and relevant to us. They teach us to reexamine our beliefs and values; they demand that we reflect once again and constantly upon the true and yet hidden meaning of the ideologies of a given society. And their own ideologies, their new proposals about for what and how we should live, present themselves as two possible alternatives to the old ideologies. And yet, as we have seen, the two proposals are incompatible. How to choose between them? How to choose between Wanderer and Superman, between relaxed Wanderer and combative Superman?

No one can deny the wonders of scientific progress and its astounding benefit to mankind. Often scientific achievement is more than miraculous. And no one would be blind about the fact that science is the product of the West, the achievement of the restless Western drive, embodied in the character of Faust, in the Crucifixion of Jesus, and in Superman. [page 58]

And yet, no one is blind today to either the dangers of scientific technology or of its unlimited application. Overpopulation, pollution, exhaustion of natural resources and possibility of nuclear war with possible annihilation of the human race, as well as other creatures on earth, are some examples of the negative aspect of the product of scientific development. With science man could become the cause of ultimate destruction of himself and other creatures on earth. Man’s restless drive for power, for transcendance, may transform itself into the seed of his own annihilation. Superman could be self-destructive; the value of power could become self-defeating.

Given this diagnosis, perhaps Wanderer appears wiser than Superman; the ideology of Wanderer appears to be the only alternatve to the rest. Without transcendance, without striving for more and more, Wanderer is free, happy and at peace. Why couldn’t wandering be a value in itself, the ultimate value. Perhaps we can find a wiser lesson from Lao Tzu than Nietzsche, regardless of our cultural origin ana background.

**NOTES**

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17. Ibid.