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THE TAOIST CONCEPT OF FREEDOM

Peimin Ni

Freedom has been esteemed as one of the top values for a good life in all civilizations, whether in the East or in the West. But not everyone who uses the term realizes the differences in people's understanding of the term. I want to discuss a concept of freedom that belongs to Taoism (sometimes spelled Daoism), one of the great classical Chinese philosophies founded in around the sixth century B.C. I will first explain the Taoist concept in contrast to the "typical western concept of freedom" and then give a preliminary evaluation of the Taoist concept based on this contrast. The differences in these concepts of freedom exemplify differences in different mentalities, and seeing these differences and their implications will give us insight into the values and the weaknesses (yes, weaknesses!) of each culture.

I

If freedom is generally understood as a state in which one can act according to one's own will without constraint or coercion, then freedom essentially involves two sides—the absence of constraint or coercion, on the one side, and the unconstrained or uncoerced individual on the other. In the West, the term "freedom" is typically taken to mean only the absence of external constraint and coercion; it lacks an evaluation of the individual's specific desires or will. Under this concept, knowledge is needed not for making a different self or will, but only as an instrument for satisfying one's desires, because knowledge may enable one to see more opportunities or alternatives and make the individual more capable of removing constraints. This concept of freedom also includes the power to satisfy one's desires, because lacking the power to do so is a constraint on the will. Thus, an uneducated person can be said not to be free to do some highly skilled job, just as a paralyzed person is not free to move around. In either case, the individual's need to have knowledge or power is purely outward directed, because the only requirement set by this concept of freedom is to clear the external constraints and coercions on the individual's will or desires, and never involves a critical examination of one's own will or desires. This concept of freedom implicitly assumes that the individual needs to be protected and satisfied, rather than regulated or modified. Any modification or regulation of the individual is seen as a limitation on the individual's freedom. When some limitation is necessary for moral or legal reasons, it will be considered a price to pay in exchange for protection of other freedoms, rather than an active means of achieving freedom.

On the other hand, the concept is very critical of the individual's external conditions; it demands that external conditions be favorable for the individual to develop. Those favorable conditions include mainly two aspects: the availability of the

desirable alternatives for the individual to choose from and the availability of information that will enable the individual to make well-informed decisions.

Naturally, this idea of freedom determines the way freedom is achieved. If freedom consists only in an absence of constraints and coercions, then obviously freedom is to be achieved by striving against limitations, removing hindrances, and being protected from external interferences. Its end is to have an enlarged and protected space in which one can move around according to one's own will or desires.

In the Taoist philosophy, we find a strikingly different idea of freedom. The Taoist conceives of freedom from the very opposite direction: instead of focusing on an absence of external constraint or coercion, the Taoist focuses on modifying the self that can be in conflict with external constraints. Instead of being critical of the external environment and requesting the environment to give room to the individual's desires or will, the Taoist requires the individual to be critical of him/herself, and to be in harmony with his/her environment.

This Taoist idea of freedom logically starts from a realization that the constrained and the constraints are mutually dependent; without the constrained, the constraints would not exist as constraints. The founder of the Taoist philosophy Lao Tzu says: "Honor great misfortunes as you honor your own person. Only because you have your own person, you will have great misfortunes. Without a person, how could there be misfortunes?" Furthermore, the kind of misfortunes or constraints one has depends on the kind of individual one is. Limitations vary from one individual to another. As Lao Tzu's great follower, Chuang Tzu, says: "Fish live in water and thrive, but if men tried to live in water they would die." This clearly applies not only to the natural limitations of fish and humans, but to all subject-object relations. An individual's particular desires and ambitions also define particular constraints. Any anticipation or desire will bring a set of constraints. To shop-lifters the video monitors installed in stores are big constraints, but to the rest of us, they are nothing but video monitors. To smokers "No Smoking" signs are constraints, but non-smokers consider them to be protection.

The more one desires or expects, the less one is free, because there are more constraints one has to break in order to have the desires satisfied or expectations fulfilled. We often think that powerful people have more freedom. But that is not always true, for they usually have more desires and ambitions. My two-year-old daughter has never felt short of money, even though she does not have any; but Donald Trump does. That's why Kuo Hsiang, a Chinese philosopher who lived in the third century, wrote in his famous "Commentaries on Chuang Tzu" that the legendary great bird Peng in Chuang Tzu's "Free and Easy Wandering" does not symbolize greater freedom. "Since the wings are large, they are difficult to move. They must mount upon a whirlwind in order to get up, and must get to the highest of ninety thousand *li*, in order to be supported by the air. Since Peng has such wings, how can it suddenly get up and get down at the height of tens of feet?" The allegory of the bird carries implications beyond natural limitations of a high-powered creature. It shows the connection between a self and its constraints. The self is not just something

given by nature; it is also a self-conception. By conceiving ourselves as such and such, we usually make ourselves become such and such, and at the same time, we set our own constraints and limitations. Some people become the victims of their own self-conception. Some refuse education because they believe they are not smart enough to get it; some dare not do certain things because they believe they are not courageous. If they had different self-conceptions, they would have fewer limitations and would become different persons.

From what has been said above, it is logical to infer that the fewer desires or self-conceptions one holds, the fewer constraints one has; and if, taking it to the extreme, one has no expectations and no self-conception at all, there will simply be no constraints. That is not to say that nothing can affect the person or that the person will become omnipotent. It is to say that nothing means a constraint to such a person and there is no self-conception that will hinder the person from developing his or her own potentiality fully.

From this concept of freedom, it follows then that the Taoist way of achieving freedom is to give up the self, to identify the self with the Tao—the great nature—so that the constraints will not apply as such. Chuang Tzu says "the Perfect Man has no self" (Chuang Tzu 26). Chuang Tzu does not mean that the Perfect Man is physically different from any ordinary person; nor is he making any subtle metaphysical assertion, as the Buddhist does. He is not speaking of any stuff that makes up what the Western philosophers would call "personal identity." Neither is he preaching the morality of being unselfish. What he means is that the Perfect Man lives without separating himself from the environment. He sees himself as part of nature rather than as an individual in opposition to the environment. He does not make the distinction between internal and external. "The True Man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back in without a fuss....He received something and took pleasure in it; he forgot about it and handed it back again" (Chuang Tzu 74). To live like that, one must relinquish the "given mind." This is called "the fasting of the mind," "forget[ting] about yourself," "sitting down and forgetting everything," and "losing yourself." It is in "the empty chamber where brightness is born!" (Chuang Tzu 53-4, 56, 87, 31). The Tao has no self—it does not have desires or expectations or any self-conception. That is why the Tao is completely free. Therefore, to identify oneself with the Tao and to have no self are virtually one and the same idea.

It is important to understand that the Taoist is not asking people to live in self-repression. When one lives in self-repression, one feels the repression. The Taoist idea is to forget about the self, leaving nothing to be repressed. Just as when one has no plan to do anything, the person leaves nothing undone; when one has no expectation that must be fulfilled, nothing will disappoint the person. For instance, many years ago, when I was an electrician, I got an electric shock resulting in the loss of a few fingers. I did feel very sad that I was no longer free to do many things that I liked to do, such as play musical instruments, but then I found interesting things to do

which do not require many fingers, such as reading philosophy. The Taoist would say that I freed myself by shifting my interest, not by repressing it.

The Taoist considers the absence of external constraints while holding a self to be unrealistic, and fighting against external constraints to be a way to destroy one's freedom. Lao Tzu says, "Force is followed by loss of strength. This is not the way of Tao. That which goes against the Tao comes to an early end" (Lao Tzu 30). "That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral" (31). "Only if you do not fight, will you have no trouble" (8). "This is known as the Virtue of not striving" (68). "Courage shown in daring will lead to killing. Courage shown in not daring will lead to life....The Tao of heaven does not strive, and yet it overcomes" (73). "[The sage] does not have a self; that is why he can fulfill himself" (7).

The virtue of not striving is also known as the virtue of Wu Wei, literally meaning non-action. It is, firstly, based on an understanding that humans are limited in abilities. "Nothing in the world can manipulate the great Tao," says Lao Tzu (32). If one separates oneself from and puts oneself in opposition to the great Tao, one is bound to fail. "Knowing the eternal is insight. Not knowing the eternal leads to disaster. Those who know the eternal are tolerant" (Lao Tzu 16). Therefore, "do not use the mind to repel the Way; do not use man to help out Heaven" (Chuang Tzu 74). When one knows the eternal laws of nature, one will not expect anything that violates the laws of nature. Thus, as we learn from the book of Chuang Tzu, the Taoist was found beating a tub and singing when his wife died, for he knew there was no use to grieve. One's birth and death are like progression of the seasons (Chuang Tzu 113). It is not that the man did not love his wife. To the Taoist, love does not mean that you must expect to have the beloved one with you forever. His understanding of the eternal freed him from grieving. It did not take away the love. "Dead but not forgotten is longevity" (Lao Tzu 33).

One should avoid taking the Taoist as one who believes that humans cannot affect the universe at all. The Taoist knows well that we do affect the universe; but if we do not follow the Way of nature and try to impose our will against it, we will definitely fail. Though Lao Tzu lived in the sixth century B.C. and was not aware of the degree to which humans affect the universe today, he said something that will probably surprise today's environmentalists: "The universe is sacred. You cannot make it [by human interference]. Those who try to make it will spoil it; those who try to hold it will lose it" (29).

The Taoist applies the non-striving principle to his dealing with the social environment as well. Again, he knows well that one can affect society, but one's ability is limited. When one goes against society or other human beings, one may win a victory or two, but eventually it is better not to strive. Those who strive create opposition and thus expose themselves to danger. "Only if you do not fight, no one can fight against you" (Lao Tzu 22, 66). Lao Tzu praises those who can control themselves: "Those who gain control over others have force. Those who gain control over themselves have [real] strength" (33). That is why the key to freedom in the social environment is still the virtue of not striving, which again requires essentially having no self. Chuang Tzu uses another allegory to illustrate the point: when a boat

hits another, the man in the boat will be blamed. But if the boat is empty or no one is seen, no one is blamed.

Secondly, the virtue of not striving is based on the Taoist view that by identifying oneself with the Tao, one can gain real strength. That is the other part of the philosophical ground of the virtue of not striving--an understanding of the power of naturalness and spontaneity. That is where Taoism is essentially different from some other religious philosophies and from asceticism or quietism. The Taoist's philosophy is not simply letting others take advantage and leaving oneself totally defenseless. Lao Tzu says, "The Tao is forever undefined. Small though it is in the unformed state, nothing can manipulate it...Tao in the world is like rivers flowing home to the sea [Nothing can stop them.]" (32). The Tao has this power because it does things by non-striving (Wu Wei).

This non-striving or Wu Wei does not mean total inactivity. Its meaning is twofold. First, it means that when one has less desire, one has less constraint; when one does not try to do anything, one leaves nothing undone. Second, and more important, it means that one should not do anything that goes against the nature of anything. Things are best done in a natural, spontaneous flow. The story in the book of Chuang Tzu about Cook Ding cutting an ox illustrates this point well. The cook inserts his knife between the joints, rather than cuts or chops on the bones. The cook's practice, which leads him to a high level of freedom, is not cutting against the bones, but rather making himself familiar with the joints, so that he can avoid cutting the bones, while at the same time accomplishing the task of cutting the ox. When the cook can cut an ox most perfectly, his internalized experience allows him to let his spirit go where it will in a spontaneous way, just as a good typist or pianist can reach the keys without having to look at the keyboard and deliberate about which key to hit next. This is still called "Wu Wei," because it is a stage during which the action is more like an event that simply happens than like an action that requires intention and deliberation. The Taoist way of achieving freedom, therefore, requires an understanding of the environment, natural or social, and a following of the nature of everything so that things can be done without any hindrance. Another good example of this is swimming. A good swimmer follows the nature of the water, rather than fights against the water. The water "helps" the swimmer rather than acts as a constraint on the swimmer. In other words, the swimmer finds freedom in the water when he or she is in harmony with the water; the water becomes a condition that empowers the swimmer to swim freely. A person who can be a good "swimmer" in any "water" is what Chuang Tzu meant by the famous passage: "If he had only mounted on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ridden the changes of the six breaths, and thus wandered through the boundless, then what else would he have had to depend on?" (Chuang Tzu 26.)

In summary, to the Taoist, freedom is a state in which there is no line between the self and non-self; it is a state in which the self gains strength from being in harmony with the non-self. The Taoist idea of freedom is therefore not simply dropping the self; it is also enlarging the self. Again, quoting Chuang Tzu, it is to "leap into the

boundless and make it your home" (Chuang Tzu 44), and reach a state in which "the ten thousand things are one with me" (Chuang Tzu 38). When you can "let your mind wander in simplicity, blend your spirit with the vastness, follow along with things the way they are, and make no room for personal views" (Chuang Tzu 91), you will be completely free.

II

As the typical Western concept of freedom can be used as a contrast for illustrating the Taoist concept of freedom, it can also be used as a contrast for evaluating it. A comparison between the Taoist concept of freedom and the typical Western concept of freedom shows that the two are not just different, they are almost opposite. One is outward directed, the other is inward directed. One is uncritical of the self but very critical of the environment; the other is very critical of the self but uncritical of the environment. One demands a larger and larger space for the self to move around; the other demands the self to be completely in harmony with the space around it. In an evaluation of the Taoist concept of freedom, these opposite features become opposite weaknesses and strengths.

For instance, many problems in today's Western society are associated with features of the typical Western conception of freedom. Because we keep striving, demanding the environment to give room for whatever we want, we have endangered the environment, the very space in which we live. Because we have been uncritical of our desires, we have often become the slaves of our own arbitrary goals and inflated appetites. Because we depend so much on various technologies to make our life easier, we have also enlarged the list of "necessities" that we depend on. Because we value victory and accomplishment rather than harmony and the joy of being content, we often find our lives short of something, and we are always busy, rushing around hunting for the next achievement and facing new obstacles and imperfections. These are just a few problems generated in our striving for freedom, and yet these are all problems of having less freedom! The Taoist idea of freedom can contribute to bettering our lives by showing us the virtue of not striving. It can make us aware that our desires are not sacred; we need to critically examine and modify our own desires and expectations and carefully evaluate the possible consequences that we may bring to our natural and social environment. It can also remind us of the joy of being content and in harmony with our surroundings, and enable us to see that the "good" is not necessarily "material," and the "better" is not necessarily "more." When we lose our rigid self-conception, we will be open to the possibilities that we otherwise cannot see, and find our own potentials that we otherwise will not cultivate. We will understand that strength can be found in "non-action," and that imperfection often comes from interference of our own mind, from our anxiety, excessive deliberation and ambition. Peace, harmony and inner strength are indispensable to a good life and a good society. They are more urgently needed than high technology, at least to many people in many parts of the world. The Taoist concept of freedom can play an extremely significant role in solving or reducing many problems in

today's Western society, and in preventing similar problems from occurring in those developing countries which aim at "catching up" with the developed.

While one can benefit from the Taoist concept of freedom, one should also be aware that the Taoist concept is by no means perfect. What the Taoist conception lacks is, in my opinion, exactly what the typical Western conception of freedom can offer: the awareness and the spirit of striving for what one deserves, and the requirement of self-determination.

Let us take a slave as an example. If the Taoist concept of freedom is applied to the slave's situation, one would say that the slave is not free because he has a self that can be constrained. This self is basically the slave's expectations and desires for a better life. One would also say that the slave can set himself free by giving up all his expectations and being content with his situation. The best advice the Taoist philosophy can give to the slave is to learn the art of Wu Wei—to understand the nature of the slavery system and live accordingly, without going against it outwardly before its natural collapse. There is nothing in this philosophy that suggests that the slave deserves basic human rights, and nothing that encourages the slave to actively strive for humane treatment.

A deeper problem in the Taoist conception of freedom is a lack of a demand for self-determination. We can imagine a totalitarian society in which the ruler has brainwashed most of the people so effectively that they have no desires to break the rules, and worse, that they have lost their ability to make any choices. Unknown to the ruler, you are the only one left not brainwashed, and you obviously live under fear and pressure. If the Taoist concept of freedom is applied in this example, we would have to say that all the people except you in that society are just as free as anyone in the United States, if not more, because they don't feel any constraints. You are the only unfree person in that society! The reason you are not free is that you are aware of the situation, and you know there can be better societies. But the Taoist would probably not suggest that you wake up the others; he would, on the contrary, suggest that you forget about yourself, if not voluntarily get your brain also washed like the others. The point is that the Taoist concept of freedom not only contains nothing that suggests humans have the right to make informed choices and have alternatives to choose from, it does not even entail having the ability to make choices. Even though Lao Tzu is as far away from a supporter of a totalitarian state as anyone can be, he said something a totalitarian would be very happy to apply: "Make people have no knowledge and desire, and the intellectuals dare not to act. No act, nothing is then unruly" (3). Chuang Tzu is no different: "Be content with this time and dwell in this order and then neither sorrow nor joy can touch you. In ancient times this was called the 'freeing of the bound'" (81).

If the two concepts are opposite in their weaknesses and strengths (namely, one concept's strengths are the other's weaknesses and vice versa), an ideal concept of freedom should be found in a synthesis of the two. It is as unhealthy to be a nihilist as to be a chauvinist toward one's own idea of freedom and culture in general. We can "rediscover ourselves"—both the value and the weakness of our own

philosophy—from looking at the other side. If it is true that we can find what we need in what the other has, it is equally true that we can find what we should retain by looking at what the other lacks. It is no good for both the East and the West to discard their own cultures simply because they are not perfect, only to find later that we have each fallen into the same trap. Of course, it is no easy task to synthesize the two concepts of freedom, not to mention the cultures they represent in general. This is not a mechanical work in which one can disassemble some defective parts and replace them with better ones. The problems of each concept are so tightly connected with the advantages of the concept that they seem to be two sides of a coin—to eliminate one would mean to lose the other. I do not pretend to know the solution to the dilemma. I believe, however, that, based on active dialogue, with the sincere hope of promoting mutual understanding, we can develop a human wisdom which transcends the wisdoms of the East and the West.

Notes

¹ I say “typical” because while this concept is used most widely and dominantly, some western philosophers understand freedom differently. For example, Montesquieu said that true freedom is not the right to do whatever one wants to do; it is rather the right to do whatever the laws allow one to do. Rousseau and Kant said that to be simply urged by desires is slavery; following the laws set by oneself is true freedom. Hegel believes that true freedom is to embrace necessity within oneself, so that there will be no opposition between the will of the self and the necessity of the reality.

I use the terms “desire” and “will” as if they are interchangeable. Though they are different and philosophers disagree with one another about the differences, I want to ignore the complication, since it does not directly affect the focus of the discussion in this paper.

² Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 13. Further references to this book will be marked “Lao Tzu,” followed by the relevant chapter number(s) in parentheses after the citation. In most cases, I use the translation by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

³ *Chuang Tzu, Basic Writings*, translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964), p. 116. Further references to the book will be marked by “Chuang Tzu,” followed by the relevant page number(s) in parentheses. I sometimes take the liberty of altering the translation slightly.

⁴ *Chuang Tzu, A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang*, by Yulan Fung (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1933) p. 28.

⁵ See the Chapter of “Mountain Woods” in *Chuang Tzu*.

⁶ I borrowed this expression from Stephen Rowe’s forthcoming book, *Rediscovering the West*.