A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought

CHAD HANSEN, 1992

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Hansen's book could revolutionise our understanding of classical Chinese philosophy. His Daoist theory of Chinese/thought departs from the orthodox Confucian-based account, gives a clear and plausible overview of classical Chinese thinkers, and makes sense of Daoism as a critique of and a step beyond the other major schools. This is an important book, worthy of the attention of anyone interested in Chinese philosophy. Ironically, it could have been improved had Hansen practised some of the Daoist wisdom it honours: 'Careful at the end just as at the beginning, then there will be no ruining of the work'. Textual errors abound. The book also has too many footnotes. [1] Although some sections are repetitious and could be tightened, Hansen's restatement of themes and methodological principles enables the reader to keep track of his detailed and complex theory. Some of the book's themes, however, could have been deleted.

Was classical Chinese philosophical writing primarily prescriptive rather than descriptive? Did key terms of classical Chinese philosophical theories function semantically like mass nouns? Did the language of classical Chinese philosophy have a pictorial element? Did that element vitiate the need for a 'language of thought'? Hansen answers all these questions affirmatively, but one does not need to know how to answer these and related questions from current Western theories of semantics, epistemology, and artificial intelligence to appreciate Hansen's account of Chinese philosophy or his claim that classical Chinese Daoism makes sense, is profound, and even compelling. To be fair, the author does suggest that casual readers skip over the details of the introductory chapters, and go directly to the narrative. Throughout he tries to work out a broadly coherent explanation of the important features of classical Chinese philosophy in a way that avoids ad hoc explanation.

Hansen's Daoist theory is critical of Confucius and of the trends of thought that developed and defended his position. He argues that modern Sinologists and Chinese intellectual historians have inherited a
biased Neo-Confucian model of classical Chinese thought. Onto that model they have projected their own folk linguistic and psychological distortions. The result is what Hansen calls the ruling, orthodox, or standard theory.

The ruling theory sanctions what Hansen decries as 'the meaning change hypothesis.' Although the classical schools of Chinese thought share a common set of philosophical terms, the ruling theory assigns them different meanings. When interpreting the moral disputes of Confucians and Mohists, for example, the term dao is said to mean something like 'guiding discourse.' When discussing Daoism, however, the same theorists interpret dao as the name of an unnameable metaphysical abstraction. By embracing the meaning change hypothesis, the ruling theory buttresses the conclusion that Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism, all talked past each other, lacked a common set of issues, a shared framework of projects and assumptions, a viable dialectical exchange of ideas, and any hope of philosophical progress. Hansen calls this conclusion 'the fragmented schools view.' By rejecting the meaning change hypothesis, the author is able to show that ancient Chinese philosophers were not isolated from each other. Instead, they were members of text-based communities who not only preserved, studied, and updated the views of some master, but talked with and debated with members of other communities who shared common interests and projects.

Hansen rejects the ruling theory's claim that there is an ineffable, transcendent, monistic unchanging dao. He complains that the orthodox perspective has taught us to read Daoist thinkers as though they were Parmenideans, but Daoists were not caught up in a debate with Heraclitian theorists. Rather, they were reflecting on language, guiding discourse, social organisation, and the dispute between Confucians and Mohists over right and wrong. The ruling theory goes wrong, Hansen argues, because it embraces the meaning change hypothesis and the fragmented schools view. As a result, it '...attributes an incoherent, mystical, irrational set of beliefs to Daoists'. (p. 10) Hansen's Daoist alternative is to '...propose a theory that makes them (Daoists) not only reasonable but incisive in critique of Confucianism'. (p. 10)

Hansen argues that all the schools, including the Daoists, meant something roughly like 'guiding discourse' by dao. Some of them, like the Confucian and Mohist schools, were proposing what they believed was the correct or appropriate. guiding discourse. Confucians looked to their traditions, their records of ritual, literature, history and government affairs, to glean from them standards of guidance. They hoped to rectify people by getting them to follow the traditional principles of the classics and to imitate the practices of ancient cultural heros. Mohists argued that the guiding discourse prescribed by Confucius is neither universal in its scope nor unconditional in its application. It is, in short, not chang 'constant'. In its place they offered li (benefit) and hai (harm), natural and measurable features which, they believed, could be used to distinguish shi (right) from fei (wrong).
Mencius, defending traditional Confucian values, criticised Mozi's utilitarianism, but the position normally attributed to Mencius as a counter argument to Mozi's utilitarianism is incoherent. It implies that Mencius embraced a doctrine that the truth about guiding discourse can be known only by an ineffable intuition. Mencius fell back on this doctrine, in Hansen's opinion, to avoid having to debate with his Mohist opponents about moral reform. But Mencius was not completely isolated from his contemporaries. For example, he borrows the idea that humans have an organ, the xin (heart-mind), that guides action. Confucius and Mozi thought that the heart-mind acquires its disposition to guide human behaviour by internalising culture. Mencius, however, departs from this nurture-explanation, and assumes instead that all dispositions to moral behaviour are innate. He claims that there are four duan (seeds or beginnings). One of the four seeds is the seed of shi-fei. The Mohists used sri and fei as debating terms. Depending on context they might be interpreted respectively either as 'yes/correct' as opposed to 'no/incorrect' or in a moral sense as 'right' as opposed to 'wrong'. Mencius seems to have understood them in the later way. When properly nurtured, he claimed, the seed of right and wrong grows into wisdom. Moral guidance is based on natural inclinations, insights, and feelings of the heart-mind. Therefore, they lie beyond language and other learned cultural forms.

Hansen criticises Mencius' moral innatism as a kind of 'moral mysticism'. Wisdom in matters of moral guidance is the mature expression of an ineffable capacity to distinguish right from wrong. So construed, Hansen claims, Mencius' strong moral innatism turns out to be a form of act deontology, not a particularly good normative theory:

It is an enormously slippery one, easy to flex as circumstances or issues require. It is hard to get a counter example to it since it rejects consistent commitment to any normative doctrine or statement of principles. The heart-mind is the sole source of moral know-how. His (Mencius') theory gave him a reason to refuse to engage in reasoned argument: 'In my heart-mind I know it's wrong!' That is all the morally superior man needs. (p. 194)

Hansen treats the Mencius and the Daode Jing as texts which espouse an anti-language theory of guiding discourse. The Mencius is anti-language because it is committed to the view that there is no constant statable dao. Right and wrong depend on a non-linguistic intuition of the heart-mind. The Daode Jing is an anti-language heuristic, an exercise aimed at undoing the moral enculturation that necessarily results from the acquisition of language and other forms of social ritual. Conventional moral attitudes, Laozi thought, do not provide constant moral guidance. In fact, there are many cases where conventional moral wisdom is better off 'reversed'. Hansen notes:
Where all previous daos have agreed in advocating ten (benevolence), he notes that heaven is not benevolent. Where all conventional daos inevitably stress purposive action and involvement, his sayings illustrate the wisdom of quietude: wu-wei (lacks/deeming, doing). Where conventional value assignments favor the upper, the strong, the wise, the dominant, Laozi's sayings help us appreciate the value of the lower, the weak, the ignorant, the submissive. (p. 223)

But Laozi's purpose was not simply to reverse conventional moral wisdom and dogmatically stress its opposite. For he knew that the reversal of conventional wisdom is not constant either. On grounds such as these, Hansen claims, Laozi is driven to a paradoxical anti-language conclusion. All daos should be abandoned.

Hansen's account of the Zhuangzi is the capstone of his Daoist theory. The orthodox view of Daoism assumes that the term dao:

. . . has a special Daoist meaning, that it is a singular term and has changed its meaning from guiding discourse to the unspeakable name of some metaphysical absolute. (p. 268)

According to Hansen, however, in the Zhuangzi, as in the rest of the classical tradition, dao is used as a general term meaning guidance or doctrine, not as a singular term referring to an abstract ineffable reality. Evidence that dao is used as a general term is the fact that the Zhuangzi mentions several varieties of guiding discourse. Among them are the guiding discourse of the ancient kings, the sage, and the gentleman, authentic guiding discourse, artificial guiding discourse, moral guiding discourse, and so on. Hansen argues that Zhuangzi recognized sundry 'incommensurable guiding daos'. (p. 268) He rejected the anti-language conclusion that no system of guiding terms is viable, but he was neither an external realist nor a mystical monist. Rather, he was a perspectivalist and a pluralist with a pragmatic orientation. The system of terms one chooses depends on ones purposes and interests, and how one applies them is determined by ones unique perspective. Thus, there are as many ways to divide up and sort out reality as there are people. There are, in short, an indefinite number of daos, and according to Hansen, Zhuangzi treated them all as 'equally natural'.

Neo-Mohists thought that linguistic distinctions should be about real similarities and differences. Hansen credits the logician Hui Shi, a debating companion of Zhuangzi, with the realization that the Neo-Mohist's attempt to justify external realism fails. He thinks that Hui Shi defended the following position, and that Zhuangzi agreed with him:
We can find some point of similarity in any two things called by different names. Conversely, we can find some point of difference in any two things called by the same names no matter how much alike. So if we focused on these other similarities and differences, we would draw distinctions elsewhere. (p. 262)

But Hui Shi and Zhuangzi draw different philosophical conclusions from this position. Hansen thinks Zhuangzi recognised that Hui Shi was guilty of an argument from ignorance. Hui Shi reasoned that since we cannot know that any of the linguistic distinctions we draw correspond to the way things really are, no distinctions are real. 'Heaven and earth are one ti (unit).' Zhuangzi rebuts Hui Shi’s fallacious monism, and opts for scepticism instead. He concludes that for all we know there might be a correct system of terms by which to sort things into natural kinds, but no one can ever know what it is.

Hansen thinks Zhuangzi’s position that external similarities and differences are no basis for the claim that there are real distinctions rests on his reflections about the indexicality of language use. Indexicals are terms in a language whose reference changes as features of the context of their use change. Zhuangzi singles out the terms shi (this) and bi (that) as paradigm indexicals. As the speaker’s position in relation to a given object changes her One One speaker’s 'this' might be another's 'that', or both might refer to different things by their uses of 'this' and 'that'. Everything depends on the context of the speech act. Hansen hypothesises that, according to Zhuangzi, all terms in a language are indexical. What a speaker denotes by the use of a given term in one speech situation can change as the situation changes. Zhuangzi does not deny that the terms of a language have semantic content, but the content can vary as the physical and social setting of their use changes.

Since there are many daos, and since all of them are equally natural, there are no neutral standards by which to judge the 'success' of any one of them. Zhuangzi, Hansen thinks, allows that there are evaluative standards for judging the success of a given system of guiding discourse, but they are always internal to the conceptual scheme of some dao. Any way of distinguishing between shi and fei, therefore, will be relative to a dao and the perspective from which it is applied. Thus, according to Zhuangzi, for all we know, no dao is constant or absolute; no system of guiding terms and distinctions is universal in scope or unconditional in application. Yet even though Zhuangzi insists that all daos have equal weight, like other philosophers in the classical tradition he too develops and prescribes a dao.

According to Hansen, Zhuangzi proposes a prescriptive metalanguage, 'a dao of daos', a perspective on perspectives, a guiding discourse for discussing the function and significance of diverse guiding discourses. A dao of daos is Hansen's interpretation of Zhuangzi's use of the puzzling term ming (understanding, illumination, clarity) at several junctures in chapter two of the Inner Chapters. Zhuangzi
was fascinated by the inability of Confucians and Mohists to reach a consensus about shi and fei. What the Confucians call right the Mohists call wrong, and vice versa. He claims that if one wants to shi (correct) what some call wrong and fei (refute) what others call right, the best thing to use is ming. Hansen's interpretation of Zhuangzi's advice to ming moral disputation as a call to adopt a metaperspective on the conceptual schemes and unique perspectives of the disputing parties, it seems to me, is exactly what Zhuangzi had in mind. Rather than argue about what to shi and what to fei, a sage tries to clarify the issues about which people disagree. He aims to get disputants to see things (so far as that is possible) as their opponents do. He tries to get them to understand the diversity of systems of guiding terms, the nature of perspective and prejudice, as well as the indexicality of language use. By encouraging disputants to adopt a metaperspective, in other words, the sage fosters communication among them, increases the possibility that they will understand each other, and holds out the hope of settling their disagreements.

The clarity which results from taking a metaperspective, a dao of daos, enables disputants to talk with each other. Providing such a perspective for contemporary interpreters and proponents of the diverse schools of classical Chinese thought is precisely what Hansen has accomplished in this monumental book. It is why his theory of Chinese thought is a Daoist one, and why his book is such an important one. One reviewer has scoffed at the claim that Hansen is the reincarnation of Zhuangzi. In a literal sense the claim is indeed suspect. Surely, however, Hansen intended it as a self parody. For he finds himself in such robust agreement with Zhuangzi. It can at least be said that Hansen has done for contemporary interpreters of the classical tradition of Chinese thought what Zhuangzi tried to do for the diverse proponents of the hundred schools, namely: give them a metaperspective from which to carry on a discussion of their issues.

One of Hansen's most commendable achievements in this book is his insightful chapter on Xunzi. From a theoretical point of view, he argues, there are two Xunzis. One is a dogmatic traditionalist who defends the guiding discourse of Confucius, prescribes the study and practice of the rituals of sacred Confucian texts, and encourages the emulation of the moral character of the junzi (gentleman). The other comes close to the rational scepticism, perspectivalism and pluralism of the Zhuangzi. The rational Xunzi understood Zhuangzi's claim that all systems of guiding discourse, and thus all ways of determining right and wrong, ' . . . are equally natural and that they can get no specific moral guidance from that trivial fact'. (p. 311) Xunzi thinks that nature is constant, but that any attempt to state a guiding discourse is not. He is thus acutely aware that all daos are conventional, and that no dao is any more right or correct than any other. Since Xunzi recognises this, he has a point of principle on the side of his defense of traditional Confucianism. For if language and daos are all conventional, then the only viable standard of correctness must be conformity to currently accepted conventions. Xunzi takes those to be the rites and practices of Confucianism.
Xunzi is unwilling to let go of morality as the Daoists advise. He understands Zhuangzi's non-prescriptive concept of heaven/nature. But he thinks society will be better off if it embraces some system of guiding discourse, even though he knows that no such system can be constant. For there are, he argues, many people and few resources. Moreover, the desires of men are natural. They cannot be learned or eliminated as some Daoists suggest. But the seeking behaviour generated by these desires can be controlled by guiding discourse. Thus, a prescriptive system of moral guidance is necessary so that men can learn to cope with the inevitable disappointment of insufficient resources.

Xunzi conjectured that by instituting a system of social inequality everyone can achieve the satisfaction of desires appropriate to their station. Only if some men want less because of their station is it possible to ensure that everyone will have 'enough'. But there is no way to ensure that men will be satisfied with things unless they are taught to accept an arbitrary system of nobility. Social distinctions of status and nobility require ritual distinctions of proper objects of desire and appropriate actions. The question, of course, is how to rank human beings in ways that do not beg the question in favour of some and against others. For if all daos are conventional, there is no natural standard by which to decide who gets what.

Although Xunzi is aware that all daos are conventional, he dogmatically assumes that there is only one which solves the scarcity problem. The ranking system he favours is the one prescribed by traditional Confucian ritual. Moreover, he accepts the Confucian claim that the differing ranks of men entitle them to differing degrees of benefit from society, but he presents no '...argument that Confucian li is the uniquely effective way to achieve this equality with inequality'. (315) Xunzi's anti-Confucian disciples, such as Han Feizi, understand that the choice to follow a dao, let alone the Confucian one, has no natural justification. In the end, one must admit, one is free to pick and choose daos as one pleases.

Han Feizi, one of Xunzi's students, also endorsed a dao. By emphasising the concept of a, which Hansen interprets as 'measurement', he hoped to propose a more objective, publicly projectable dao than Xunzi had. Xunzi argued that standards are based on the judgement of the junzi (gentleman), and that the most available and useful guiding discourse is the one that is currently in place. For Xunzi that was Confucianism. Han Feizi, however, rejected the traditional authority of Confucian teachers, texts, and rituals. He preferred a consequentialist guiding discourse, one that employed fa (measurement), and aimed to maximise the wealth and power of the ruler. Sadly, his authoritarian dao was eventually institutionalised by Qin Shi Huang Di and subsequent Han dynasty despots. Since open discussion and criticism is the engine of theoretical insight, a shroud of ignorance and superstition was drawn over the golden age of classical Chinese philosophy.
Hansen has launched a devastating assault on the orthodox Confucian-based theory of classical Chinese thought, and set up in its place a meta-framework for sensible discussion of the concepts and problems of the major philosophical schools. I hope there will be more books like this one; not as ambitious, perhaps, shorter, and with better copy editing, but more books that think as deeply as Hansen has in his could usher in a long awaited renaissance in Western interpretations of classical Chinese thought.

NOTE

[1] At the end of the book, in a section marked 'Notes', Hansen posts 639 footnotes to chapters three through ten totalling 44 pages of subscript size print. The reader is advised to have a nice magnifying glass handy. An additional 75 diminutive footnotes are listed at the bottom of the pages of chapters one and two. Most of Hansen's footnotes are not essential to his main case. They embellish his position, stave off possible objections, and explain tangential nuances. They are numerous because of Hansen's legitimate desire to be as thorough as possible in the defence of his global theory.

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