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West and East, Hasidim and Daoism: An Essay on the Thoughts of Martin Buber

Adam Zheleznyak

The East and West were largely separated in early history, allowing each to develop its own diverse set of ideas and philosophies. For this reason, the commonalities between the beliefs of the East and West are worth exploring as they can lead to unexpected insights about the foundations of human nature. Over time many have underscored, for example, similarities between Judaism and Confucianism. In contrast with this school, the 20th century German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber found that his notion of Judaism, as inspired by the Hasidic movement of two centuries prior, had more in common with Daoist values. Hasidism, like Daoism, is characterized by its mysticism. Beginning and prospering in a politically unstable Poland in the early 18th Century, Hasidism — with its comparatively progressive values and its expansive notion of God — garnered opposition from other Jews. Yet, Hasidism gained many supporters and had an impact on Judaism throughout all of Eastern Europe; it introduced a different, more spiritual form of the religion.¹ The associations between Hasidism and Daoism impacted the philosophical and religious thoughts of Martin Buber, allowing him to develop his own interpretations of what Daoism and Hasidism are, and what should be learned from both.

To place Buber's views in context, this essay will initially focus on more traditional outlooks considering Judaism's relationship with Confucianism

and Daoism. Looking first at Confucianism, a key similarity with Judaism is the importance placed on family relationships. In Confucianism, filial piety is considered the first, primary act towards a life of benevolence — benevolence being one of the most fundamental concepts in Confucianism.² There are two components in the proper practice of Confucian filial piety: as a minimum, material support and care must be given to the parents, and, more importantly, respect and love must be shown to the parents.³ Compare this to the Judaic notion of filial piety: it is ordered in the fifth commandment to honor one's parents, and it is explained in the Talmud that the Torah stipulates both reverence and care for one's parents.⁴ Additionally, both traditions have similarities in the way filial piety should influence practice. Both legislate how long to mourn the death of a parent, the necessity of being critical yet respectful to parents in order to protect their dignity, and the importance of bearing children of one's own.⁵ However, the status of filial piety within these two traditions is fundamentally different. Whereas Confucianism recognizes filial piety as paramount, Jewish tradition considers an individual's relationship with God of even greater value than an individual's relationship with their parents.⁶ Despite this, the similarities in the ways family relationships are valued stand strong. In addition to filial piety, Confucianism and Judaism also share an emphasis on education and tradition.⁷

Historically, many Daoist and Confucianist beliefs have been at odds. It therefore seems logical that, for many of the reasons that Confucianism and Judaism are similar, Daoism and Judaism are dissimilar. A foundational goal of Daoism is to find harmony with nature through Dao, (“the Way”). In this sense, following Dao is to seek illumination by deeply connecting with the world free of regulation or human intervention. As scholar Galia Patt-Shamir from Tel-Aviv University points out, Judaism differs from the Dao because it considers disharmony necessary to the human condition.⁸ For example, the biblical story of the Tower of Babel — where God created diversity in

language to instill disorder and prevent humanity from reaching the divine — demonstrates that traditional Judaism accepts the existence of chaos and the separation from God as steady truths. Another way in which Daoism differs from traditional Judaism is that early Daoism critiqued Confucianism for conforming life according to rigid practice, rather than accepting the natural order.⁹ Biblical and rabbinic Judaism, which regulate how a Jew should pray, relate with others, and live, would be vulnerable to the same criticism. At first glance, Daoism and Judaism are not compatible, especially when considering the stronger connections between Confucianism and traditional Judaism.

And yet Martin Buber considers Daoism and Judaism fundamentally complimentary. This is because Buber's sense of Judaism was shaped by his early exposure to Hasidism. As a child, Buber spent his summers in Bukovina, where his father would sometimes take him to the village of Sadagora. In Sadagora, there was a dynasty of *tzadikim*, or Hasidic rabbis. Buber recalls his realization from meeting a *tzadik* that “the world needs the perfected man and that the perfected man is none other than the true helper... But is [the *tzadik*] not still what he once was imagined and appointed to be: the helper in spirit, the teacher of world-meaning, the conveyor of the divine sparks?”¹⁰ Having realized this “pure idea” as a child, Buber became intrigued with Hasidism and learned more about Hasidic teachings, seeing the *tzadik* as one who “realizes God in the world.”¹¹ The ability to “realize God” contrasts with the separation from God proclaimed in traditional sources of Judaism. Although Hasidic beliefs vary, one of the most defining aspects of Hasidic thought is that religious life begins with a direct connection with God — in practice the *tzadik* acts as the spiritual intermediary to God for the community.¹² This Judaism places spiritualism, rather than law and structure, at the center of religious life. These early experiences provided Buber with an alternative to the rigorous orthodox Judaism into which he had been born.

Sometime after his initial encounter with Hasidism, Buber developed a fascination with Eastern philosophies, most specifically Daoism. Buber's

interest in Daoism began during a time when there was a general German interest in China due to Germany's military occupation there in 1897. In fact, Buber's academic interest in China largely overlapped with his interest in Hasidism.¹³ Buber sought to bring Daoist teachings to the West, writing essays on the teachings of Daoism and providing translations on portions of the *Chuang Tzu*, an early Daoist text.¹⁴ In an early work of his, "The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism," Buber generalized (extremely) the East to be a complex yet unified entity. He contrasted the East's capacity to connect with all of the world to the Western inclination towards objectification.¹⁵ Buber went on to argue that the source of Jewish thought was originally "Oriental" and that the "Jew has remained an Oriental."¹⁶ Even though Buber's views changed over time, this early work of his demonstrates the early influence of Chinese tradition on his thought and foreshadows the connections he later made between Hasidism and Daoism.

So what values do Hasidism and Daoism share? Unlike more traditional Jewish views, a Hasid believes that it is possible to directly commune with God and that God should be connected with in all aspects of daily life. In addition, Hasidism proclaims that God is everywhere and surrounds everyone.¹⁷ Thus, by seeking a connection with God in all moments, a Hasid seeks a connection with the world, just as a Daoist seeks unification with the world by following the *Dao*. There is also the Hasidic value of elevating evil thoughts and inclinations into good energy, not by ignoring or overcoming, but by following the evil urge to its source to transform it.¹⁸ This process of removing negative impulses before they are acted upon relates to the Daoist principle that virtue is achieved through non-action and self-understanding.

And in practice, Hasidism and Daoism also have many similarities. For example, just as Daoism goes against conforming life into rigid routine, Hasidim often ignores the rules governing the times for prayer, such as performing afternoon prayers in the night time. This is because Hasidim believe worship should be a part of one's life in all moments, and so it is a

Hasidic value to be spontaneous in prayer.¹⁹ Sometimes, Hasidim partake in meditation — an important practice in Daoism — before prayer to prepare themselves for a connection with God.²⁰ Additionally, Hasidim have the responsibility to provide all worldly needs to the *tzadik* and his family so that he can focus on his spiritual connection with God.²¹ Although material support is still a necessity, Hasidism and Daoism both consider material needs a distant afterthought to spiritual connection. Contrast this principle to traditional Judaism and Confucianism in which many values highlight the material side of life.

Despite these similarities, Daoism and Hasidism still have a fundamental difference comparable to the fundamental difference between Confucian and Jewish filial piety. In Hasidism, all of the world is divine because God inhabits all, and thus the value of connecting with the world is to connect with God. According to Daoism, in contrast, the world is worth connecting and unifying with because it is simply its nature to be unified. Even though this difference is largely abstract, it hints at a key contrast in the source of Hasidic and Daoist beliefs. This makes sense because Hasidism is a religious orientation, albeit a non-traditional one, and Daoism is a philosophical disposition. However, Hasidism and Daoism share similarities on many levels, connections that would influence Buber's thoughts.

One of Buber's most seminal ideas, the *I-Thou* and *I-It* relations, has Hasidic and Daoist influences. *I-It* — subject to object — represents the attitude man takes towards some thing, typically only going as far as to “perceive,” “imagine,” or “will” that thing.²² *I-Thou* — subject to subject — is not bounded like *I-It*: instead of merely experiencing something, *I-Thou* “establishes the world of relation.”²³ Each attitude uses the word *I*, but the *I* in each differ because *I-It* only requires part of oneself while *I-Thou* entails the “whole being” — there are two modes of man.²⁴ The conceptions of *I-Thou* and *I-It* seem to directly follow from the ideas Buber translated and explored from Daoism's Chuang Tzu. The Chuang Tzu criticizes the method

of forcing order onto nature with social rules, and it suggests that man loses spontaneity — a value also in Hasidic prayer — when he acts only towards utilitarian purpose.²⁵ According to Buber, *I-It* is the attitude man uses when acting for a purpose and, as in the Chuang Tzu, Buber suggests that one should seek to relate with the world rather than use it: *I-Thou*. The Chuang Tzu also condemns the desire of man to control everything; this criticism is characteristic of the teaching of *wei wuwei*, or non-action, a lesson that influenced Buber's worldview later in his life.²⁶ Hints of *wei wuwei* are found in Buber's work on *I-Thou* because, according to Buber, trying to "will" or force upon an object forces man into an *I-It* mindset as opposed to a "genuine" *I-Thou* relation.²⁷ Just as *wei wuwei* calls for undivided action, *I-Thou* calls for a unification with the world.²⁸ In this way, there are clear connections between Daoism, Hasidism, and Buber's work.

On many levels, Buber's work and sense of Judaism was impacted by how he viewed the philosophies of Daoism and Hasidism. For example, ideas from Daoism affected the interpretations Buber made of Hasidic tales. In *The Way of Man*, Buber explains the significance of a Hasidic story where a *tzadik* and officer have a conversation in a St. Petersburg jail. The officer asks the rabbi how one could understand what God meant when asking Adam "Where art thou?" To this, the *tzadik* tells the officer "in every era, God calls to every man: 'Where are you in the world?'"²⁹ Buber explains that this story is a call for man to find his "particular" way and only by understanding himself can God be reached.³⁰ This explanation of the Hasidic tale is reminiscent of the Chuang Tzu, which proclaims the belief that all things have a deep uniqueness.³¹ Analogous to Daoist principles, Buber found deep meaning in the Hasidic value of helping a man find his way, leading Buber to emphasize that the calling out of God is a confirmation that each man is unique.

Buber also took the Daoist idea of unification into his view of Judaism and Hasidism to emphasize the importance of a Jew's earthly actions. Comparing Judaism to other religions which "do not regard our sojourn on

earth as true life,” Buber believed that “Judaism, on the contrary, teaches what a man does now and here with holy intent is no less important, no less true ... than the life in the world to come. This doctrine has found its fullest expression in Hasidism.”³² Buber went on to write that “Man was created for the purpose of unifying the two worlds. He contributes towards this unity by holy living ... at the place in which he stands.”³³ This rendition on the purpose of Jewish living is quite beautiful, but it is not a universal sentiment: Jewish scriptures often promote that there is a necessary separation between man and the divine. For example, in the story of the Tower of Babel, God foiled man’s plan to reach the heavens – thus connecting earthly man with the divine – by dividing all peoples into mutually incomprehensible languages.³⁴ Buber likely emphasized the Hasidic principle of connecting the divine and the earthly so strongly because it resonates with Daoist ideals. Specifically, the Daoist value of understanding the world in its simple entirety influenced Buber’s understanding of Hasidism. For example, Buber found that in Hasidism “real transformation, real restoration ... can only be achieved by the comprehension of the whole as a whole.”³⁵ And, just as discovering and accepting oneself is the Dao, Buber believed Hasidism asserts that the never ending path towards the “unification of the soul” is about “overcoming contradiction with effortless ease.”³⁶ With the phrase “effortless ease,” Buber even utilizes the Daoist imagery of passivity and signifies calmness as a value in Hasidism.

His study of Daoist ideas did not only expand Buber’s sense of Judaism and Hasidism, but Daoism also affected Buber’s view of the overall world and what it needs. The Daoist concept of non-action, *wei wuwei*, in addition to impacting his conception of *I-Thou*, gave Buber a means to describe what was wrong with the direction society was going and what needed to change. Buber often criticized the mass industrialization happening in his lifetime. In an attempt to explain what the West can learn from Chinese values, Buber wrote his essay “China and Us” in 1928. Buber writes about the West’s role in industrialization:

It is this burden that the West is called upon to master. Upon the real mastering of it depends whether this epoch will fulfill its meaning or not. Stripping off this burden and going back behind all this industrialization and technicizing and mechanizing, we would no longer proceed on the way at all; we would, in general, no longer have a way.³⁷

Buber saw the rapid emphasis of technology as a philosophical problem that needed to be resolved in the world. So what was Buber's solution? Buber explicitly determined that there is nothing to be learned from Confucian culture.³⁸ Instead, he proposed that Western society adopt the Daoist teaching of *wei wuwei* to gain a "powerful" "existence" of "action without doing."³⁹

Buber also cited *wei wuwei* as something Jews should learn in response to the violence of Zionism. As a student in his twenties, Buber joined the rising Zionist movement. However, he soon found that his sense of Zionism differed from the typical: instead of being purely political, his Zionism was cultural and spiritual.⁴⁰ Settling in Palestine in 1938, Buber found that his home in what would later become Israel was not as peaceful as he believed it should be. In response, he criticized the nationalism and violence of the Zionist movement. He believed that the work of Jews should benefit both Jewish and Arab peoples and that, instead of ruling obstructively and with violence, the Zionist movement should look towards the Daoist virtue of ruling with non-action, unifying all peoples.⁴¹ Thus, Daoism helped define Buber's beliefs of the Zionist movement and his place in a growing Jewish society.

As with Daoism, Buber's impression of the Hasidic movement impacted his view of Judaism's place in the world. Prefacing his book *Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, Buber wrote a foreword in the spring of 1959 describing the importance he sees in learning from Hasidism.

I consider the truth of Hasidism vitally important for Jews, Christians, and other men, and at this particular hour more important than ever before. For now is the hour when we are in danger of forgetting for what purpose we are on earth, and I know of no other teaching that

reminds us of this so forcibly.⁴²

What made Buber think this “particular hour” is a moment “more important than ever before?” Likely, it had to do with the recently created state of Israel and its conflict with Palestine and others. Buber might have also been thinking about the other hostilities in the world such as the Cold War. In his foreword, Buber calls on Jews and all other men to get the world back in the right direction by looking towards the principles of Hasidism: to observe and overcome self-contradiction; to calmly elevate the bad into good; and to unify what one personally considers divine into the everyday actions of life.

The ideological connections Martin Buber found between Hasidism and Daoism are remarkable when considering how separate these ideologies were in history. Just as Daoism grew to become a tradition divergent from Confucianism, Hasidism arose to be a new interpretation of Judaism in the face of previous traditions. In Hasidism, where many historians only found superstition, Buber found meaning and connection. Through the unification of these philosophies, Buber has shown the world that even between what some would consider the most diverging of cultures, there is still a deep, meaningful relationship to be found. Two quotes, the first in Buber’s words and the second in the words of the Chuang Tzu, translated by Buber, aim to coalesce the main goals of Hasidism and Daoism. In Buber’s words, about Hasidism:

Man cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human; he can approach Him through becoming human. To become human is what he, this individual man, has been created for.⁴³

And about Daoism, from Buber’s translation of the Chuang Tzu:

He who knows of the Heavenly, who knows of the human, has reached the goal. Knowing of the Heavenly, he knows whence he came. Knowing of the human, he rests in the knowledge of the known, he waits for the knowledge of the unknown. To complete

the allotted life, not to perish along the way, this is the fullness of knowledge.⁴⁴

Both Hasidism and Daoism believe in the human, that simply to live life knowing oneself and one's place is enough — enough to find meaning and enough to find the divine in the day-to-day. In fact, one's divine “goal” or “purpose,” according to Buber's Hasidism and to the Chuang Tzu, is to achieve this expansive notion of self. Though separated by place and by time, Hasidism and Daoism both converge on this ideal, revealing a deeper universal desire to find the inherent meaning that underlies a human life.

Adam Zheleznyak is a freshman from the Bay Area majoring in mathematics. Keep your challah away from him, as there is nothing stopping him from eating the whole thing.

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