

Who is the more Pragmatic Daoist – Laozi or Zhuangzi?

In recent years, a philosophical position that was introduced in the late nineteenth century – known as pragmatism – has again become the *vogue*. In the world of academic philosophy, thinkers such as Richard Bernstein, James Conant, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty have brought it back into the mainstream of American thought. In the popular media, the word has been used with increasing frequency, especially in reference to President Barack Obama (albeit in a sense at which many professional philosophers might balk). Simply put, pragmatism has become a buzz word, and this rise in its popularity may help explain yet another increase – *viz.* in the number of philosophers outside of the United States, and from disparate schools of thought, who are being labeled “pragmatic” in recent scholarship.

The area of philosophy which focuses on east-west comparison has seen such an increase, as well. Respected professionals like Roger Ames, Richard Shusterman, and Chad Hansen (among others) have given well researched and reasonable accounts of how various Chinese philosophies resonate with pragmatic themes. Interestingly, much of this work tends to focus on the Confucian tradition more than the school of thought known as Daoism. In what follows, I should like to offer a heuristic for this type of (admittedly anachronistic) consideration within the philosophies of the two most prominent daoist sages – Laozi and Zhuangzi.

When applying the term pragmatism to thinkers who, like Laozi and Zhuangzi, are far removed from it in time and space, it is vitally important to make clear what is meant by ‘pragmatism.’ Like any “-ism,” pragmatism has been so overused that it has been rendered nearly vacuous in contemporary discourse. Pragmatism has traversed a

rougher road than most, though, as it has been used, on occasion, to identify seemingly contradictory positions.¹ Moreover, in public consciousness, pragmatism has taken on a separate, non-technical meaning that is almost completely antithetical to its technical uses. Clearly, pragmatism seems to resist attempts at succinct definition, however, one angle of attack might be a delineation of the features that set pragmatism apart from other schools of thought. Thus, before turning our attention to which Daoist should be considered more pragmatic, some clean-up work is in order.

Pragmatism grew up in a tumultuous time in American history, when thinkers were grasping at theoretical straws, hoping to find a way to make sense of the political and intellectual turmoil. It is often referred to as the only school of thought native to American soil. The commonly told story names Cambridge as its birthplace, where a group of young Harvard intellectuals (including C.S. Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and William James) met to discuss philosophy and science. Peirce is credited with coining the term pragmatism, Holmes with applying it to the law, James with popularizing its philosophical tenets and John Dewey – a student of Peirce and correspondent of James – with correcting many of its initial shortcomings. But, this account is simplistic and somewhat inaccurate, as pragmatism did not arise *ex nihilo* (springing up out of the ground) but instead brought together aspects of many other schools of thought, many of them just as “American” in origin.

Hilary Putnam, for one, has argued that pragmatism can be distinguished by four basic theses: 1) antiskepticism, 2) fallibilism, 3) distrust of the fact/value distinction, and

¹ Cf. the uses of pragmatism by contemporary thinkers like Richard Rorty and Susan Haack, or A.O. Lovejoy’s famous polemic of “The Thirteen Pragmatisms”

4) an assertion that “practice is primary in philosophy.”² Yet, it should be noted that pragmatism shares an emphasis on philosophical practicality with one of its precursors, transcendentalism, which came into its own with Emerson’s 1836 essay “Nature.” This fact has sometimes been overlooked in the literature but is significant nonetheless because transcendentalism laid the groundwork for pragmatism in several ways. With the appearance of Emerson’s Phi Beta Kappa Address entitled “The American Scholar,” transcendentalism made the first declaration of American intellectual independence. Many of the transcendentalists – most notably Thoreau and Margaret Fuller – published tracts on social and political issues of the day in addition to their philosophical offerings. Perhaps most importantly, the transcendentalists had a strong influence on the childhood of both Peirce and James, whose fathers were active in the social circles of the transcendentalist movement. Pragmatism also shares its antiscepticism and mistrust of the fact/value distinction with another American movement known as naturalism. While many pragmatists adopted some form of naturalist sentiments, the two lines of thought remain distinguishable. Naturalism, as the term was used during that time, was primarily an ontological view, whereas pragmatism was seen as more of an epistemological position. Historically, there have been self-identified naturalists who were not pragmatists (George Santayana) just as there have been pragmatists who did not subscribe to naturalism (Josiah Royce).

Thus, the only one of Putnam’s four theses that might be unique to pragmatism is its fallibilism, and though it certainly is a feature of other philosophies, pragmatism offers perhaps the only systematic treatment of the idea – *viz.* Peirce’s notion of inquiry, which

² Putnam, Hilary. “Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity.” In *Words and Life*. Ed. by J. Conant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) pg. 152

was later expounded upon by Dewey. In a nutshell, their view drew heavily upon philosophical realizations about the scientific method. As Peirce put it, “In sciences in which men come to agreement, when a theory has been broached it is considered to be on probation until this agreement is reached.”³ Dewey echoed this sentiment, years later, with his instrumentalist view, which called for philosophers to give up their hopeless “quest for certainty.”⁴ On their view, the search for knowledge was a ceaseless endeavor, and, as such, those who took it up were required to continuously revise and adjust their beliefs. It would seem that while Putnam’s four theses are necessary conditions in calling a particular view pragmatic, a robust fallibilism might be the only one that is sufficient as well. In the very least it seems to be the deciding factor for determining if any particular thinker can properly be called pragmatic. Therefore, using Putnam’s work as a heuristic device, we might better discern which daoist sage offered the more pragmatic vision.

I will begin my analysis of pragmatism and the *dào* with Laozi, who is traditionally believed to be Zhuangzi’s predecessor.⁵ According to legend, when Laozi was asked to put his ideas on paper by a border official in exchange for passage, he penned the *Dàodéjīng* [道德經]. A collection of 81 chapters in verse form, the *Dàodéjīng* (or “Classic of the Way and Virtue”) is considered the most important text in the Daoist canon. The main topics of the text are the metaphysics of *dào* [道], or “the way,” and how these notions can be applied in moral life to attain “virtue,” *i.e.* *dé* [德]. Commentators have disagreed about which of these two components is the main focus of the text. Those

³ Peirce, C.S. “The Rules of Philosophy,” from *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934) pgs 156-158

⁴ cf. Dewey, John. *The Quest for Certainty – The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. 37 volumes. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987) LW 4

⁵ Although the accuracy of this claim has been called into question more recently, my objective is to analyze the philosophical notions only, and therefore I will follow the canonical account throughout the remainder of this essay.

who give primacy to the former, typically interpret the *Dàodéjīng* as a mystical document, whereas their opponents usually view it as a moral treatise.

Evidence of this debate can be found in the various translations of the first line of the text, which reads (in the Hanyu Pinyin romanization) *dào kě dào fēi cháng dào*⁶, which is most often translated along the lines of, “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way.”⁷ This may be seen as a declaration of the ineffability of *dào*, and *ipso facto*, evidence for a mystical reading. However, another way to read this first line might be, “The path worth following is not an unchanging one.” This would render the text not as an endorsement of ineffability, but rather as advancing a normative principle intended to show that the best course (or *dào*) of action is one that is open to revision, which would seem to be the epitome of fallibilism. For now, I will leave this issue aside in order to focus on other passages from the text that seem to relate to pragmatist precepts.

The most obvious feature that the *Dàodéjīng* shares in common with pragmatism is the dissolution of the fact/value distinction, *i.e.* the separation of descriptive from prescriptive claims. Chinese philosophy, in general, tends to be far less dualistic than its Western counterpart, and Daoism is perhaps the most holistic of all the major Chinese schools of thought. The theme permeates the *Dàodéjīng*. For example, in chapter 42, we are told that living organisms are the embodiment of nature’s generative forces (*yīn* and *yáng*) and thus doing violence against them inevitably leads to an unnatural end. However, the passage that is most indicative of Laozi’s aversion to an “is-ought” dichotomy is found in Chapter 51, which reads, “the way is revered and virtue honored

⁶ Literally: “Way worthy of Way, not unchanging Way.”

⁷ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*. Tr. by D.C. Lau (New York: Penguin, 1963) Chpt. 1

not because this is decreed by any authority but because it is natural for them to be treated so.”⁸

Laozi’s emphasis on the practicality of ideas is nearly as obvious. As chapter 8 states, “In a home it is the site that matters; In quality of mind it is depth that matters; In an ally it is benevolence that matters; In speech it is good faith that matters; In government it is order that matters; In affairs it is ability that matters; In action it is timeliness that matters.”⁹ Here Laozi offers a view of practicality that is not based on utility alone but rather one that seeks a firm foundation. To put this into the language of the pragmatist, particularly that of Peirce and of Dewey, the usefulness of an idea is not based upon the “cash value” it holds for an individual but for the directive, *i.e.* the “laboratory habit,” that presents itself to others as a repeatable experiment. In the eleventh chapter of the Daodejing, we find a passage that could have just as easily come from the writings of Peirce or Dewey. It reads,

Thirty spokes share one hub. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the cart. Knead clay in order to make a vessel. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the vessel. Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the room. Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use.¹⁰

The similarities between this passage and Dewey’s notion of the “indeterminate situation” are striking. As Dewey put it,

What is designated by the word "situation" is *not* a single object or event or set of objects and events. For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole...*an* object or event is always a special part, phase, or aspect, of an enviroing experienced world – a situation.¹¹

⁸ Ibid. Chpt. 51

⁹ Ibid. Chpt. 8

¹⁰ Ibid. Chpt. 11

¹¹ Dewey, John. *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry – The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. 37 volumes. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987) LW 12:72 [Dewey’s emphasis]

Laozi tells us that the use of some object comes from somewhere (or, more properly, from nowhere) outside of it. Though not mentioned explicitly in this passage, we are likely meant to understand this “Nothing” as representative of *dào*. According to Dewey, we move from an indeterminate situation to a “determinate” one when we discover the directive that gets us back into the flow of life-experience. Coincidentally or not, Laozi’s use of similar metaphors for *dào* (comparing it to water) elicits a picture of it as a malleable and dynamic principle.

In order to answer whether or not the *Dàodéjīng* shares pragmatism’s rejection of skepticism, we must revisit our dilemma concerning how to read Laozi, whether as a mystic or as a fallibilist. The reason for this is that the pragmatists saw fallibilism as the only viable alternative between skepticism and dogmatism. If Laozi is to be considered a mystic, then his view of knowledge would fall into the latter camp.

Thinkers from ages past (Kant for one) also sought a *via media* between these epistemological extremes, yet the American thinkers who cultivated pragmatism had one advantage – Darwin’s theory of evolution.¹² As a mathematician and scientist, Peirce saw the similarities between Darwin’s idea and his own work on probability theory and “the law of errors.” In the 1870s he began to apply the upshots of evolution in his philosophical writings, as well. James (who as a young man was the research assistant of the leading American creationist, Louis Agassiz) seemed less affected by Darwin in his early career, but would later apply the principle to his work in psychology. Dewey, however, was perhaps the greatest advocate of Darwinism among the major American

¹² When the *Origin of the Species* appeared in 1859, Peirce was twenty years old, Holmes was eighteen, James seventeen, and Dewey was still an infant.

pragmatists, as his essay, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” reveals. He wrote,

In laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the *Origin of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics and religion.¹³

The mode of thinking to which Dewey alluded is fallibilism. The pragmatists realized that even though human inquiry cannot attain absolute certainty, we need not resign ourselves to a position of blind doubt. Accordingly, we *can* know some things, tentatively speaking, simply by looking around and trying ideas out. Furthermore, because we have a faculty called memory, the lessons we learn in trying ideas out are cumulative. The ideas that worked in the past for our forbears come down to us through culture and tradition. When the environment changes, and we are faced with new conditions, those old ideas often have to be revised or even rejected. If we discover a new directive that brings us back into harmony with our surroundings, then we survive, if we cannot find such a rule, then we die. In their view, that was how knowledge worked; that was fallibilism.

Though it is obvious that the ancient Chinese did not have the benefit of reading Darwin, there is evidence from the text that could be suggestive of a link between Daoist cosmology and a few of the natural principles upon which evolution is based, particularly an organic change among creatures and an emergent order in absentia of a divine creator. For instance, in the first chapter, we see Laozi’s version of an origin story, “The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; The named was the mother of the myriad

¹³ Dewey, John. “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy” – *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. 37 volumes. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1987) MW 4:3

creatures.”¹⁴ Later, in chapter 25 we are told that “the nameless” is only called *dào* because its name escapes us,

There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
Silent and void,
It stands alone and does not change,
Goes round and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name,
So I style it ‘the way’.”¹⁵

Interestingly, Lau’s translation of the rest of this chapter ends with, “Man models himself on earth, Earth on heaven, Heaven on the way, *And the way on that which is naturally so.*”¹⁶ The Chinese for the last line is, *dào fǎn zì rán* (literally: the way on self thus) and could readily be translated in a manner that invokes the principle of self-causation, instead. It would seem we are again stuck between an interpretive rock and a hard place. If we choose Lau’s interpretation, then a comparison between the *dào* and evolutionary sentiments may get off the ground. If we read it in the alternate fashion, the text seems irrevocably mystical. Unfortunately, it seems that once the interpretive choice has been made, the remainder of the text can be read consistently in the preferred tone.

Zhuangzi Misunderstood?

Like Laozi, Zhuangzi’s work seems largely open to interpretation. Comparatively speaking, there have been few Eastern commentaries on Zhuangzi’s work because most Chinese literati after the 5th century considered his ideas either dangerous or unintelligible.¹⁷ Therefore, most recent interpretations have come from Western scholarship. In fact, in the early twentieth century, Zhuangzi’s writings influenced the

¹⁴ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*. Tr. by D.C. Lau (New York: Penguin, 1963) Chpt. 1

¹⁵ Ibid. Chpt. 25

¹⁶ Ibid. [my emphasis]

¹⁷ Cf. Chan, Wing-Tsit. *The Source Book of Chinese Philosophy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973)

work of thinkers such as Buber and Heidegger. Since then, many American thinkers (B. Watson, T. Cleary, V. Mair and P. Ivanhoe to mention only a few) have offered differing interpretations of his work that paint Zhuangzi as one or more of the following: a mystic, a quietist, a skeptic or a relativist. As mentioned, these characterizations hang on an interpretive choice, and in what follows I will offer a way to interpret Zhuangzi as a proto-pragmatist of sorts (as R. Ames and D. Hall have done) that is based on the very passages of the text from which these other characterizations are typically drawn.

Many Westerners who read the Zhuangzi see the poetic and mythological elements of his prose as a rejection of rational ways of thinking. His depictions of giant fish that transform into birds, of turtles that are thousands of years old, and of men who drink the dew, ride the clouds, and drive a team of dragons are the main causes for the characterization of Zhuangzi as a mystic. While these stories are certainly fantastical, they do not necessarily lead to a mystical outlook. The *dào*, on Zhuangzi's view, does not occupy some higher plane of existence, nor does Zhuangzi advocate the sloughing off of this realm in favor of another (two concepts that are typically hallmarks of mysticism). Instead, Zhuangzi's tone is one of awe in the face of nature's wonders and his characterization of the *dào* is one of immanence, of a world hidden within the world, rather than one of transcendence. When Zhuangzi is asked where the *dào* exists, he replies, "There is nowhere that it doesn't exist...It is in the tiles and shards...It is in the piss and shit."¹⁸ Zhuangzi's man of the *dào* (which he called the "true man" or *zhēnrén*) was not someone with his head in the clouds, but rather someone who was attuned to the natural world around him. As he put it,

¹⁸ Zhuangzi. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. Tr. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.) pg. 241

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 came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He didn't forget where he began; he didn't try to find out where he would end. He received something and took pleasure in it; he forgot about it and handed it back again. This is what I call not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out [Nature]. This is what I call the True Man.¹⁹

This seems to suggest that Zhuangzi was a more of a naturalist than he was a mystic, and such a reading is supported by a line following the quoted passage, which states, “When man and [Nature] do not defeat each other, then we may be said to have the True Man.”²⁰

The passage that is most often quoted in relation to Zhuangzi's quietism appears in chapter 17. In that story, when officials approached Zhuangzi with an offer from the ruler of Qu to join his court, Zhuangzi compared himself to a turtle, explaining that he would rather be alive and dragging his tail in the mud than be dead and venerated.²¹ However, it is unlikely that Zhuangzi meant to advocate a hermit lifestyle with this passage, but rather one of not lowering one's standards for the sake of esteem. This becomes more evident in the subsequent parable wherein Hui Tzu is concerned about rumors that Zhuangzi may supplant him as prime minister of Liang. Upon his arrival, Zhuangzi says,

In the south there is a bird called the Yuan-ch'u - I wonder if you've ever heard of it? The Yuan-ch'u rises up from the South Sea and flies to the North Sea, and it will rest on nothing but the Wu-t'ung tree, eat nothing but the fruit of the Lien, and drink only from springs of sweet water. Once there was an owl who had gotten hold of a half-rotten old rat, and as the Yuan-ch'u passed by, it raised its head, looked up at the Yuan-ch'u, and said, 'Shoo!' Now that you have this Liang state of yours, are you trying to shoo me?²²

This could lead one to view Zhuangzi as a relativist, since what is good for the owl was not good for Yuan-ch'u. I believe such an interpretation is specious. Some scholars see relativism in passages such as, “A road is made by people walking on it;

¹⁹ Ibid. pg. 78 Watson translates the Chinese *tiān* as “Heaven,” although the meaning in ancient China was more akin to “Nature.”

²⁰ Ibid. pg. 80

²¹ Ibid. pg. 187

²² Ibid. pg. 188

things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so,”²³ as well as the story of the beauties Mao-Ch’iang and Lady Li (considered attractive by men but frightening to fish, birds and deer) which Zhuangzi concludes with,

Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled”²⁴

Taken in isolation, these passages do seem to suggest a relativistic bent, however, when read in conjunction with other passages, such as, “If you want to nourish a bird with what nourishes a bird, then you should let it roost in the deep forest... concepts of right should be founded on what is suitable. This is what it means to have command of reason,” it seems that Zhuangzi is not advocating relativism but rather reminding us to look for principles that are appropriate to the natural world.²⁵ It seems Western readers have a tendency to conflate Zhuangzi’s assertion that it is often difficult to distinguish right from wrong with the claim that both points of view are equally valid.

Perhaps the most recognized passage from Zhuangzi’s work is also the one that most commentators cite as evidence of Zhuangzi’s skepticism. It recounts the story of Zhuangzi’s dream that he was a butterfly. Upon waking, as the text explains, “he didn’t know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.”²⁶ Many Western commentators see this as a precursor to Cartesian doubt. Yet, the passage continues with, “Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things.”²⁷ This last line shows that the point of the story is not to illustrate the limits of knowledge but to

²³ Ibid. pg. 40

²⁴ Ibid. pg.

²⁵ Ibid. pgs. 194-195

²⁶ Ibid. pg. 49

²⁷ Ibid.

illustrate the metaphysical holism of the *dào*. The distinctions between the “myriad things,” such as people and butterflies, indicate the dynamic nature of a universe in flux.

As Roger Ames has written, “the myriad things are perturbations of hylozoistic energies that coordinate themselves to constitute the harmonious regularity that is *dào*.”²⁸ This is best illustrated in the beginning of the second chapter, wherein it is explained that the pipings of earth, man, and Nature (*tīan*) resonate from the blowing of the same wind. As the last remark of that passage reads, “When blown, all of these openings sound differently, and each shows attunement in its own way; in each case the tune chooses itself, but who does the blowing?”²⁹ Because *Zhuangzi*’s view of the *dào* is one of “an emergent, ‘bottom-up’ order rather than something imposed, any interpretation of *dào* that would reduce it to preexisting laws or principles that discipline the natural world in some necessary way would be problematic.”³⁰ Simply put, on *Zhuangzi*’s view, the *dào* is the emerging fixed order, or principle of continuity, that arises out of the flux of reality.

Accordingly, the *zhēnrén* reflects a native vitality, or “spontaneity,” that has a tendency to be lost in society at large by conventionality. The best way to recover that verve, according to *Zhuangzi*, would be through attunement with nature. By this, he did not mean for us merely to become more conscientious of our natural environment, though this was certainly a key element in his thought, but rather he hoped that a respect for the nature of all existents (the myriad things) could be fostered. The *zhēnrén* uses spontaneity and a “command of reason” to harmonize with the world around him. This objective is at one with that of pragmatic inquiry.

²⁸ Ames, *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1998) pg. 5

²⁹ *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 2 [my translation]

³⁰ Ames, pg. 7

As *Zhuangzi* would tell us, such harmony often requires innovation, not convention. Throughout his text, there are stories of physically deformed figures, particularly crippled men and crooked trees, that exhibit the highest virtue because they rest at ease within their own nature. For example, in the fourth chapter, a woodsman has a large holy-tree appear to him in a dream (after earlier rejecting it as useless). The tree says to him, “If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large?” The woodsman awakes and admits to his disciples that by judging this tree by *conventional* standards he was “way off.”³¹ Later in the same chapter another large, useless tree is likened to the sage insofar as neither can be exploited. In the fifth chapter, the story is told of a crippled man by the name of *Shu* who pays a visit to Confucius, but because of his awkward appearance, receives an unkind welcome. Later, when Laozi asks him if Confucius can be freed from the shackles of his doctrines, the crippled man responds, “When Heaven has punished him, how can you set him free?”³²

Of course, *Zhuangzi* did not advocate unqualified innovation. For unreflective innovation can be more dangerous than the most stifling conventionality. This is where his emphasis on self-transformation must be noted. On his view, the creative vitality of spontaneity must always reflect back upon itself, correcting past mistakes and cumulatively building in complexity. This is the key element in becoming a *zhēnrén*.

If we take this interpretation of *Zhuangzi*’s *dào* seriously, then he is clearly not a mystic. If *Zhuangzi*’s “true man” is to be understood as someone who applies reason in a manner that is suitable to his environment, then it would seem appropriate to read *Zhuangzi* as a naturalistic fallibilist. If this is so, then the charges of skepticism, quietism,

³¹ Watson, pgs. 64-65

³² Ibid. pg. 72

and relativism are rendered moot and Zhuangzi can consistently be called a pragmatist philosopher.

The case for Laozi is a more difficult one. Because his writings are so terse, there is insufficient textual evidence to build an argument that is not open to criticism. If one chose to adopt the alternative historical account of Laozi, wherein he is seen as a fictional figure conjured up by followers of Zhuangzi to lend legitimacy to their school of thought, perhaps then a case for calling him a pragmatist would be stronger. However, such a topic would require more attention than this analysis will permit.