

DAOIST FREEDOM, PSYCHOLOGICAL HYGIENE, AND SOCIAL CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT: *The article explores the inner logic and defining features of Daoist freedom. It argues that Daoist freedom can be meaningfully understood as psychological hygiene, and it suggests that Daoist xuan-jie (懸解) can be rendered possible only if one can rid oneself of intensional suffering—an idea ultimately inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche. This comparative approach enables the article to contribute to the received way of understanding Daoist freedom by stressing its dialectics: by being at ease with one’s social and political environment, Daoist freedom demands social criticism, calling for room for people to be able to act spontaneously so that all can nurture their distinctive natures and have a full and free exercise of their natural abilities. The article aims to achieve two objectives at once: it aims to argue for the understanding of Daoist freedom as psychological hygiene, and it defends this reading by bringing two dimensions of Daoist freedom into a consistent whole. In a constantly changing and increasingly pluralistic world, psychological hygiene and social criticism are both necessary for leading a robust and healthy human life.*

Keywords: *Daoist freedom, intensional suffering, psychological hygiene, social criticism*

Friedrich Nietzsche once described a “great remedy” to human suffering, the remedy he calls “Russian fatalism”; it refers to a situation where “finding a campaign too strenuous,” where one chooses “no longer to accept anything at all, no longer to take anything, no longer to absorb anything—to cease reacting altogether.” For Nietzsche, what Russian fatalism represents is nothing less than a form of psychological “hygiene” that renders a healthy mental life possible (Nietzsche 1967, 230). While there are profound differences between Nietzsche’s Russian fatalism and Daoist freedom, it seems to me that the latter exhibits an attitude that bears some thought-provoking resemblance to the spirit of such fatalism, in particular the psychological hygiene that Nietzsche takes pain to highlight. By associating Daoist freedom with psychological hygiene, this article aims to stress the uniqueness of Daoist freedom and its relationship

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with social criticism.¹

Such understanding of Daoist freedom as promoting psychological hygiene invites challenges and objections. It would be objected, for instance, that Daoist freedom advocates *passive* adjustment to the political environment and that it asks us to give up on challenging the latter even when necessary. It is for this reason that Daoist freedom is associated, unfairly as I would argue, with a submissive orientation toward the social and political world. The more psychologically hygienic people manage to achieve in their individual life, the less demanding they will be with regard to the betterment of collective life. In this sense, Daoist freedom would be good for individuals, but not for society. In this article, I defuse this challenge by drawing on materials from the *Dao-De-Jing*; the end result is a form of Daoism that supports effective social criticism and equal respect for people's distinctive natures, which can be accomplished at the social and political levels. This social criticism, together with psychological hygiene, form a kind of dialectics that is constitutive of Daoist freedom, or so I will argue.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I discuss the value of Daoist existential freedom by relating it to social customs or conventions (interpretation) and what Zhuang Zi calls existential "bonds." I explain in this part that there are two Daoist approaches to suffering, and I clarify the reasons provided by Daoism why suffering can be both physiological and psychological. In the second section, I explore the mechanisms of existential freedom, which will be followed by an explanation of the role played by the compartmentalization of two realms in section three. In the fourth section, I answer the question concerning the goal of Daoist existential freedom and pin down what such freedom means. Finally, in the fifth section, I address the major objection against Daoist freedom concerning its purported submissiveness and depoliticizing effect.

1. *XUANJIE*: DAOIST EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM

The first mention of Daoist freedom can be found in the chapter entitled "The Teacher Who is the Ultimate Ancestor" in the book of *Zhuang-Zi*:

Be content with the time and dwell in the flow, and sadness and joy cannot find a way in. This is what of old was called 'being loosed from the bonds'; and whoever cannot loose himself other things bind still tighter² (Chuang-Tzu 1981, 88, trans. A. C. Graham; unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from the book).

Here we find the Daoist idea of ridding oneself of the existential "bonds,"³ a state of existence Zhuang Zi famously calls *xuan-jie* (懸解). However, neither here nor in

¹ In doing so, it builds itself upon the existing elaborations of Daoist freedom; chief among them are Schwartz 1985, 192; Graham 1989, II, 3; Hansen 1992, chap. 6; Munro 1969, 123; Liu 2006, chap 6, 7; Lai 2008, chap. 8; Norden 2011, chap 8, 9.

² "安時而處順，哀樂不能入也。此古之所謂懸解也，而不能自解者，物有結之。"

³ By "existential" I simply mean those phenomena that pertain to the nature of human existence, which includes but is not limited to the meaning, purpose, and significance of human life; in the context of

other chapters of the book does Zhuang Zi tells us explicitly what existential bonds are and how we can be loosened from them; nor does he tell us what to do in order to ward off the external stimuli such as “sadness and joy,” which are believed to be the expressions of existential bonds. We are only furnished with some clues in the chapter “Worldly Business among Men” where we are told that “in the service of one’s own heart no higher degree of Power than, without joy and sorrow ever alternating before it, to know what you cannot do anything about and be content with them as our destiny”⁴ (ibid. 70, minor changes). What we can detect in this chapter is a correlation between the absence of “joy and sorrow” and the ability to be content with one’s life. Here Zhuang Zi seems to be claiming that with the help of such an ability, one can command external forces and be free from existential bonds—a secret of achieving psychological hygiene, as we shall see.

What is not entirely clear in these passages is what such an ability entails and how to acquire it. The answer to these questions, I believe, lies in a dialogue reported between Shen Tujia (申不害) and Zi Chan (子產) in the chapter “The Signs of Fullness of Power” of the *Zhuang-Zi*. Two ways of reckoning with suffering are mentioned in the chapter. Given the way the chapter is structured, it is reasonable to believe that Shen’s ideas are the ones that Zhuang Zi would endorse; according to Shen, different people take different approaches to suffering which will then generate different attitudes towards suffering:

There are many of us who should freely tell you about their lapses, thinking that they did not deserve to suffer; there are a few of us who would refuse to tell you about their lapses, thinking that they did not deserve to be spared; but as for recognizing the inescapable and being content with it as destined, only the man who does have Power in him is capable of that⁵ (ibid. 78, minor changes).

When one experiences suffering, Zhuang Zi explains, it never happens that one merely goes through suffering passively without posing any questions. One usually asks, for instance, why I am the one who has to suffer or whether there are special reasons explaining why I have to suffer (“thinking that they did not deserve to suffer”). By answering such a question, one simultaneously assigns meaning to it, and in so doing, suffering is made acceptable to one degree or another, depending on the explanatory power of the answer one comes up with. In short, by giving meaning to suffering, the psychological agony normally associated with it is removed, and when this happens suffering itself becomes easier to swallow. Here, it is helpful to recall Nietzsche’s insight that in accounting for human reaction to suffering, “what arouses indignation against suffering *is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering*” (Nietzsche 1967, 68, emphasis added). To make sense of suffering, according to Nietzsche, is existentially crucial to the human being, and to do so successfully is to

Daoism, it touches upon issues concerning the meaning of constraints, suffering, and hardship in human life, as well as the individual’s freedom to control their own existence in the face of these challenges.

⁴ “自事其心者，哀樂不易施乎前，知其不可奈何而安之若命，德之至也。”

⁵ “自狀其過以不當亡者眾，不狀其過以不當存者寡。知不可奈何而安之若命，惟有德者能之。”

remove the psychological burden inflicted by suffering. It is the senselessness of suffering that constitutes the psychological burden, not the suffering *per se*. This Nietzschean insight, of course, requires further explanation, which I will offer shortly; for now, we can focus on human suffering and its interpretation—that is, the human approaches to suffering. For Zhuang Zi, suffering is inseparable from the perspective from which we perceive it. This is why Zhuang Zi believes that for humans there are two approaches to suffering.

The first approach to reckon with suffering, as we may summarize, relies on a mechanism that gives meaning to suffering—we may call it *the meaning-positing mechanism*. This approach is fundamentally different from the second approach that is related to what Zhuang Zi calls “the inescapable” in the passage quoted above (“as for recognizing the inescapable and being content with it...”). Instead of finding meaning for suffering via the meaning-positing mechanism, this approach believes that we should sever the link between suffering and the meaning associated with it. Chad Hansen hammers this point home in his discussion of distinctions and names. According to him, “*Daos* are not so much theories that guide us as they are *conceptual perspectives* that guide us...The mechanism [of *daos*] is not like that of rules, evoking a descriptive state of affairs for us to bring about. It affects us more by shaping our taste, our discriminating attitudes” (Hansen 1992, 212-3). Suffering and meaning are often linked because we usually understand suffering by reference to conventions and customs or “*daos*,” to use Hansen's term.⁶ For Zhuang Zi, by “recognizing the inescapable” one can be “content with it as destined” where “content” does not mean that it can make suffering disappear once and for all but that the latter becomes less acute if we manage to separate it from its meaning.

In this connection, it may be useful to draw on a distinction made by Arthur Danto between “extensional suffering” and “intensional suffering.” It is useful in that the distinction explains otherwise too schematic an account embedded in the *Zhuang-Zi*, especially the one we find in the chapter “The Signs of Fullness of Power” and “Worldly Business among Men.” If Daoist freedom stems from severing the link between suffering and its meaning, we need to find out how it does the trick and make clear its mechanisms. Human suffering, according to Danto, is essentially *hermeneutic*. Humans do not experience suffering directly, say, as mere physiological agony, but always already as an object of hermeneutic interpretation. In distinguishing between extensional and intensional suffering, Danto drives home a point that the most devastating suffering for humans is always *both* physiological *and* psychological. Only as biological beings can we experience physiological agony independent of its interpretation. This then explains why the most unbearable suffering for humans is normally not physiological—except for those that do not see the prospect of recovery. For Danto, extensional suffering as mere physiological suffering is different from the one resulting from interpretation; the latter he calls intensional suffering. Danto uses the example of impotence to explain the distinction: as a physiological symptom,

⁶ The reason I allow myself not to draw a clear distinction between the *Dao-De-Jing* and the *Zhuang-Zi* is that while being aware of their differences, I aim to bring out their common features instead of analyzing their distinctive characteristics.

impotence suffered by human males is not different from other forms of sickness such as diabetes or prostate disorder. But impotence is understood as a *special* kind of sickness in modern Western culture. For it is “connected with the male self-image of adequacy and power” (thanks to interpretation), whereas diabetes or prostate disorder is not. Precisely because of this cultural interpretation, impotence causes such psychological problems as depression and despair and even leads tragically to suicide.⁷ On Danto's account, what makes impotence distinct is the cultural interpretation that attaches a sense of shame to an otherwise purely physical illness. It is such an interpretation that transforms impotence into a “*morally overcharged* symptom” and subsequently creates a new form of suffering in addition to the physical one. As a stark contrast to impotence, he invites us to consider hyperglycemia: “Very few...attach much significance to the mere fact of hyperglycemia, or would commit suicide over that, or regard themselves as flawed—or sick” (Danto 1994, 42-43). The lack of social and psychological significance of hyperglycemia resides in the absence of a certain culture, which charges the otherwise pure, physiological symptom with degrading social meaning.

What we can extrapolate from Danto's account is the following: humans cannot experience intensional suffering without interpretation, and they can return to extensional suffering by removing it. Danto's distinction highlights the role played by interpretation, which is the mediation between extensional suffering and the “morally overcharged symptom.” Interpretation is solely responsible for intensional suffering. Here we can recall the Daoist theme (contained in the first Daoist approach to suffering) that *suffering does not have a genuine meaning which is prior to, and independent of, human perception or the perspective of viewers* (the epistemic dimension of the theme is discussed by Robert Allison 1989, 23, Chad Hansen 1982, 36-39, P. J. Ivanhoe 1996: 199, and Lisa Raphals 1994, 26-49). For Daoism, human suffering is shaped by the socially arbitrary interpretation, and this is why Bryan W. Norden invites us to consider the following rhetorical question: “[if we consider] how much of our thinking and feeling is artificially produced by society and its linguistic distinctions. Would people crave being thin if our society did not invidiously distinguish it from being fat?” (Norden 2011, 252) Daoists know well enough that it is not realistic to eliminate all linguistic distinctions, just as it is not realistic to remove all intensional suffering, but it is a *net gain* if we can reduce it to the lowest possible degree. Extensional suffering is bad enough for us, and we should not add insult to injury by compounding it with linguistic distinctions and producing intensional suffering at our own peril.

It is here, I emphasize, that we can see why for Zhuang Zi being free in the existential sense constitutes a remedy: When Danto argues that intensional suffering should be reduced to extensional suffering, the same goal is achieved by Daoism by pointing out the risks of existential bonds. The very notion forcefully calls into question

⁷ These can be very odd, according to Danto, if we do not take into consideration the male self-image nurtured by a particular form of culture (say, one that values the ability to procreation) and merely focus on the physical symptoms of such a sickness. Physically speaking, diabetes or prostate disorder is certainly more dangerous and damaging to one's health, but they rarely cause severe depression and despair. The oddity can only be dissipated when we start to be attentive to the link, built by the Western culture, between the male self-image and impotence.

the relation between suffering and its meaning. It means to create a pause in a situation where we are blind to the social conventions and socially caused intensional suffering, and it also calls upon us to be sensitive to the all too common tendencies that naturalize the connection between suffering and conventions.

2. THE NEGATION OF INTERPRETATION, INTERNSIONAL SUFFERING, AND EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM

Other than making extensional suffering a basis for intensional suffering, interpretation can do more. It can be attached to a kind of physiological state that is more or less neutral for Daoism, which means that intensional suffering need *not* base itself on extensional suffering. This is the possibility Danto does not entertain, however. With the Daoist Classics *Zhuang-Zi* and *Dao-De-Jing* we can see this possibility fully embraced. In this section, I will discuss the "independent" intensional suffering and the Daoist mechanism of shedding it, with a view to forming a more complete understanding of Daoist existential freedom.

It is well-known that for Daoism desire that goes beyond the threshold of biological need is undesirable. The following famous quote from the *Dao-De-Jing* is a good example:

The five colours make man's eyes blind; the five notes make his ears deaf; the five tastes injure his palate; riding and hunting make his mind go wild with excitement; Goods hard to come by serve to hinder his progress. Hence the sage is for the belly not for the eye. Therefore he discards the one and takes the other⁸ (*Tao Te Jing* 1989, 12, trans. D. C. Lau).

According to Yang Xichang (楊錫昌), "the belly" and "the eye" should be understood symbolically, where "the belly" stands for the basic biological need and "the eye" the social interpretation. "The eye" is a distinct way of seeing a human need from that of "the belly," so that the former can cast a new light on desire and thereby transform it into something else (cf. Chen 2003, 119). As soon as "the eye" takes precedence over "the belly," what occurs is the birth of an obsession with a particular (e.g., extravagant) way of satisfying desire. This obsession, according to Yang, constitutes the opposite of freedom, for it makes the satisfaction of desire *imperative*. Since human capacities to satisfy these desires are limited and external constraints are often irremovable, certain desires are bound to be unsatisfied; this will then cause endless frustration and anxiety. Since "acquiring the right desires is crucial to our worth in a social system...[and] society trains us in how to draw certain distinctions and act on them," "freedom from desire" is extremely difficult (Hansen 1992, 213; cf. Liu 2006, 147). Here desires can be seen as results of social interpretation.

It is worth emphasizing that, unlike basic human needs, desire has no fixed point of reference and knows no limit. To return to the distinction we were using, this means

⁸ "五色令人目盲；五音令人耳聾；五味令人口爽；馳騁田獵，令人心發狂；難得之貨，令人行妨。是以聖人為腹不為目，故去彼取此。"

that the bar of “the eye” can be raised infinitely high. It explains why Wang Bi (王弼 226–249 AD), a neo-Daoist philosopher, says that “those who are for the belly seek things to maintain themselves, whereas those who are for the eye seek things to enslave themselves” (Wang 2011, Ch. 12). The possibility for humans to maintain themselves *only* as human animals (that is, satisfying only “the belly”) is highly questionable, to say the very least, but Wang Bi is right in attributing the compulsive self-enslavement to “the eye”: the objects of our desire are not naturally desirable but are determined by social interpretation (or by what Hansen calls “distinctions” or “conventional *daos*”).⁹ The enslavement comes from our mistaking something arbitrary for something natural, which is but the result of social interpretation and distinctions. When JeeLoo Liu discusses this problem, she seems to be ambiguous: “With sensory stimulation, however, come finer discrimination and more desires that are not innate in us. Lao Zi says: ‘The five colors cause one’s eyes to be blind. The five tones cause one’s ears to be deaf. The five flavors cause one’s palate to be spoiled.’ As an example, we can think about the process of becoming a wine connoisseur” (Liu 2006, 147).¹⁰ In saying this, that is, she seems to be suggesting that desires have a *natural* cause in a stimulated sense. If interpretation and conventions were absent, this would mean that sensory stimulation has no chance of creating “finer discrimination and more desires.” What this shows is that desires are *socially* caused by social conventions and they do not have a natural cause. For this reason, the way out of the enslavement of desires is not the elimination of sensory stimulation altogether, which is not possible without the simultaneous removal of a certain social environment, but the (partial) removal of social interpretation (conventions).

This, as a solution, is attested by the *Zhuang-Zi*, especially in the chapters “Perfect Happiness” and “The Signs of Fullness of Power.” What we see in these two chapters is a broader picture or full revelation of the Daoist way of psychological hygiene. The most seminal passages from them are the following; since they draw an almost complete picture of existential freedom, it is worth quoting them at some length:

People who can't get these things fret a great deal and are afraid—this is a stupid way to treat the body. People who are rich wear themselves out rushing around on business, piling up more wealth than they could ever use—this is a superficial way to treat the body. People who are eminent spend night and day scheming and wondering if they are doing right—this is a shoddy way to treat the body (translation from Watson 1968).¹¹

⁹ As he explains it: “Keep in mind that what we would think of as moral theories—conventional *daos*—are naming systems that guide us. *Daos* are not so much theories that guide us as they are *conceptual perspectives* that guide us. Lao Zi expands on how, at the level of names, *dao* affects behavior. His account is not at the level of sentences. The mechanism is not like that of rules, evoking a descriptive state of affairs for us to bring about. It affects us more by shaping our taste, our discriminating attitudes. Society trains us on how to draw certain distinctions and act on them. It instills the point of distinction and the associated pattern of desire” (Hansen 1992, 213).

¹⁰ Liu is obviously correct, however, in pointing out that once sense is stimulated, “the expansion of desires” is unavoidable (*ibid.*, 148).

¹¹ “夫富者，苦身疾作，多積財而不得盡用，其為形也亦外矣。夫貴者，夜以繼日，思慮善否，其為形也亦疏矣。”

Death and life, survival and ruin, success and failure, riches and poverty, competence and incompetence, praise and slander, hunger and thirst, there are the mutations of affairs, the course of destiny. They alternate before us day and night, and knowledge cannot measure back to where they began. Consequently, there is no point in letting them disturb one's peace.¹²

As these passages make explicit, the manifestations of existential enslavement include frets, worries, anxiety, and disturbance of inner peace, etc. They are the obstacles in the way of existential freedom. According to Daoism, earthly concerns and happenings such as “success and failure, riches and poverty...slander and praise” have no *intrinsic* properties, positive or negative, for they are only “the mutations of affairs.” To put it another way, they are what they are because of interpretation. It is the interpretation that pits success against failure, riches against poverty, and praise against slander (cf. Yearley 1983, 130; Hansen 1992, 213). And it is in doing so that the former of each pair becomes desirable and the latter detestable. As far as their true natures are concerned, however, we do not know which one is better, for “knowledge cannot measure back to where they began.” It thus makes no sense to speak of their nature as intrinsically positive or negative. Roger Ames sees the flexibility that results from this wisdom, and he maintains that it is valuable teaching of Daoism that we can unlearn distinctions in order to function efficaciously and freely in circumstances that are not of our own making (Ames 1998, 227).

It should be clear that Ames does not mean that we can unlearn *all* distinctions. The human world as we find it cannot do away with success and failure, riches and poverty, slander, and praise entirely, and as humans we need distinctions to function as social beings. Therefore, the target of Zhuang Zi's critique is not the *categories* of the opposition but their specific *contents*. He wants to draw our attention to the fact that the way we value success and failure can change, and the way we do it depends on how we perceive the situation. What he wants to take issue with, on this account, is the *reified* interpretation or conventional understanding of success and failure, not success and failure *as such*. For Zhuang Zi, there is no solid ground on which humans can value one thing (what we deem as riches and praise) over the other (what we deem as poverty and slander). This is precisely why Daoists see the world as a process of becoming; in such a world, the significance and meaning of things change their positions over time. Even “reversal is the movement of Dao” (*fan-zhe-dao-zhi-dong* 反者道之動; chapter 40). All things are equal when they are seen in the duration of time and from a higher perspective (*qi-wu* 齊物, which is also the title of the second chapter of the *Zhuang-Zi*). When all things are equal, there is indeed no reason to value A over B. This is the reason why Daoism warns us not to be captivated by the reified interpretation and various social conventions. If we value earthly happenings, we will likely be caught in existential enslavement—we are “letting them disturb [our] peace.” This is what

¹² “死生存亡，窮達貧富，賢與不肖，毀譽、饑渴、寒暑，是事之變，命之行也；日夜相代乎前，而知不能規乎其始者也。故不足以滑和，不可入於靈府。”

Zhuang Zi describes as “the upside-down people” (*dao-zhi-zhi-min* 倒置之民) in the chapter “Mending the Inborn Nature”. What turns people upside down is nothing less than existential bonds that trap us in reified interpretation and existential enslavement. The antidote, as suggested by Zhuang Zi, is the sobering awareness of the reified relationship between existential bonds and interpretation.

3. COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF THE TWO REALMS

Daoist existential freedom thus teaches us that to be free and psychologically hygienic a cautious attitude toward interpretation is necessary (recall what Zhuang Zi calls in the chapter “The Carefree Excursion” as “small knowledge” 小知). We are yet to deal with a crucial question, however, which concerns the following: Can the removal of interpretation be comprehensive? In other words, when Zhuang Zi tells us not to be “tied by things” (*wu-wu-lei* 無物累; the chapter “The Way of Heaven”), does he intend these “things” to include all things? The reason why this question is important is that as humans we are bound to be tied by *something*; a human being who has no concerns and does not care about anything is unrecognizable. Indeed, as Herlee Creel puts it nicely, “It is all very well to talk of caring nothing for the world's opinion, of not striving, being perfectly quiescent, remaining content with the lowest position in the world, and so forth. But human beings get tired of that sort of thing. And most of the [D]aoists were human, no matter how much they tried not to be” (Creel 1953; cf. Lai 2008, 165).

One way to solve this problem is to point out that the removal of interpretation is a means to the end of achieving existential freedom and reducing intensional suffering. Once that end is met, there is no need to subject more distinctions to the negation of interpretation. This solution is not without problems. One of the problems is that it does not address the concern of the *scope* of the Daoist negation. Assuming that the aim of negation is to reduce intensional suffering and achieve freedom, we still need to answer the question as to *how far* the Daoist negation of interpretation can go without losing humanity. The answer has to do, it seems to me, with the Daoist idea of *compartmentalization* that is at the center of its way of achieving existential freedom and psychological hygiene. According to this idea, the negation of interpretation does not apply across the board but is confined to one of the two realms of Daoism. This requires explanation, of course.

There are two compartmentalized realms inherent in Daoism. One of them has to do with “what is inevitable” (*bu-de-yi* 不得已) or “things that could not be otherwise” (*bu-ke-nai-he* 不可奈何), and the other “what is within human control” (*zai-wo-zhe* 在我者). For A. C. Graham, there are things that humans can do spontaneously (“so of itself”), but “a phrase more characteristic of Chuang-tzu may seem to contrast with it, *pu [bu] te yi*, that than which one ‘cannot do otherwise,’ the ‘inevitable’” (Graham 1989, 190; cf. Fraser 2011, 102). These two realms are both inseparable from the Daoist understanding of the world. For the sake of brevity, we may call the first realm *the realm of inevitability* or *the realm of freedom* and the second *the realm of non-necessity*. Thanks to compartmentalization, things that fall into the first realm are to be seen as

immaterial in relation to suffering, for all that fall into this realm are merely instantiations of destiny/fate (*ming* 命) or can be understood as such. As Slingerland aptly puts it, “[t]here is no liberty...outside of the recognition of necessity—or more precisely outside of the practical realization of necessity at the heart of our activity” (Slingerland 2003, 208). According to Daoism, we are free insofar as we recognize inevitability (the void of interpretation), and when we recognized it we can “celebrate all life situations in which we find ourselves” (Liu 2006, 168). The problem, however, is that we cannot see things as inevitable *at will*; we need to create space for them to begin with.

For Feng Youlan (馮友蘭), this is what Daoism does in achieving freedom, and this is why compartmentalization is part and parcel of Daoism. Feng discusses the mechanism of compartmentalization with regard to Daoist existential freedom. But he also provides a profound insight into Daoist psychological hygiene. Feng's philosophy on Daoism, as is well known, is largely inspired by Spinoza, for whom existential tranquility results from a reduction of emotions. He believes that there is no need to differentiate various causes of “existential tranquility” (for Spinoza, there is but one cause and that is God). For obvious reasons, Feng does not resort to God; instead, he sees necessity as an overarching concept that governs everything in the universe, from the lens through which he examines Daoism. For him, seeing things as “not being able to be otherwise” is a way to remove what he calls “mental torture,” a form of suffering that is different from pure physical suffering. He writes, “By the use of understanding, man can reduce his emotions [and mental torture],” and the same cannot be done with physical torture (Fung 1991, 311). It is worth stressing that the “understanding” Feng refers to here is not human understanding in general, but a special form of perception that accords a certain value of necessity to things at hand. According to Feng, it is this understanding that creates the difference between physical and mental torture—or, extensional and intensional suffering, to put it in our terminology. Hence, the answer to the Daoist question “How can we mitigate mental torture,” as Feng phrases it, lies in the very idea of “understanding.” He explains it thus: “A man of understanding will not be angry when rain prevents him from going out, but a child often will. The reason is that man possesses greater understanding, with the result that he suffers less disappointment or exasperation than the child who does get angry” (*ibid.*, 311-2). For an adult man “understands” that rain is inevitable and a child does not, so the latter suffers whereas the former does not. This is simple, but it is not all. Feng emphasizes a generic point that the more seriously we cast in doubt the causes of mental torture, the better chance we become psychologically healthy.

It is noteworthy that there is only one form of necessity involved in Feng's example of rain. We may call it *natural necessity*. Thanks to natural necessity, which has nothing to do with human factors, mental torture is removed by “greater understanding.” But there is more than one form of necessity, some of which cannot easily be reduced by Feng's understanding, and yet some of which should not be reduced to natural necessity even if we can. What I have in mind is the form of *social necessity*, which is fundamentally different from the natural necessity to which Feng refers in his example of rain. Their difference can be explained by the following case. Suppose, to stay with

Feng's example, that a man is prevented from going out not because of rain but because of an order given by a powerful other who forces him or her to stay at home (for whatever reasons or the lack thereof). Such an order, when understood as a form of necessity, is more difficult to swallow than natural necessity. It seems that as humans we are by and large more receptive to natural necessity than to social necessity; this much at least can be stated as the difference between the two.

The reason that I believe we need to draw this distinction is that we cannot live in a world where praise and blame are rendered entirely irrelevant or immaterial. And this amounts to saying that we cannot live in a world where no room is left for freedom. There is no denying that in such a world we can no longer hold people accountable for what they do, nor can we take credit for what we do. In such a world, there is no vocabulary of responsibility, duty, and conviction, not to mention praise and blame. It is for this reason that we have to reconsider the scope of Feng's "greater understanding," and this means, first and foremost, that the account has to go through a modification so that sufficient room can be left for the activities that are humans' while retaining a space for the applicability of "greater understanding." This is a challenge, and such a challenge can only be met by carving out space for the principle of such an understanding and leaving the rest to other principles (see the final section). This job can only be done by the compartmentalization of the two domains between "what is inevitable" and "what is within human control" (Fraser 2011).

4. WHAT IS EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM FOR?

Compartmentalization of the two realms creates a permanent space for existential freedom and psychological hygiene (recall what Nietzsche says regarding hygiene that it lies in not reacting altogether when a campaign is "too strenuous"). With a space carved out for necessity, Daoism reveals its true and unique characteristics.¹³ As we have seen, Schwartz summarizes the Daoist life as "just living;" seen as existential freedom, this attitude of "just living" represents what it is to have freedom *for*.

In "The Signs of Fullness of Power", Zhuang Zi describes a significant feature of existential freedom as the following:

Judging "That's it, that's not" is what I mean by "the essentials of man'." What I mean by being without the essentials is that the man does not let himself be inwardly wounded by likes and dislikes, that he constantly goes by the spontaneous and does not add anything to the process of life.¹⁴

¹³ We should avoid a common misunderstanding that to accept "the inescapable" or fate is to be cowardly passive. On the contrary, sometimes the opposite is true: it takes courage to face up to one's fate. As Jeeloo Liu puts it, "Fate" in the *Zhuang-Zi* is not a destiny that is determined by some Supreme Being; "fate" simply refers to one's limitations in terms of carrying out one's dreams and ideals... If the external circumstances are already given as a fixed state of turmoil and yet one still believes one has the ability to alter it, then one would be like "the praying mantis that waved its arms angrily in front of an approaching carriage, unaware that they were incapable of stopping it" (Liu 2006, 172).

¹⁴ "是非吾所謂情也。吾所謂無情者，言人之不以好惡內傷其身，常因自然而不益生也。"

According to Zhuang Zi, to achieve the goal of not "adding anything to the process of life" one needs to avoid an "inward wound" (*nei-shang* 內傷). Here Zhuang Zi maintains that those who do not wound themselves inwardly are those who do "not add anything to the process of life." What does this mean?

To answer this question, we need to read it together with the chapter "Going rambling without a destination." Zhuang Zi says there that those who are existentially free "refuse to be encouraged though the whole world praised him, or deterred though the whole world blamed him, he [is] unwavering about the division between inward and outward, discriminating about the boundary between honour and disgrace."¹⁵ Contemporary commentators tend to have different understandings of the message this passage delivers. It can be understood as relating to "equilibrium," "tranquility," or to "inner peace." Despite the differences, it is agreed that Daoist freedom is captured by such a state of living as, to put it in Zhuang Zi's language, "serene" (*jing* 靜), "emptiness and stillness, calm and indifference" (*xu-jing-tian-dan* 虛靜恬淡), and "cares and misfortunes cannot settle" (*you-huan-bu-neng-chu* 憂患不能處) (*Chuang-Tzu* 1981:259). Such a life in which cares and misfortunes cannot settle is, indeed, what Daoism endorses and promotes. When Zhuang Zi advocates "forgetting oneself" (*wang-wo* 忘我) or "losing one's own self" (*wu-shang-wo* 無傷我), he is aiming at this form of life and promoting this form of "just living," or so I argue. Zhuang Zi is aware that one cannot forget oneself entirely, so what he advocates is that one can forget oneself temporarily so as to suspend "adding anything [resulted from conventional customs] to...life" and see-through "likes and dislikes" ("The Signs of Fullness of Power"). To live a psychologically healthy life, for Zhuang Zi, is to be free and not fettered by social customs and conventions that render serene and "just living" impossible. This is what "losing one's own self" demands; in fulfilling this demand, one lets emptiness and stillness set in. This way one can have a life that is free from "inward wounds" (intensional suffering). For Daoism, to be free is to make possible such a form of life.

5. IS DAOIST FREEDOM SUBMISSIVE?

In the final section, I will address a major objection concerning Daoist existential freedom understood as promoting psychological hygiene. The objection holds that to be psychologically hygienic and free in the Daoist way is to turn a blind eye to the political, which is often oppressive and dominating in character. Daoist existential freedom requires adjustment to, and reconciliation with, social and political settings, and they do not aim at a critical reflection of how such a setting functions and will not challenge it even when necessary. Therefore, psychological hygiene and existential freedom are both passive and unnecessarily submissive. According to this objection, Daoist freedom depoliticizes the life world, making its political dimension irrelevant and even trivial, acting as if it does not matter. The more freedom we have in this way

¹⁵ “舉世而譽之而不加勸，舉世而非之而不加沮，定乎內外之分，辯乎榮辱之竟，斯已矣。”

as individuals, therefore, the less freedom we will enjoy as collective social beings. This is a serious challenge for Daoism, to be sure; if it stands, we will have to reconsider the Daoist existential freedom elaborated above as a whole.

I will argue in the following that this objection does not stand because it misses the fact that there is a deep-seated force in Daoism that puts stringent constraints on politics, demanding the creation of an environment where we can all act spontaneously according to our distinct natures (Ivanhoe 2010: 187). This force suggests to us the possibility of constructing a political form of Daoist freedom. Such freedom sets high standards for politics; it asks questions as to how power should be excised, how the ruling should be carried out, and what aim politics must achieve in order to make people free, etc. It is in this sense that this form of freedom is political. In what remains, I will argue that Daoist freedom is not guilty of submission and depoliticization. In doing so, I will first resort to Donald Munro's exposition of Daoism in *The Concept of Man in Early China*.

Munro comments on the Daoist approach to governance as follows: “[Daoism] will teach...that the most enduring government will be the one permitting the greatest freedom. This is not freedom in the sense of allowing individuals to control their own destinies, for this no one can do. *It is freedom in the sense of absence of external compulsion or restraint*” (Munro 1969, 123, emphasis added). Here Munro puts his finger on a profound insight of Daoism, namely, the relation between freedom and invisibility of power (the latter takes the form of the “absence of external compulsion”). The absence of external compulsion or invisibility, according to Munro, has two merits that come in tandem. First, it has the advantage of making power invisible in the eyes of the subjects. Because the government does not put hurdles in the way of what its subjects wish to have or to be, its power is not visible. And second, thanks to invisibility, power will not give its subjects the conscious awareness that it is the government that exercises the ruling; a sense of freedom is thus created among the subjects whose expression takes the form of *self-governing*. With the help of these two merits, the government, which would otherwise be the conspicuous object of people's censure, is now protected from being too visible. This is why Munro says for Daoism “the most enduring government” is the one which permits freedom from external compulsion and restrictions and leaves sufficient room for its subjects.¹⁶

Munro's understanding of freedom and the relation between power and invisibility is already implicit in chapter 17 of the *Dao-De-Jing*. In the chapter, a hierarchy of ways of exercising power and the significance of invisibility is made exceptionally explicit. If we read the chapter closely, we find a typology of power, corresponding to the degree of power's visibility and the feeling of freedom. The chapter establishes the relation between freedom and invisibility of power as follows:

¹⁶ What we can infer from Munro's insight is that the linchpin of Daoist political freedom is the *way* in which power is exercised (instead of whether it is excised). In all forms of politics, power is inevitably excised, and what matters is only a matter of how. Therefore, to say power is invisible is *not* to say that power is disengaged; rather, it is *how* power is engaged that matters the most, namely, whether it is “external compulsion or restraint” or compatible with the mechanism of self-governing.

The best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to his subjects. (1)
 Next comes the ruler they love and praise; (2)
 Next comes one they fear; (3)
 Next comes one with whom they take liberties... (4)
 When his task is accomplished and his work done the people all say, 'It happened to us naturally.' (5)¹⁷ (*Tao Te Ching* 1989, 25)

Here the best politics (1) is contrasted with other three somewhat deficient types of governance: the ruler's goodwill in governance wins him love and praise from his subjects (2), the ruler who inflicts fear upon the ruled (3), and the ruler whose power is made powerless (which is why the ruled "take liberties") (4). That the last two forms of politics are deficient or ranked lower than (1) and (2) is due to one of their common features, namely, power's visibility. When power is visible, the ruled inevitably takes the government to task for what happened to their destinies, for to be deprived of freedom is to be unburdened with responsibilities and at the same time to be invited to hold accountable those who take their freedom away. This is the Daoist insight into the social psychology of power and life. It applies equally well to the politics in which the ruled show their "love and praise" toward the ruler (2) (one can think of Confucius's ruler with various virtues so that people love and praise): goodwill does not change the fact that the ruled are at the mercy of the ruler's power, even though the exercise of power itself is praiseworthy. Love- and praise-based ruling *are* forms of ruling that involve visible power, for subjects know that they are at the receiving end of the ruling. Therefore, even love- and praise-based ruling threatens the foundation of power, despite that it is more desirable than the ruling that causes fear (3). Fear is the thing that makes power ultimately visible because to fear is to know what is to be feared. What is left then is the most favorable political power which is capable of generating the crucial feeling that "it happened to us *naturally*" (5). This is the type of government that is unconditionally praised and endorsed by Daoism. Its secret, according to the *Dao-De-Jing*, resides in the shadowy presence of power.

If "enduringness" is one of the political virtues as some hold, then the Daoist idea of political freedom offers an important lesson to the exercise of government. It sheds light on the classical distinction between kingly/sage and hegemonic rule, which is prominent in the pre-Qin dynasty. Such a distinction is known in the Chinese classics as *wang-ba-zhi-bian* (rule by virtue VS. rule by force 王霸之辯). Viewed from the Daoist point of view, the Confucian kingly/sage rule (rule by virtue or *wang* 王) ranks higher than the hegemonic rule (rule by force or *ba* 霸), not because the former is morally more desirable as Confucians believe, but because it is less visible and thereby more likely to be enduring. This does not mean, however, that Daoism holds an instrumental attitude toward political ruling. As we have seen, invisible power can be enduring only because it helps create a political world that is conducive to freedom:

¹⁷“太上，下知有之；其次，親而譽之；其次，畏之；其次，侮之。……功成事遂，百姓皆謂我自然。”

space for people to act spontaneously according to their distinctive natures. Hence, although the *Dao-De-Jing* takes a different normative stance from Confucianism, it can nevertheless concur with Confucianism that the kingly/sage rule is more desirable than sheer force. For Daoism, the scale of the probability of good ruling tips in favor of those types of power that are less visible, regardless of its normativity, whereas for Confucianism the emphasis falls upon its contents.

The hegemonic rule believes that force (*li* 力) alone can crash down political oppositions; that is why its emphasis is on forces exclusively. Mencius once gives a forceful reason against this way of thinking: “When people submit to force they do so not willingly but because they are not strong enough” (Mencius 1979, 63). With the accent on “not strong enough,” Mencius makes us believe that force alone cannot deliver moral compliance, for the latter requires a willingness on the part of the subjects. When subjects are not strong enough, they may still submit to the powerful ruler out of fear, but as Mencius aptly argues, willingness can only spring from moral cultivation (*yang* 养, “Gong Sun Chou, I”) , not from force, imposition, or coercion. When governance is shot through by sheer power, there can be no room left for cultivation and hence, no willingness and freedom is possible.

The reason I bring in Mencius is that I want to show that the goal of Daoist political freedom is to make willingness possible. Politics needs to be brought into a better shape—this is what they both share. Their differences lie in contents or what it means by a “better shape”: Confucianism wants politics to be guided by such virtues as benevolence (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義), whereas Daoism aims to create a political world where politics exists only in minimum.¹⁸ That is, for Daoism, we need little political power in the state to maintain human coexistence, and we should leave the rest to the people themselves to take care of, so that each and everyone can nourish her distinctive nature and be at one with herself, without the influences of coercive power imposed by the political forces. The way to make it possible, and to make freedom not collide with the minimal requirement of social stability, for Daoism, is to rely on a relatively simple governing principle and a relatively simple social structure—the well-known “a small state with a limited number of people” (*xiao-guo-gua-min* 小國寡民). The simple structure makes sure that the division of labor is not complex, lest the subjects become liable to the impacts of social and political imperatives. “The less human intervention there is, the better human society will be” (Liu 2006, 145). The purpose of the simple governing principle is to make sure that the government keeps its role to a minimum so that social stability can be maintained and enough room can be left for freedom.

¹⁸ Karyn Lai is right when she distinguishes two questions, “We are concerned here with two connected but different questions; the first relates to general engagement with the world, the second is more specific and deals with involvement with the political affairs of the state.” As far as the second is concerned, Daoists want to engage with it as little as possible (Lai 2008, 163).

6. CONCLUSION

In this article, I link the value of Daoist freedom with psychological hygiene and argue that seeing Daoist freedom in this way can bring out some crucial features of Daoism. The article also argues that the realization of psychological hygiene is not achieved by submissiveness, for Daoist freedom has built to itself a rigid political requirement that a desirable form of governance should leave sufficient objective room for its members to act spontaneously so that their distinctive natures can all be nurtured in ways that they desire. The article thus expands the standard interpretation that Daoist freedom enables individuals to have a full and free exercise of their natural abilities by arguing that Daoist political freedom requires room for such exercise; without the demand that everyone nourishes her distinctive nature and be at one with herself without the uninviting influences from coercive power imposed from the without, psychological hygiene are impossible to imagine. It is in this sense that both the political requirement that is part and parcel of Daoist political freedom and psychological hygiene emphasized by Daoist existential freedom is constitutive of Daoism. The article thus brings these two dimensions of Daoist freedom into a consistent whole. Of course, the Daoist utopia of a small state with a limited population may be deemed infeasible today, but the plausibility and significance of existential freedom need not rest on such an unrealistic utopia: We all need psychological hygiene to lead a robust and healthy human life in the world that is constantly changing. What is more, since a psychologically hygienic life is meaningful only in a truly politically pluralistic society, social criticism is indispensable as well—a valuable lesson we can all learn from Daoist freedom.

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