

Kant and Daoism on Nothingness

If we wanted to construct a caricature depicting the difference between Western and Eastern philosophy, we might say that what characterizes Western philosophy, in contrast to its Eastern counterpart, is a forgetfulness of original nothingness.¹ By “original nothingness” I do not mean a negated proposition or a lack of quantity, but a placeholder for an active yet indeterminate principle that cannot be expressed in terms of being but transcends, or, if one does not like the language of transcendence, underlies our determinate world.

In Western thought this kind of original nothingness has been seen with suspicion ever since Parmenides argued that it is impossible to speak of what is not. Since original nothingness is simply no-thing, since it lacks any determination or, as modern language philosophy would tell us, is an “empty concept” resulting from an unwarranted substantiation of the grammatical particle “no,” we should, the claim goes, better drop it from our list of philosophically interesting concepts. Rather than creating pseudo problems, we should confine ourselves to the legitimate use of negation and not postulate the existence of something that, by definition, is a no-thing.

In many East-Asian philosophical traditions, on the other hand, the concept of original nothingness has always enjoyed prominence and the paradoxes it gave rise to have been interpreted as productive paradoxes.² The Buddhist conception of Nirvana as the ultimate freedom from craving and suffering, the Daoist emphasis on the originally name- and form-less *tao* which we will examine more closely, or the Kyoto school with its emphasis on absolute nothingness are just some representative examples that readily come to mind.

Despite its totalizing and simplifying tendency, there is some truth in this caricature of a West-East divide centered on the respective oblivion and valuation of original nothingness. Western metaphysics has always preferred to inquire into the nature of Being instead of Nothingness. In spite of Heidegger’s insertion that the *Seinsfrage* has been forgotten, in Western metaphysics from its inception with the Pre-Socratics, Being has enjoyed prominence over nothingness. In his *De rerum originatione radicali*, Leibniz raises the ultimate question of ontocentric Western metaphysics “*quod aliquid potius existit quam nihil?*” This question, which is usually translated as “why is there something rather than nothing?,” inquires into the meaning of existence

¹ For such an attempt cf. Ludger Luetkehaus’s *Nichts* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 2003). Gi-Ming Shien defends the opposite thesis by arguing that “the full development of metaphysics both in ancient Chinese Taoism and in Greek philosophy culminates in nothingness.” “Being and Nothingness in Greek and Ancient Chinese Philosophy,” in: *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Jul., 1951), pp. 16-24.

² The idea that there are productive paradoxes in Asian philosophy is too often dismissed or simply ignored by analytic interpreters. Cf. for example Chad Hansen who claims that “if you concentrate on *wu*, you will be quickly dazed by philosophical puzzlement.” *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought. A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 221.

in general. It aims at a justification of the existence of Being as such. Eastern philosophies, on the contrary, pursued the question “why is there nothing in spite of everything and how can this nothing influence our behavior?”

Metaphysics in its Western and Eastern expressions aims at the unconditioned. Without the assumption of an ultimate unconditional ground that brings about everything, the world and our cognition of it would lack its determining basis. Because the principle of sufficient reason states that everything must have a determining cause, it would have to be renamed as the principle of the insufficient or infinite chain of reasons if we dismissed the existence of an unconditioned ground that is the condition for everything else. This ground, whether it is thought of as Being or Nothing, however, cannot itself be determined and formed, if we assume that everything formed must have been formed by something else.

Kant’s position within the ontocentric history of Western metaphysics is not just that of a revolutionary but also that of an outsider that could provide for a bridge between West and East. From his astonishing early “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Quantities into the Wisdom of the World” (1763), he revealed an uncommon interest in limiting the role of Being and taking nothingness in the form of negative qualities seriously. In subtractions for example we see that even the zero has something positive. At least nothing positive can be taken from it. Even zero minus zero remains zero.

At the central transition before the Transcendental Dialectic that was to become essential for Hegel’s discussion of nothingness in his *Logic*, Kant distinguishes four kinds of nothings ranging from empty concepts (*ens rationis*) through empty objects of concepts (*nihil negativum*) and empty objects without concepts (*nihil negativum*) to empty intuitions without object (*ens imaginarium*). Although he does not explicitly raise the possibility of original nothingness – nothingness beyond the concept-object ontology -, he strives to develop a concept of illusory objects, which are not mere negations or privations pointing to a lack, but have a positive role as in the case of metaphysical ideas to which I will return shortly.

It would of course be crazy to assume that Kant’s Copernican Revolution that replaces metaphysics and ontology with nihilology was due to Asian influences. Kant did not study Chinese sources first or even second hand.³ According to J.J. Clarke, Kant was “venturing little beyond common stereotypes when he referred to ‘the monster system’ of Laozi who, according to Kant, taught that nothingness was the highest good and who advocated a kind of perpetual tranquility in which all

³ It has commonly been assumed that Kant simply accepted the stereotypes of his day. Although there was an increasing interest in Chinese philosophy from the days that the first accounts by Jesuits arrived on European shores, there was also a deep suspicion against the superstition that was attributed in particular to Daoism. Voltaire and Leibniz turned to China with an interest in the secular and rationalist nature of Confucianism. Leibniz corresponded with his Jesuit friend Joachim Vovet out of a deep interest and respect for Confucian philosophy. He believed that in China one could rediscover a lost knowledge about a universal language that could bridge the warring religious and political factions of Europe.

distinctions are annihilated.”⁴ Clarke, just as Ching, Oxtoby as well as Glasenappe before him, is convinced that Kant did not reveal the slightest interest in what he considered mystic Asian thought. However, the apparent lack of sympathy or genuine interest that these remarks reveal stand in sharp contrast to some of the features of Kant’s transcendental idealism and the role of nothingness within it. One could say that Kant’s attempt to limit traditional metaphysics’ obsession with its insistence on an ontology of ultimate beings stands half way between the traditions.

My concern in this presentation is thus not to trace a line of influence – which is not supported by the sources – but rather to point to parallel sensitivities which are developed in a different philosophical register. The obvious differences are not only understandable due to cultural backgrounds, but also due to the two and a half thousand years separating these thinkers and traditions. Daoism was operating within a paradigm guided by the assumption of cosmic harmony while Kant was deeply influenced by the achievements of modern natural sciences that start from individual cases and aim at universalizability. If my comparison of Kant and Daoism with regard to original nothingness nevertheless emphasizes similarities rather than differences, it is because I hope to narrow the gap between two specific episodes of Western and Eastern metaphysics rather than opting for the fashionable assumption of unbridgeable incommensurability.⁵

What does the shared sensitivity between Kant and Daoism consist in? I want to argue that it can be summarized by the following three interconnected theses: 1. It is in the nature of human reason to search for the unconditioned. 2. This unconditioned cannot be conceived of in dogmatic metaphysical terms as something existing but is a hypothetical non-entity. 3. The insight into the illusory nature of claims to knowledge concerning the unconditioned does not lead to epistemic despair but harbors ethical consequences.

I will provide support for these theses by first focusing on Kant’s critique of dogmatic metaphysics to then, in a second step, compare what Vaihinger calls Kant’s “philosophy of the as if” to the conception of nothingness we find in Daoism. Finally I will argue that in both Daoism and transcendental idealism we witness a parallel transition from a metaphysics of non-existence to an ethics of regulative principles.

While the nature of the transition from metaphysical questions to ethical consequences is much more apparent in Chinese philosophy - which is why many commentators just see Chinese metaphysics as an appendix or prelude to its main concern in ethics - it is also present in the transition from theoretical to practical reason in Kant. But let’s first go one step back and call to mind Kant’s original starting point.

⁴ J.J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West. Western Transformations of Taoist Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 41. Cf. also Luetkehaus, *Nichts*, p. 719.

⁵ The incommensurability assumption is developed for example by David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames in their coauthored books *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), and *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

I. Kant, the metaphysical need, and the “as if”

Kant famously prefaces the A version of the *Critique of Pure Reason* by claiming that human reason is burdened by metaphysical questions it cannot dismiss since they spring from human nature, but which it also cannot answer, because they transcend its capacities. Metaphysics as the science aiming at ultimate foundations is a necessary aspiration of human reason, while reason can only create the illusion of providing answers about such ultimate questions.

Human reason thus tragically searches for an unconditioned conditioning ground, which it can never know of, at least if “know” is understood as a theoretical activity here. This ground, which Kant refers to as *Ding an sich* or *noumenon*,⁶ is nothing for us, because in itself, it remains elusive for beings equipped with forms of intuition and a set of categorical modes of structuring our perception of the world that makes it impossible to experience the formless conditioning ground underlying our experience *qua* being formless. Not only do we not know about the nature of *noumena*; no relation - even that of causation - between the *noumenal* world and the phenomenal world can be formulated, since all such relations would be irreducibly linked to categories and principles, and these have no validity beyond the world of phenomena. Referring to the *noumena* as ultimate reality underlying our experience is already an ambiguous way of speaking, since it assumes ontological hierarchies and the categories such as unity and existence, which are reserved to structure the phenomenal world. Therefore, in the strictest sense of the word, things in themselves are the unconditioned non-beings about which we cannot say anything. Their only known property is that they are unknown to us. That Kant nevertheless speaks of such things - or of such a “thing,” since the ascription of quantities also belongs to the phenomenal world - is due to an ambiguity in the set-up of his project, an ambiguity which many commentators starting with his first interpreters have tried to dissolve with varying degrees of success, usually by denying things in themselves an independent ontological status.

I would like to make a suggestion to preserve and perhaps justify the apparent ambiguity behind things in themselves talk. That we speak about this reality even if in ambiguous or even self-contradictory terms is due to Kant’s often overlooked assumption that philosophy may engage in making hypothetical assumptions which do not need to be cashed out in terms of knowledge claims. Hans Vaihinger’s *Philosophy of “As-If”* was the first systematic attempt to point to this essential feature not only of Kant’s philosophy, but human forms of cognition in general.⁷ Kant’s most

⁶ For the purpose of this presentation I treat Kant’s thing in itself and the noumena as coextensive concepts, an assumption that Stephen Palmquist and others have rejected. It is my contention that the “as if” hypothesis that I will develop is a third alternative to the problematic “two worlds” interpretation of Kant and the more recent deflationary interpretations that try to dismiss the transcendental metaphysical baggage as unnecessary to understand Kant’s epistemic and moral insights.

⁷ Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als-Ob* (Berlin: Reuter and Reichard, 1911). English translation by C. K. Ogden, *The Philosophy of “As-If”* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924). Cf. also Eva Schaper’s original attempt to apply Vaihinger’s thesis to the thing-in-itself problematic: “The Kantian Thing-in-Itself as a

explicit statement of his “as-if” approach is to be found in his hypothesis of the Copernican Revolution: consider the world *as if* it were what appears to us; and consider the *noumenal* as if it were that which underlies such appearance about which we cannot know anything.

The same “as if” model that allows Kant to distinguish between an unknown *noumenal* and a known phenomenal world reappears in Kant’s treatment of metaphysical ideas God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul. The transcendental dialectic dealing with these ideas is an attempt to warn us against the Scylla of assuming that we can know (or disprove the existence of) the unconditioned and the Charybdis that we could dismiss the very question about its nature as meaningless. Dogmatic metaphysics assumed that things that cannot be proven are valueless. Kant’s philosophy of the “as if” allows us to admit that there are features of reality about which we do not have any knowledge and which cannot be proven, but which still turn out to be valuable, even necessary when conducting our lives.

II. Daoism on Nothingness

There are striking parallels between Kant’s account of *noumenal* reality as an existence whose only predicate is that it does not have any predicate, which condemns it to unrecognizability, and the conception of nothingness in Daoism. Daoism can be said to be centered around the idea of nothingness or “*wu*.” In the tradition of Chinese Daoism it is the nameless *tao* that gives rise to the *tao* that is structured by the complementary principles of yin and yang. The determinacy of a formed world arises through the generation of the principles, a distinction created by the “Great Ultimate,” which ultimately derives from the Ultimate, which Laozi and his followers characterize as Non-Being or Nothingness. When thinking of the structure of the two principles yin and yang where yin is the passive, female force and yang the active, male one, it is structurally analogous to Kant’s two stems of cognition, the receptive sensibility, on the one, and the active synthesizing understanding, on the other hand.

Even the word “*tao*” itself has often been translated as “nothingness” based on statements such as “it is not the *tao* that is effable.” Laozi presents *tao* not as a concrete object that could be seen or touched, but as the conditioning ground that underlies the world of touch, sight, smell and, most essentially in our context, cognizability. It speaks of something of which it claims it cannot speak.

In the text, Laozi uses nothingness to explain the generation of existence: “all phenomena are derived from existence, and existence from ‘Nothingness’.”⁸ However, he also uses it as a principle that provides for a sense of perfection when he says, “what things in existence are beneficial, it is because ‘Nothingness’ is applied to it.”⁹ Nothingness is the underlying and perfecting principle, which cannot be thought because all thought applies finite categories to the structurally infinite original nothingness. Robert Neville has convincingly argued that nothingness should not be

Philosophical Fiction,” in: *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 64, History of Philosophy Number (Jul., 1966), pp. 233-243.

⁸ Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, chapter 40.

⁹ Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, chapter 20.

understood as a cosmological principle of origin but rather ontologically – or rather nihilologically - as the ground that underlies our experience and is also more fundamental than time and space.¹⁰

Starting with Zhuangzi, nothingness is understood increasingly as an inner subjective principle. It explains intuition and spontaneity, which is generated from a source, which remains below the threshold of consciousness. It is original nonbeing that invites us to be creative.

Zhuangzi suggested to look at our world from the perspective of what Chad Hansen dubbed “skeptical rather than dogmatic transcendence.”¹¹ Skeptical transcendence allows one to see the world as contingent manifestations emanating from an original nothingness. Daoism thus looks at the world “as if” it could be different, not because it knows what this different world would or should be, but because it knows that what is is founded on nothingness.

III. From the metaphysics of nothingness to the ethics of the “as if”

We might think that the dilemma of conceiving of an entity as if it were nothing would lead to theoretical despair. In the case of Kant and Daoism, however, we witness the opposite. After the limitations they reached in their metaphysical investigations due to the impossibility of claiming knowledge about a determinate conditioning ground, they consider a productive notion of nothingness in practical terms. After the task of establishing a metaphysics of being failed, they attempt to reinstitute the hypothetical “as if” existence, or, in the case of Zhuangzi, non-existence of an unconditioned in the practical realm. The ethics of the as if thus replaces metaphysics as first philosophy.

In Kant’s case, the metaphysical ideas, which cannot be proved or disproved, are justified for the purpose of action as regulative ideas. As regulative ideas they become the preconditions to engage in meaningful moral action. While nothing allows us to conclude theoretically that there is freedom, as judging and acting beings we find ourselves in a world in which we cannot but imagine us as if we were free and thus responsible for our choices and actions. Justifying moral choices and actions is categorically distinct from explaining the structure of the world.

In the case of Daoism we live spontaneously as if the nothingness were guiding us although it is not doing so consciously. The sage is said to derive from the insight into nothingness a non-interference or non-action (*wu-wei*).

It is well known that Daoism’s ethical thinking is not at all in line with Kantian moral philosophy. There is no time to spell out the differences in any detail here. While the former stresses harmony between the principles of yin and yang, the categorical imperative defines morality as acting out of active duty alone rather than out of passive inclination. While Kant emphasizes the primacy of reason, Daoism supports

¹⁰ Robert Neville: “From nothing to being: The notion of creation in Chinese and Western thought,” in: *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Jan., 1980), pp. 21-34.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 222.

the independent claims of human intuition and the body. While the spirit of Daoist ethical theory is negative in emphasizing emptiness and not talking, deontology is indifferent to specific values and focuses on the procedure to generate universalizable maxims.

However, apart from these obvious differences, due to their parallel starting point of sharing a deep skepticism about the traditional metaphysics of claiming to know about the existence of transcendent entities, both Kant and Daoism share an emphasis on freedom. Freedom can only be imagined in a world in which original nothingness allows for creativity rather than a transcendent God or other being. While Daoist spontaneity is of course not the same as Kantian autonomy, both are premised on the assumption that it is us rather than our societies and even our own history of values that determine what is right and wrong as if we were free of these societies and values. Nothing in our nature or socialization is right *ipso facto* and immune from critique, and it might even be the case that the values of an entire community are wrong.¹² When we want to know what the right thing to do is, we should step back from our own private interest and universalize, i.e. raise the question about the significance of our actions or non-actions for the community.

While acknowledging the regulative character of the principles guiding moral actions, Kant smuggles in the assumption of existence through the backdoor by assuming that there is a quasi-metaphysical fact of reason (*Faktum der Vernunft*), whereas Daoism acknowledges such transcendent facts as mere illusions. It is here where a fruitful future dialogue between Kantian and Daoist ethics could be imagined.

To sum up, then, we have seen that both Kant and Daoism criticize a metaphysics that starts from the concept of Being. Daoism assumes that what underlies our world is nothingness while Kant postulates the hypothetical existence of things in themselves which are, for creatures like us, non-beings equal to x or zero in that they are prior to our modes of structuring the phenomenal world. Both Kant and Daoism thus replace the primacy of a metaphysics of Being with an ethics of the as if. Kant cultivated the assumption of the “as if” in practical terms to secure the possibility of moral action. Daoism developed an ethics of nothingness and spontaneity that raises the possibility “as if not.” Both Kant and Daoism thus converge in their insight into metaphysical indeterminacy and the resulting assumption of human freedom as the precondition of moral action.

¹² Here I am following Chad Hansen’s “Metaphysical and Moral Transcendence,” in Bo Mou (ed.): *Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions* (Peru: Open Court, 2001), pp. 197-228.