

Aimless Wandering

Chuang Tzu's Chaos Linguistics

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The bait is the means to get the fish where you want it, catch the fish and you forget the bait. The snare is the means to get the rabbit where you want it, catch the rabbit and forget the snare. Words are the means to get the idea where you want it, catch on to the idea and you forget about the words. Where shall I find a man who forgets about words, and have a word with him?

-Chuang Tzu

Does Taoism have a "metaphysics"?

Certainly later Taoism, influenced by Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, developed elaborate cosmology, ontology, theology, teleology, and eschatology - but can these "medieval accretions" be read back into the classic texts, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Chuang Tzu*, or the *Lieh Tzu*?

Well, yes and no. Religious Taoism certainly established such a back-reading. But, as J. Needham pointed out, the Maoists of our century were able to evolve a Marxist reading of Taoism, or at least of the *Tao Te Ching*. No doubt **any** reading of a "spiritual" text may have some validity (since the spirit is by definition indefinable); the *Tao Te Ching* has proved especially malleable.

But Chuang Tzu not only has no metaphysics, he actually condemns and derides metaphysics. Supernaturalism and materialism both appear equally funny to him. His only cosmogonic principle is "chaos". Oddly enough the only philosophical tool he uses is logic - although it is the logic of dream. He makes no mention of divine principle, of the purpose of being, or personal immortality. He is beyond Good and Evil, sneers at ethics, and even makes fun of yoga.

The *Chuang Tzu* must surely be unique amongst all religious scripture for its remarkable ANTI-metaphysics. It qualifies as "revelation" not because it unveils hidden knowledge from "outside" the self - as other scriptures claim to do - but because it transmits a sure way to "spiritual realization", SELF-realization, in this lifetime, in this body, in this daily life. If this way or method can be summed up in one word, one might say *spontaneity*; and if this term were to be "defined", one might mention the phrase *wei wu wei*, "action/non-action".

The universe comes into being spontaneously; as Kuo Hsiang points out, the search for a "lord" (or *agens*) of this creation is an exercise in infinite regress toward emptiness. The Tao is not "God", as some Christian translators still believe. The Tao just *happens*. On the human scale

misery arises solely from the uniquely human ability to fall out of harmony with this Tao - to not be spontaneous.

Chuang Tzu has no interest in why humans are so inept (no concept of "sin"); his only concern is to reverse the process and "return" to the flow. The "return" is an action; the flow itself is not an action but a state - hence the paradox "action/non-action". The concept *wu wei* plays such a central role in Taoism that it survives even in modern religious Taoism as the truth BEHIND all metaphysics and ritual. In the great expiatory and communal rites of cultic Taoism as practiced in Taiwan or Honolulu today, at least one person - the priest - must attain union with the Tao, and must do so by a process of voiding his consciousness of all "deities", all metaphysical principles. As for so-called ancient "philosophical" Taoism, we might say that it has *wu wei* instead of a metaphysics.

Lao Tzu's goal seems to have been the conversion of the Emperor to Taoism, on the assumption that if the rule does nothing (*wu wei*) the empire will run itself spontaneously. Chuang Tzu however shows almost no interest in advising rulers (except to leave him alone!), and his examples of "real humans" are almost always workmen (butchers, cobblers, cooks), or drop-out hermits, or bandits. If Chuang Tzu can be said to advocate a social program - and I'm not sure he does - it certainly has nothing to do with any imperial/bureaucratic/Confucian values or structures. His "program" could be summed up in the phrase AIMLESS WANDERING.

Chuang Tzu is more anarchistic than Lao Tzu - but is he an "anarchist"? I think yes - not because he wants to overthrow the government, but because he believes government impossible; not because he would ever sink so low as to espouse an "ism", but because he sees chaos as the essence of all becoming.

To illustrate this chaos-ontology we could do worse than investigate Chuang Tzu's take on language.

But first let me define a few terms. I call hermetalinguistics the concept that God revealed language and that there exists such a thing as the conveyance of essence through language. This conveyance can be direct (Hebrew and Arabic are languages "spoken" by God) or emanational, as in Neoplatonic linguistics. It can be "hermetic" (or occult, as in Kabbala), or even meta-linguistic (as in religious *glossolalia*, the "charism of tongues") - but in either case it saves language from utter relativity and opacity.

Against this traditional theory of language we moderns have developed a nihilistic linguistics in which words convey nothing of essence and in fact do not really communicate anything except language itself. I trace this current to Nietzsche, to Saussure and his nightmarish experience with the Latin anagrams, and eventually to dada.

A leading exponent of hermetalinguistics today (oddly enough) is Noam Chomsky, who (despite his anarchism) believes that language is somehow wired in, although he substitutes DNA for the Platonic archetypes! Whom might we pick as a leading exponent of nihilistic linguistics? How about William Burroughs? (In his honour we might call it "heavymetalinguistics".) Much as I admire the aesthetics of both schools I can "agree" with neither. I find myself wishing (as a "spiritual anarchist") for some language theory which might "save" language from the charge of mere re-presentationalism and alienation. However, I want a theory without teleological excrescences - no "lord" of language, no categorical imperatives, no determinism, no revelation from "outside" or "above", no genetic coding, no absolute essence. I find it in two places, one "ancient" nicely balanced against one "modern" - Chuang Tzu, and Chaos Theory.

In part our language troubles arise from the absolute quality assigned to the Word in all western hermetalinguistic traditions. Although some western mystics already express distrust of human words, they can never - on pain of heterodoxy - question the integrity or finality of God's Word. All western religious thought is based on a sort of sacred nominalism which goes unquestioned till "heresy" calls it momentarily into debate. "Orthodoxy" crushes the rebellion against the Word in its own ranks, while the war against the Word becomes an underground guerilla campaign carried out primarily within literature, in criticism, and in linguistics - against "religion".

We might learn something useful for our search by looking at a spiritual tradition which begins with a distrust of words and yet still manages to make language perform in a magical way. Taoism supplies us with precisely such a radical tradition. "The Tao which can be spoken is not the Tao," begins Lao Tzu. Why then did he write the book at all? Why not stick to the silence where all language eventually vanishes, right from the start? One might answer that such a project would amount to precisely the sort of refusal to go with the flow which Taoism most despises. Humans talk, so Taoists talk. This answer might suffice - but a much more interesting response is given by Chuang Tzu.

"Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something," Chuang Tzu asserts - but "the only trouble is that what it says is never fixed. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything?" Finally this question must remain unanswered, since Chuang Tzu's uncompromising perspectivalism and linguistic relativism make any categorical attempt to distinguish between "It" and "Other" an act of futility. As the translator (A.C. Graham) points out, for Chuang Tzu "all disputation starts from arbitrary acts of naming". Nevertheless, "saying says something" rather than nothing. Language is at once totally "arbitrary" and yet capable of meaning. Otherwise the Taoist would indeed fall silent.

A writer of the School of Chuang Tzu discusses what he calls "ward and sector words", by which he means the sorting and classifying functions of language. (The metaphor refers to the wards and sectors of the grid-arrangement of Chinese cities; it's worth noting that the very earliest cities, such as Jericho and Catal Huyuk, were laid out on strict grid-lines.) This aspect of language is not "the Way", and at worst can become a "chopping to bits and disputing over alternatives". But it is also not not-the-Way. Some paradoxical stance between saying and not-saying is called for, because "the man who perceives the Way does not pursue [names] to where they vanish or explore the source from which they arise," for "this is the point where discussion stops." "There IS a name," but also "there is NO name."

Chuang Tzu distinguishes three kinds of speech. An appended commentary by one of the original editors of the book asserts that all three kinds are used by Chuang Tzu himself.

First there is *saying from a lodging-place*. Inasmuch as language is arbitrary one may occupy any position or use any definitions to expound the Way. The old editor says Chuang Tzu thought this kind of verbal situationism broadened the scope or "widened the range", i.e. that it could be used to open up ordinary mind to the non-ordinary and meta-verbal Tao. In fact, it works "nine times out of ten," says Chuang Tzu. "*Weighted saying* works seven times out of ten" - this is the aphorism, the statement made on authority, spoken from a position "ahead of others". Both *lodging-place* and *weighted language* would appear to belong to the category of ward-and-sector words. Chuang Tzu's third category clearly interests him the most, since he describes it at the greatest length. He calls it *Spillover saying*, and comments that it "is new everyday. Smooth it out on the whetstone of Heaven. Use it to go by and let the stream find its own channels."

Since language is arbitrary, and the sage knows it, he (or she - for many Taoists were women, including Lao Tzu's legendary teacher) knows that "in saying he says nothing". And yet paradoxically by knowing this and in fact by "*refusing* to say", the sage "says without saying" and "refuses to say without ever failing to say". How can this be?

When Chuang Tzu says that "the myriad things [i.e., the signifieds] are all the seed from which they grow," I assume that "they" refers to words, to signs, and that he does assert some link between the two categories, despite his (paradoxical) counter-assertion that no such connection can be found. The connection cannot be found (expressed in words) because in unlike shapes they abdicate in turn, with ends and starts as in a ring.

That is, "things" themselves are ontologically fluid and protean, unfixed. If you mark a wheel and then spin it, none grasps where to mark the grades, and all becomes a blur. As for this flux-state of sign and signified, call it the Potter's Wheel of Heaven or "the whetstone of Heaven" on which the sage is advised to "smooth out" or polish his speech. Without this understanding, "who could ever keep going for long?" What decent Taoist could ever speak *at all*, much less meaningfully? But because language, by this understanding, becomes "new every day", the sage is finally not stunned or stultified by the arbitrariness and relativity of language, by its *failure*, but is refreshed and revived by its *freedom*.

The most important clue to understanding this teaching about language is in the image "Spillover". Graham says it refers to a vessel which tips over when filled to the brim, then rights itself, like one of those little oriental dolls which are legless and weighted at the bottom, so that they always pop back up when you try to knock them over. These dolls by the way are shaped like gourds and were probably originally made from gourds. The gourd is a symbol of Chaos, "Mr. Hun-T'un", described in the famous final passage of the Inner Chapters. Could the original "Spillover" vessel also have been a gourd, and thus associated in Chuang Tzu's mind with Chaos? In Chinese myth Chaos is not a figure of Evil (as in most western mythology), but is instead full of potential, benevolent if somewhat eerie, the ultimate force and source of all creation. From Chaos comes the "myriad things", like the seeds in a gourd or the chopped-up goodies in a won-ton (*hung-t'un*), or the water in a spillover-vessel which flows out, letting each stream find its own channel, fertilizing the earth, bringing everything into becoming.

The *vessel* could refer to the Sage, who spontaneously "overflows" with illumined words. The words find their meanings (channels) spontaneously, according to the language-state of the listener, the reader. And then spontaneously the Sage pops upright and is filled again, and each day overflows again. A chaotic process - but one from which *meaning* comes into being. Moreover, one can become practiced at this conjuring act, polished, "smooth".

The *vessel* could refer not only to the sage but even more to the *words themselves*. A word, which in itself is arbitrary and meaningless, spontaneously fills up and overflows with meaning. The meaning is not fixed, but it is not mere "blowing breath", nor just a semantic raspberry, *bllllatttt*. The vessel fills up and empties again and again - same vessel, but potentially a new meaning each day. So the word contains *more* meaning than it appears to nominate or denominate. There is something more, something extra in the word. There are words beneath (or upon) the words, which flow out spontaneously and find their channels, their expression, their use in a given situation. "Taoist Poetics".

Thus, beginning with total linguistic relativism, Chuang Tzu ends with a sort of metalinguistics. Spillover words do not ward and sector, they PLAY. They contain more than they contain. Like the famous cleaver which never needs sharpening because the Taoist butcher can pass it

between all tendons and joints, the Spillover word "finds its proper channel". The sage does not become trapped in semantics, does not mistake map for territory, but rather "opens things up to the light of Heaven" by flowing with the words, by playing with the words. Once attuned to this flow, the sage need make no special effort to "illumine", for language DOES IT by itself, spontaneously. Language *spills over*.

Now, recall that when Saussure was studying the Latin anagrams, he found that the key words of the poems spilled over into other words. For example, syllables of character's names were echoed in words describing those characters. At first the founder of modern linguistic considered these anagrams as conscious literary devices. However, little by little it became apparent that such a "reading" would not hold. Saussure began to find anagrammatic spillovers everywhere he looked - not only in ALL Latin poetry, but even in prose. He reached the point where he couldn't tell if he was experiencing a linguistic hallucination or a divine revelation. Anagrams everywhere! Language itself a net of jewels in which every gem reflects all others! He wrote a letter to a respected academic Latinist who had composed Latin odes - poems in which Saussure had detected anagrams. Tell me, he begged, are you the heir to a secret tradition handed down from Classical antiquity - or are you doing it unconsciously? Needless to say, Saussure received no answer. He stopped his research abruptly with a sensation of vertigo, trembling at the abyss of pure nihilism, or pure magic, terrified by the implications of a language beyond language, beyond sign/content, *langue/parole*. He stopped, in short, precisely where Chuang Tzu begins.

Words are like wind and water.

-Chuang Tzu

The invisible/conceptual gourd which activates or circulates spillover language can also be compared with the strange attractor of modern chaos theory. The strange attractor is a real but non-material patterning that exists only in the action it informs. Think for example of a swirl of smoke in the air. Why doesn't the smoke simply dissipate evenly, like a mathematical gas? Why are there patterns in it? Strange attractors are "attracting" the particles of smoke into those vegetal undulations, just as planets are attracted into orbits, or cells are attracted into a lizard's ass to replace a cut-off tail. Strange attractors activate "order out of chaos" (in Ilya Prigogine's phrase). Attractors animate "random" matter into coherent shapes - but in reality the attractor only "exists" IN the material process itself. The attractor can serve not only as a model for morphogenesis but even for evolution itself. Prigogine's "creative evolution" depends neither on the blind "random mutations" of the neo-Darwinians, nor on the entelechy or vitalism of the Creationists. With chaos theory, the "Third Mind" has entered into the equation, Michel Serres' "parasite". One might coin the term "Taoist dialectics" to describe the action of this *tertium quid*, which bears so uncanny a resemblance to the Strange Attractor, the "catastrophe machine". In the yin-yang disc the lozenge of dark contains a seed of light, and vice versa; moreover the areas are not separated by the straight line of Dualism, but rather by the snaky, sinuous, and ambiguous line of dyadic movement. Western dialectics analyzes in order to synthesize, whereas Taoist dialectics begins with synthesis in order to analyze.

If words can be compared to matter (and why not, give their equally dubious ontological status?!) and "grammar" can be compared to the Strange Attractors (patterns which are "real" but only "come into existence" in the presence of words and are only "real" IN the words), then we may also compare Chuang Tzu's Spillover Linguistics with the chaos theory of such mages

as Prigogine and Ralph Abraham, and launch the science (or pseudo-science) of chaos linguistics. This useful fiction will be born under the sign of what Feyerabend calls "anarchist (or dada) epistemology" - a kind of anti-Method already dreamed by Chuang Tzu.

In religious Taoism the deity of automatic or "spirit"-writing, Tzu-Ku-Shen, is also the goddess of the latrine - thus calling up the image of magical language as a kind of caca-phony or defecatory chaos which somehow manages to convey meaning (reminiscent of the paradox known to Information Theory in which "noise" can be "richer" in "information" than certain ordered codes). In time Tzu Ku came to preside over a panoply of Immortals who wielded the magic inkbrush or "flying phoenix" through human mediums. Usually women, as in western spiritualism, these mediums act as amanuensis to the spooks, and have transmitted everything from garbage to canonical scripture. (Mao Shan Taoism was founded in this way, by two mediums channeling a dead woman sage under the influence of hemp incense.) An eleventh-century author named Shen Ku describes the process under the evocative title "Dream Torrent Essays" - a sweeping away of daylight consciousness in a wave of hypnogogia.

A great deal of Taoist scripture, both Canonical and heterodox, has been produced in this way. Some of it is "found", like the tantric Tibetan "treasure"-texts (*terma*), encased in solid rock or living wood, or under water, or in other impossible places. An entire order of Tibetan treasure-finders devotes itself to the lore and discovery of such texts. Some Taoist texts are not composed in human language or writing, but in the "tadpole" or "cloud" script of the spirits. An immense amount of language has spilled over from the Cinnabar Grottos of the Immortals into our world. While vulgar materialists may content themselves with scoffing at the provenance of this huge indigestible heap of writing, we might prefer simply to marvel at the overwhelming superabundance and generosity of reality itself, a plenitude which seems to conspire with us in all our maddest japes. As Nietzsche and Bataille have suggested, the myth of scarcity is merely a means of control through immiseration, whereas the actual nature of the world is one of absolute fullness, indeed over-fullness, spilling over as constant EXCESS. In language, this over-supply of meaning proves too big to be handled by human consciousness; hence the intervention of the spirits, the "muses" and other extra-conscious sources. Taoist writing serves as a monument to the "generosity of being" or the perpetual overflow of the cornucopias Tao. At its most chaotic and ambiguous peak of expression, it "saves" language itself - both from the tyranny of any lord, and from the abyss of aloneness.

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