

Creating meaning: a Daoist response to existential nihilism

Geir Sigurðsson¹

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Abstract The rise of modern science in the Western world produced not only a number of social and technical improvements but also a view of the world as a godless mechanism and thus of human life as devoid of ultimate metaphysical meaning. Some modern Western thinkers worried that this rational scientific view of the world, which presupposes ‘metaphysical nihilism’, or the view that there are no metaphysically grounded values, would also lead to an existential kind of nihilism that rejects human life, action, morality and social values in general as meaningless. Their attempts at preserving the former condition while preventing the emergence of the latter, however, have been criticized as being founded on questionable metaphysical and even religious foundations, and thus for being inconsistent with the modern scientific outlook. Richard Dawkins’s argument that engagement in the scientific activity of seeking truth suffices to establish meaning in life is generally not regarded as convincing, largely because the ‘truths’ of modern science fail to provide anything resembling existential meaning. Apparently, Western culture seems to suffer from some kind of metaphysical yearning in its post-metaphysical scientific world. This paper seeks an inspiration for a solution in early Daoist philosophical writings, most notably the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, and their call for creative self-forgetting and constantly active interpretation. Their treatment of topics such as human life, death and activity uncovers an intriguing worldview consistent with ‘metaphysical nihilism’ and yet inherently meaningful and life affirming.

Keywords Daoism · Nihilism · Creativity · Selfhood · Scientific worldview

✉ Geir Sigurðsson
geirs@hi.is

¹ Faculty of Languages and Cultures, School of Humanities, University of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland

Metaphysical and existential nihilism

Regardless of what ideas we have about our position as human beings in the universe, it is clear that our life on earth is subject to temporal limits. Belief in some form of an afterlife is certainly still widespread, and while an afterlife would not result in an extension of our terrestrial life, the content of such belief has generally a significant impact on the believer's attitude to life and ways to lead it. In the industrialized parts of the world, however, the view is now more common that no other life awaits us after the secular one has run its course, and that its completion therefore marks the end of the individual in question. Such an 'atheist' view of life established itself in the western world along with the scientific outlook in the modern age and became particularly conspicuous from the nineteenth century onwards. It has been challenging, to say the least, to render this view compatible with the need for meaning in human existence. Thus, metaphysical nihilism, or the notion that the universe is not arranged by divine providence, usually also entailed existential nihilism, or the view that life is altogether devoid of meaning and purpose. Among those who have tried to meet this challenge are Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom, despite very different approaches, sought to avoid an attitude to terrestrial life based on the assumptions and results of natural science that would lead to moral nihilism, civilizational decline and even the brutal state of nature as formulated by Thomas Hobbes. Many have certainly found solace in their philosophy, but others have pointed out that despite their rejection of the dogma of the traditional Christian worldview, they still had to resort to metaphysical and even quasi-religious resources to ensure existential meaning. According to these interpreters, Kant exchanges God for reason (Land 1991) while Nietzsche ultimately leans upon ideas of a metaphysical nature, such as the 'will to power' and 'the eternal recurrence of the same' (Nolt 2008). This indicates that the death of God in the West has left a void to be filled with something that, despite being called by another name, continues to serve a divine or metaphysical role for the fundamental meaning of life.

Other thinkers have gone further and openly declared metaphysical nihilism. They have either unhesitatingly accepted existential nihilism as well or made unconvincing efforts to avoid it. Arthur Schopenhauer and E. M. Cioran represent the former group, while Richard Dawkins is probably the best-known representative of the latter. For example, Dawkins (1995) says that the "universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference". Despite these qualities of metaphysical nihilism, Dawkins believes that one can avoid existential nihilism by dedicating one's life to active scientific work. He claims that life becomes meaningful through science and learning, and that any kind of fear and trembling stem from ignorance or an inability to enjoy the fruits of scientific endeavour. Dawkins's 'solution' has been criticized for being rather shallow. In a recent comparison of Nietzsche's and Dawkins's responses to a godless world, Howe (2012) says that "in Dawkins's presentation of the value of life without God, there is

a naïve optimism that purports that human beings, educated in science and purged of religion, will find lives of peace and astonishing wonder”.

There are several reasons why Dawkins’s insistence that engagement in scientific activity suffices to provide human life with meaning is less than satisfactory. One regards the complex nature of the concept of truth. To regard science as moving along a straight line in a continuous progression toward fuller and more complete ‘truth’ would surely be a misconception. There is certainly something to the analysis of the Italian nineteenth century poet Giacomo Leopardi that the progression of science is primarily negative in the sense that it eliminates falsities by replacing them with new ideas that then later turn out to be falsities as well (Leopardi 1937). Moreover, scientific discoveries most often generate a number of new questions, which means that scientific progress is far from resulting in fewer questions left unanswered.

Another reason concerns the very nature of truth that science seeks. Even though science in its applied mode as technology enables us to increase efficiency and productivity in our interaction with the environment, science is not capable of revealing the meaning of life on earth, nor can it demonstrate what sort of life we ought to live. Science can only inform us of what *is*, not what *ought to be*, i.e. what to do, what is desirable, good, right, etc. Certainly, ethics and humanities in general also belong to the category of science and these fields can indeed prepare us for dealing with issues such as the ultimate grounds of reality and the good life. However, Dawkins only seem to have the field of natural sciences in mind when speaking of the scientific search for truth. His passion for natural science may be such that its pursuit prevents him from the consideration of existential challenges, but his personal interest in science is hardly of any use to those who suffer for the lack of meaning in life and world.

The attempts outlined above indicate that the historical, religious and philosophical trends of Western culture have gradually entangled it in an existential dilemma. It seems that while human beings still require some kind of metaphysical meaning in life, science with its accepted methods and approaches leaves no room for such meaning to be discoverable. It appears therefore rather counterintuitive that natural science’s strict rational and quantificational approaches tend to be regarded as desirable models of emulation for most if not all fields of human existence.

An indication as to how this contradiction may be solved can be found in other cultures that have developed in different ways. This paper discusses the ancient philosophy of Daoism and its views on the position of human beings in the world process. I contend that Daoist ideas about human life and meaning constitute an excellent case of how the contemporary godless and scientific worldview can be accepted without being sucked into a debilitating meaninglessness of existential nihilism. The Daoist attitudes to life function as stimulating incentives to action, creativity and dynamic living without the need for some kind of metaphysical framework of meaning. As a matter of fact, I believe that Dawkins is in many ways on the right track in his efforts to find meaning in active scientific practice, but the weakness in his arguments consists in his narrow focus on the concept of truth, which comes through as a hollow echo of past metaphysics. With its creative hermeneutic-pragmatic philosophy, however, Daoism can underpin Dawkins’s and

others' project to rid the world of the influence of Christian faith without falling into the pit of nihilism. I shall return to this issue toward the end.

Life and death

According to Chinese annals from the third century, a dandyish gentleman was once observed riding through the streets of Luoyang, then capital of China, in a small cart pulled by a couple of deer. Two servants ran behind the cart; one of them held a flask and a cup, while the other carried a shovel. Whereas the purpose of the flask and cup seemed obvious, the shovel caused some bewilderment among the onlookers. When the waiter carrying the shovel was asked what it was for, he responded that the master had given a clear command to be buried on the spot when he died.

This curious man's name was Liu Ling 劉伶 and he belonged to a Daoist group called 'The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove' (Zhulin Qixian 竹林七賢). In his performance, Liu Ling was ridiculing the Confucian emphasis on rites and customs associated with death and all the other significant stages of life, implying that such rites and customs were merely silly exaltations of meaningless natural processes. As a consequent Daoist, he rejected such formal fuss, preferring to encounter the events of life spontaneously and to enjoy his temporary participation in the unceasing course of existence, preferably, as it seems, in a condition of some mellowness (Morton and Lewis 1995).

Over the centuries, Daoists have been some kind of whisperers behind the stage of a conscious Confucian moralism in Chinese society. They have tried, with varying levels of success, to remind the actors that they are after all just acting and need not take their roles too seriously. In the continuous flux of world and becoming, the individual human being is no more than a particular kind of life that comes into existence, remains temporarily above ground and then disappears back to her origins in the streams and endless transformations of the world.

Confucius's followers mostly avoided speculations about the overall world-structure, at least until about the tenth century AD, when the keen rivalry from both Daoism and Buddhism forced them to concoct ideas about the nature of the universe. The Confucian cosmological system that then emerged was strongly influenced by the two aforementioned schools of thought, but the Confucian focus was and still remains chiefly on the organization of society, moral education and the cultivation of traditions and culture.

When one of Confucius's disciples ventured to go beyond these fields and ask the master how to serve the gods, the reply was that someone who is incapable of serving humans can hardly learn how to serve the gods. When the same disciple asked him about death, Confucius replied that someone who does not understand life could not be expected to understand death (Lunyu 1966, p. 11.12). Confucius certainly held that one should respect the spirits of deceased ancestors, but he recommended to his disciples that they should keep distance from them and concentrate rather on the urgent tasks of everyday life (Lunyu 1966, p. 6.22). As stated in the Confucian classic *Zhong Yong* 中庸 from the fifth century BC, a

chapter in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), one of the main obstacle to the establishment of a good society is that the ‘wise’ are too preoccupied with what is beyond ordinary experience (*Liji zhijie* 2000). The reference here might very well be to followers of the Dao-school. Confucius seems generally to have had scarce interest in the natural processes of the world and the same applies to most of his later followers.

The Daoist philosophy, however, took off with observations of the natural world, of the ways of the world structure. Their interpretation of what Daoists experienced in the natural sphere shaped their views of life. Among their observations was that the natural processes are utterly indifferent to the fate of the phenomena subsisting within them. For example, in the *Laozi*, section 5, it says: “Heaven and Earth are not humane; they treat the ten thousand things as straw dogs”. Straw dogs were kind of dolls used for sacrifices. After they had served their purpose in the rituals, they were simply discarded as useless waste. The ‘ten thousand things’ denote the phenomena of the world, all beings and all things, that in light of this metaphor only play a temporary role in the course of the world until their inescapable destruction. The fact should not be ignored, however, that the symbolic value of the straw dogs was considerable during the sacrificial ceremony when they were treated with utmost reverence (Lau 1989). Similarly, one might say that the world powers attach certain importance to phenomena while they exist and serve specific functions. In other words, life is precious and worthy of reverence while it lasts, whereas its inevitable demise should not be overly lamented.

As with Confucians, therefore, Daoists concentrate on life itself. But Daoists were enthusiastic about operations of nature as they sought to understand and adapt to them. They noted that if unimpeded, the natural course of events supported for the most part the growth and development of organisms. Hence, the various species fare best when they live their lives in accordance with their special talents and abilities. When attempting to go beyond their natural skills, however, they find themselves in trouble. A locust trying to stop a horse carriage with its physical strength is bound to be crushed under it and a fish on dry land will have a short life span (*Zhuangzi* 1956, p. 4 & 6). The natural system follows a certain process that organisms—by belonging to the system—need to harmonize with and adapt to according to their own physical and spiritual constitution.

Daoist writings describe various mysterious sages who have overcome human limitations and soar in the clouds, flow with rushing rivers, dive into deep waterfalls, and, last but not least, have overcome their own mortality (*Zhuangzi* 1956, p. 19). While Daoist folk belief has tended toward a literal understanding of immortality, it can also be interpreted as an awareness of one’s perpetual existence in the endless transformations of the universe. Such existence entails of course that individual persons in possession of self-awareness dissolve in the transformation commonly called death. But the sheer realization that we share the inevitable fate with all other participants in the world process to eventually cease to exist as particular phenomena seems to force us to approach life differently and more nonchalantly.

When the fourth century Daoist master Zhuangzi 莊子 lay on his deathbed his disciples requested permission to prepare a ceremonious burial for him. However,

Zhuangzi asked to be left wherever he would ultimately die. “But master”, the disciples said, “we fear that crows and hawks will eat you up”. “Above ground”, said Zhuangzi, “I will be eaten by crows and hawks. Below ground I will be eaten by mole crickets and ants. You want to take from one to give to others. Why are you being so partial?” (*Zhuangzi* 1956, p. 32).

Life and death are human definitions of certain milestones in the continuous transformation of the universe while *dao* 道 refers to the process of the transformation itself. When Zhuangzi’s wife passed away, his friend Huizi 惠子 came to see him to console him, but was shocked when he found the widower sitting flat on the ground, banging on a saucepan and singing aloud. “After having shared your life with a wife”, said Huizi, “who has raised your children, aged at your side and then died, it is bad enough that you should refuse to mourn her, but you are so shameless to beat drums and sing!” “This is far from being the case”, answered Zhuangzi. “When she had just passed away, I felt, of course, great sorrow. But then I began reflecting on where she came from”, he adds, and then explains how he realized that her existence as a human being was merely a certain phase in the transformation of the ubiquitous vital energy of the world, *qi* 氣, into the specific features of human life, and finally into what we call death. This final transformation merged his wife with the coming and going of the four seasons in the world process. The implication is that when he realized his fortune to have been able to share the precious time of his human existence with her he no longer saw a reason to mourn, but felt instead the urge to celebrate her life with drum beatings and singing. (*Zhuangzi* 1956, p. 18).

The title of the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, ‘Xiaoyaoyou’ 逍遙游, could be translated as ‘straggling about’ or ‘leisurely strolling’. The wandering refers to our way of being, or rather becoming, while in existence. In life, we straggle about for a short period as human creatures, are then dissolved and transformed into other phenomena, and then continue straggling without knowing into which we have changed. Another chapter speaks of some old friends who observe the transformations of one another in the last stages of life with passionate interest. “What will you be turned into now?”, one of them enthusiastically asks another one who is lying on his deathbed, “will you be made into a rat’s liver? Or an insect’s arm?” (*Zhuangzi* 1956, p. 6).

Authentic participation in the overall transformation of which terrestrial life is only a section is a prerequisite for free and creative strolling. It entails acceptance of one’s fate in a broader context, even acceptance of becoming a rat’s liver or an insect’s arm after the next great transformation. Conversely, my effort to cling to my selfhood will result in limiting my mode of existence and alienating myself from the world process by denying the inevitable, and instead perpetuate a self-deception of the position of human beings. In my coexistence with others, the fear of losing this self of mine urges me to prove my uniqueness to myself as well as others. The comparison with others gives way to values that I will use to convince myself of my own excellence. I begin believing that I am something remarkable, even more important than others. In this manner, I become not only self-centred but also greedy, and express such qualities through superficial social values, leading to fierce competition and struggle for desired but not necessarily desirable things. It is in

such a way, Daoists say, that we become mere slaves of superficial social values. Moreover, the strong and suppressive self-consciousness accompanying this mode of life inhibits our natural creativity in the continuous flow of existence. We begin to perceive our relations with others primary as consisting in conflict and contest. Our lives are then characterized mainly by frustration, grudge, envy, fear and disapproval of others. At the same time, however, we are less able to deal with reality, for our self-consciousness distorts the harmony with its processual flow. In chapter 19, Zhuangzi takes an example of an intoxicated man:

If a drunk falls from a carriage, even if it is going very fast, he will not die. His bones and joints are the same as those of other people, but the injuries he receives are different. It's because his spirit is whole. He was not aware of getting into the carriage, nor was he aware of falling out of it. Life and death, alarm and fear do not enter his breast. Therefore, he confronts things without apprehension. If someone who has gotten his wholeness from wine is like this, how much more so would one be who gets his wholeness from heaven!

“The highest person is without self”, Zhuangzi says in chapter one. The implication is not that the self does not exist, has disappeared or has been destroyed, but that is adjusted to other factors in every single action. The highest person, achieving real progress in her relationship with her environment, forgets herself, forgets her self, becomes a thing among things, a process among the processes, and moves in rhythm with these processes and the entire flow of the world. In his comment on this Daoist image, Graham (1961) says that in certain circumstances “it is especially dangerous to be conscious of oneself ... One whose mind is a pure mirror of his situation, unaware of himself and therefore making no distinction between advantage and danger, will act with absolute assurance, and nothing will stand in his way”. As already mentioned, the results depend of course also on a realistic assessment of one's own physical and mental capabilities and limitations.

Self and creativity

The self-forgetting that consists in letting go of one's self-awareness and have it drift throughout the marvellous reality of which we are part also happens to be the key to creative living. The poetic story of Zhuangzi's dream of the butterfly hardly needs any introduction:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt that he was a butterfly, fluttering about as a butterfly would, happy and content, without knowing anything about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and was there again, a startled Zhuang Zhou. One does not know whether Zhuang Zhou was a butterfly in a dream or whether the butterfly had now become Zhuang Zhou in a dream. As for Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly, there must be some distinction between them. This is called the transformation of things. (*Zhuangzi* 1956, p. 2).

Some Western interpreters of this short but fascinating story have tended to understand it as an expression of the distinction between appearance and reality, a theme that we know from the Greek master Plato and has been a consistent theme in the history of Western philosophy and science. The assumption, then, is that Zhuang

Zhou represents reality and the butterfly signifies illusion. Such an interpretation, however, reads too much of Western thinking into the story. To begin with, Zhuangzi the writer presents himself in the third person, making use of his given name, Zhuang Zhou, in order to refer to himself in the text with just as much detachment, even ‘objectivity’, as to the butterfly. Note also that the butterfly knows nothing about the existence of Zhuang Zhou. It is simply a butterfly “fluttering about as a butterfly would, happy and content”. All of a sudden, the butterfly has become Zhuang Zhou. And we do not know which of the two is real or whether there is at all some sort of reality as opposed to appearance. The only thing we know is that there is some distinction between the existential modes of Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly. They replace selves immediately. One can be present in one of the two realities by forgetting the other. The butterfly forgets Zhuang Zhou and experiences its own butterfly-mode. In order to take full advantage of the creative transformations of reality, in order to enjoy them through authentic participation, we must let go of our self.

Many examples of such creative forgetfulness are found in the tasks of ordinary life. As soon as we no longer need to focus on technical aspects in a creative act, they are likely to have become spontaneous in what we do. When reaching such a high proficiency in a foreign language to be able to speak it without constantly reviewing in our mind formal rules of grammar or syntax, but just talk away, we are most probably internalizing it—provided, of course, that we do not assess our abilities unrealistically. Another well-known story from the *Zhuangzi* is the story of cook Ding, who was in the service of a duke, and exceptionally good at cutting oxen. The duke once observed the cook while doing his work, fascinated by his mastery with the knife, and asked him how he had reached such outstanding technique. The cook responded:

Your servant is fond of the way (道), which surpasses any technique. Whenever I observed oxen in the beginning, all I could see were entire cattle carcasses. After 3 years, I ceased to see the oxen as wholes. Today I sense them with my spirit rather than seeing them with my eyes. I have left my sensory knowledge aside and let the spirit flow as it wills. I follow the natural patterns, cut by the main lines, let major openings and slots guide me, acting in accordance with the natural constitution. I never touch the ligaments and tendons, let alone the greater bones. A good cook changes his knife once a year, because he slices with it. An ordinary cook changes his knife every month, because he hacks with it. I’ve used the same knife for 19 years now, cutting up thousands of oxen, and yet it is as sharp as it was in the beginning. For there are spaces within the joints, and the knife’s blade has no thickness. By placing that which has no thickness in an empty space, there is a vast opening where the knife can move about easily (游). Therefore, the knife is as sharp as in the beginning, even after 19 years. (*Zhuangzi* 1956, p. 3).

When attending to his tasks, engaged in an interactive relationship with the natural pattern, cook Ding ceases to exist as an ordinary self that applies a learned and conscious technique. Through his self-overcoming, he gains sensory skills. Günter Wohlfart (2005) explains Ding’s skills in the following way: “Just as we say about someone that he speaks fluently, we could say here that he acts fluently, rupture-free, without racking his brains. The doing does what it does *by itself*,

although this petty *self* often makes itself out to be important and self-consciously does as if the doing came *from the self*".

The distinction between the Chinese (and indeed 'Asian') 'collective self' and the Western 'individual self' is an old but surprisingly resilient cliché that among other things has been the basis for discussions of the creative abilities of Eastern and Western cultures. Such discussions tend to be quite value-laden and akin to the patronizing arrogance that characterized European attitudes to other cultures in wake of the scientific, technical and industrial revolution in Europe. The gist of such arguments is familiar enough. Doubts are raised that Asian culture is suited to stimulate creativity, mostly because of the tendency within the culture to collective thinking, traditionalism and social hierarchy, but that it may be capable of doing so to the extent that it adopts Western thought and Western approaches. Thus, for example, it is commonly accepted that Japanese culture can be creative because of the American influence in the country for the last seven decades (e.g. Hannas 2003). However, it is said, traditional culture in Asia is not capable of real creativity, and this is often claimed to be the main reason why Asian cultures proved unable to on equal footing with the Western powers in scientific, technical and economic respects. While this questionable discussion will not be pursued any further in this paper, a brief note is in order of the Chinese notion of self and its relationship with creativity with regard to philosophical literature.

The idea of self in Confucianism is primarily constructed through relationships and roles that signify in their progression the desirable growth of the individual in question. It is hardly meaningful to say that such an individual, alone and in himself, is anything at all. It is through the roles into which he is born, which he gradually learns to enact and then takes on throughout the course of his life that he creates himself. Thus, he makes his own identity by cultivating his relationships and roles. It could also be formulated in such a way that his ego is only the centre around which his relationships revolve. Hence, the Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation is not an exhortation to egocentric introspection behind closed doors, but to a cultivation of our relationships in everyday social living: that we become better daughters, sons, fathers, mothers, spouses, friends, students, colleagues, etc. Because relationships and roles are always unique in the sense that they are formed by *this* particular person in her relationship with *these* particular people, the individual needs to clear and follow her own personal ways in attending to her relationships, though certainly by taking account of traditional customs as established norms.

In this sense, the Confucian notion of self is certainly related to the collective, but defining it as a 'collective self' is quite a misleading simplification, most notably because its effective growth requires an always creative and personalized endeavour to make the most of any association with others. Daoism then expanded the horizon beyond interpersonal relationships to processes of nature in seeking to attune themselves to circumstances. Such attunement takes heed both of the circumstances as such and the characteristics of the individual as he forgets his own self, releases himself from it in a certain way to achieve direct perception of the natural processes in his own actions. Emulation is involved in both cases: Confucians emulate the exemplary ancient sage kings and trailblazers of the Confucian 'way' (dao 道) as

presented in ancient accounts, while Daoists emulate the natural process or ‘way’ (dao 道). The first is the way of civilization, the latter the way of nature as a whole, which, of course, contains the human being just as any other phenomena.

The idea of creativity emanates quite naturally from the notion of self as will be discussed later. But let us first briefly turn to the Western concept of creativity. There has been a strong tendency in the West to regard the creative act as originating in the depths of the individual, which is why its products are also considered unique. In this sense, creativity is almost identified with originality. While this tendency may be traced to some extent to the creation myth in the Old Testament according to which God creates the world from ‘nothing’ save from His own creative power, the focus on the distinct and creative selfhood grew stronger along with the rise of individualism in the modern age (Weiner 2000). We find a number of signs of this tendency today, e.g. a kind of reverence for originality, almost regardless of what it produces. Similarly, it is seen as a reprehensible ‘sin’ to imitate others, the punishment for which is to be branded as ‘unoriginal’. The heavy emphasis in western educational institutions to instil in their students that plagiarism is a serious crime and in the legal system to protect copyright rights are also manifestations of this thinking. It is no coincidence that Chinese or East-Asian practices in academia and other fields have been singled out for disrespecting such principles. This is a clear case of cultural conflict.

Considering the Chinese notion of selfhood explicated above, we may identify the following features of the creative act: Firstly, creativity consists in an unceasing endeavour to accomplish a harmonious attunement to constantly changing circumstances, and has therefore little to do with an actual ‘product’. Secondly, creativity is always co-creation between agent and circumstances and can therefore not be regarded as having individual ownership. Thirdly, creativity involves taking advantage of the available knowledge of the models relevant to the particular circumstances in each case. Hence, and fourthly, the value of creativity is assessed with regard to the contribution it brings to those who take part in it or are affected by it, but whether it is based upon a prior model is irrelevant.

This indicates that the aforementioned conflict about plagiarism and copyright infringement is primarily of a cultural kind. In Chinese art over the centuries, it has been considered normal and even praiseworthy to emulate appropriate models. The actual creation takes place in the delicate and personal interpretation of the replication. Just as nature never repeats itself exactly in two instances, no human act can ever be an exact replica of another, but is always a new creation. From a Daoist perspective, such a creation is all the more authentic as the creating person permits herself to let go of her self, its clear distinctions from other selves, and thus the vanity of self-absorption. The focus is on the creation itself, the process as such. The following story from the *Zhuangzi* is a good example:

Woodworker Qing was carving out a bell stand. When the stand was ready, those who saw it were astonished by it, as if it was the work of a ghost or a spirit. The Marquis of Lu came over and asked: ‘What technique did you apply?’ Qing replied: ‘Your servant is just a simple artisan and in possession of no technique. But I can say this though. Whenever I begin to prepare a bell stand, I avoid using up my vital energy (qi 氣), and find it necessary instead to quiet my mind by fasting. After

fasting for 3 days, I no longer care whether it will bring me praise, reward, rank or remuneration. After fasting for 5 days, I no longer care whether I'll be criticized or praised, or considered to manifest skill or not. After fasting for 7 days, I always forget myself and that I have four limbs and a body. At this point, the royal court might just as well not exist. Whatever might divert me from exercising my skill has disappeared. Then I enter the mountain forest and behold the natural pattern of the trees. As soon as I see one with the right form, I can visualize the completed bell stand, and all I need to do is to apply my hand. That's all I do, approaching the natural naturally. This is why it appears to be the work of spirits' (Zhuangzi 1956, p. 19).

In a certain sense, the completion of the bell stand is a further elaboration on nature. The woodworker joins the natural processes in their course, as if entering a game of skipping, but it is by means of his actions that the processes proceed beyond that which they would have without him. He brings them to completion through 'effortless action' (wuwei 無爲), which is why the bell stand ought to be seen as the outcome of an entirely natural process.

Classical Chinese landscape painters did not seek to make copies of nature, but to create new nature by joining its processes. As creations, the artworks themselves are new modes of being, and thus no less real than the artists themselves. Nature and artworks are all made from the same material, qi (vital energy), and the artist can even succeed in establishing a greater harmony in the artwork than in nature itself. The eighth century Daoist painter Wu Daozi 吳道子 once painted a landscape mural for Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗. According to legend, he then painted a gate on one of the mountains, clapped his hands, disappeared through the gate and was never seen again after that. He created a new reality (Lindqvist 1967).

The tradition of classical Chinese art has seen numerous repetitions of certain motifs. The originality of these works does not consist in the exceptionality of new motifs that have not appeared before or materials previously not used by others. It manifests itself as personal, creative originality in the finest lines and thinnest strokes of the brush. Perhaps Westerners can learn something from this attitude by reducing the pressure on their artists to come up constantly with new and original motifs that mostly results in time spent on the production of meaningless art—into which one cannot even disappear.

Through forgetfulness, by 'unlearning' the reified image of self that we have received from our upbringing and socialization, an opportunity opens up for greater involvement in the course of existence, like in the case of a child forgetting himself while immersed in play, or in the case of Zhuangzi, straggling about with his best friend Huizi and participating in the happiness of the fish.

Zhuangzi and Huizi strolled leisurely (游) across the bridge over the river Hao. Zhuangzi said: 'Look how the carps straggle about (游) at ease—this is happiness of the fish.' Huizi responded: 'You are not a fish—whence did you gain the certainty that they are happy?' 'You are not I', Zhuangzi said, 'whence did you gain the certainty that I do not know that they are happy?' 'I'm not you', Huizi said, 'so I can certainly not know anything about you. But you are just as certainly no fish and so it's clear that you cannot know anything about the happiness of the fish.' Zhuangzi replied: 'Let's return to where we started. By asking whence I gained the certainty

that the fish are happy, you already assumed that I knew it. I got the certainty from here—upon the bridge’ (*Zhuangzi* 1956, p. 17).

The properties of things are no less influenced by our own approaches than by their own nature.

Conclusion: life-affirming interpretation as natural creation

In the story quoted above, Zhuangzi creates a magical moment with his friend Huizi in collaboration with their environment. The vivid splashing of the carps becomes an expression of the satisfaction characterizing the leisurely strolling of the two friends. A metaphysically meaningless event is turned into a hermeneutically meaningful framework of a moment giving rise to the perceived joy of living. The interpretation of reality is just as much a creative approach to it as its transformation, and there is no reason to understand it as a fabrication or distortion.

Within the mechanistic worldview that emerged in Europe during the modern age it is certainly difficult to accept the value of creative interpretation in this sense. The only true depiction of reality consists in mechanical and deterministic causal relationships between material particles. Any description deviating from such determinism is simply false. For this reason, the Italian poet and thinker Giacomo Leopardi, who suggested a creative interpretation of reality that in many ways resonates with the Daoist approach here discussed, was compelled to present it as a praiseworthy but wholly fabricated illusion: “The faculty of imagination”, Leopardi (1937) said, “is the main source of human happiness. The more it rules in man the happier he will become. We see this in children. But it cannot rule without ignorance”. Leopardi maintains the Platonic attitude to creative arts as devices of deception while stating that deception is necessary for human beings to overcome existential nihilism:

To the sensitive and imaginative man... the world and its objects are, in a certain sense, double. With his eyes he will see a tower, a farmland; with his ears he will hear the tolling of a bell; and at the same time, with his imagination, he will see another tower, another farmland, hear another tolling. The objects of this latter kind contain all the beautiful and pleasant aspects of things (Leopardi 1937).

The objects of the second kind are praiseworthy illusions according to Leopardi. They are illusions, because they are not ‘really real’. In our efforts to interpret the world in a more life-affirming manner, we need to turn the Platonic values upside down and extol lies and deceptions.

However, the worldview that modern physics has brought us indicates that Leopardi does not necessarily have to understand the artistic interpretation of reality as an illusion contrary to science. Quantum mechanics has demonstrated that the smallest units of that which we call material reality appear in different ways, either as particles or waves, and that their manifestation depends on both circumstances and observer. It implies among other things that reality cannot be described as an independent objective realm subsisting outside the subjective observer. Both depend on each other. Thus, I cannot understand myself without taking account of my environment and at the same time no understanding of the environment is possible

without taking account of the particular perspective of the observer. Philosopher and physicist Karen Barad has argued that quantum mechanics has excluded the possibility of representationalism, i.e. the idea that words and objects, or meaning and matter, have clearly separable spheres of being, and that ‘objective’ reality can be represented with words without difficulties. There are no individually determinate entities to be discovered. All we have, Barad argues, are phenomena arising from the intra-action (as distinct from ‘interaction’) of ‘objects’ and ‘measuring agencies’, and these phenomena are the only available conceptual schemes involving determinate boundaries and properties. Meaning arises when specific ‘agential intra-actions’ take place, determining the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena. In this case, “particular material articulations of the world become meaningful”. (Barad 2007) In other words, meaning arises necessarily as a co-creation between human and world, but there is no objective reality to be ‘discovered’ as such (cf. Sigurdsson 2016).

According to both Daoism and quantum mechanics, while certain regularity can be detected in the process of reality, it should not be understood as a deterministic causal mechanism. We should rather see it as operating according to periodic and processual tendencies that can never be duplicated twice, because its interactive ‘participants’ are always new and unique. Daoists would add that our participation as reflective and interpretive human beings is quite special in that our conceptualization and understanding of reality are subject to interpretation and linguistic presentations pertaining to certain historical traditions and norms. We are therefore not completely free to interpret things in any way we like, because neither nature nor our concepts and understanding are characterized by sheer arbitrariness. Our scope for interpretation, however, is considerable and largely depending on the perspectives involved. To some degree, I believe, Daoism could agree with Leopardi when he says that the human being “needs to know what works for his sake. Absolute truth... is indifferent to the human being. His happiness may consist in both true and false cognition and judgment. Crucial is that his *judgment* be *truly* suitable for his nature” (Leopardi 1937).

Leopardi and Daoists seem to share a hermeneutic-pragmatic understanding of ‘truth’ according to which a ‘true’ interpretation of the world is one that provides us with auspicious material and spiritual conditions for living. Nietzsche (1988) in his experimental philosophy formulates an interpretation that suggests a similar understanding: “Truth is therefore not something out there to be found or discovered—but something *to be created*, designating a *process*, or rather a will to ceaseless overcoming: introducing truth, as a processus in infinitum, an *active determining*, *not* a becoming-aware of something fixed and determined ‘in itself’”. Our thinkers all suggest that a positive and creative interpretation of life and world is among the necessary requirements for a rich and prosperous life.

The world we live in is truly mysterious and wonderful. It is not only because of its complex composition that we will never have a full and ‘objective’ understanding of it, but no less because of our peculiar way of having to interpret it while simultaneously being an element in it. Richard Dawkins does not seem to take this fundamental mode of human existence into account in his insistence that our efforts to acquire increasingly better understanding of reality will automatically prevent

existential nihilism. Perhaps his overemphasis on discovery and truth makes him as unconvincing as he is. He loses sight of the fact that the joy he gets out of scientific work is precisely the joy of creativity.

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