

Kai Zheng, *The Metaphysics of Philosophical Daoism*, H. Ruan, R. Ames (a cura di), Routledge, Abingdon 2021, pp. 202, £ 36.99, ISBN 9780429447747

Sara Francescato, Università degli Studi di Padova

The Metaphysics of Philosophical Daoism is the latest book written by Kai Zheng, the Director of the Chinese Philosophy Department and the Director of the Centre for Daoist Studies at Peking University. His work aims to demonstrate that *xingershangxue* (形而上學), the study of “beyond forms”, represents the core foundation of philosophical Daoism.

The first section provides a thorough explanation of the main concepts of philosophical Daoism, such as *dao* (道), *de* (德), the “virtue of *dao*”, *wu* (無), “operative” void, and *ziran* (自然), “spontaneously self-so”, which characterises the activity of *dao*. The second part presents a path of analysis that goes from physics, the realm of empirical things, to metaphysics, interpreted through the Daoist perspective. This section covers the Daoist theory of physics, the relationship between Dao and things, and the Daoist theme of transformation.

In the first chapter, the author aims to define the theoretical core of philosophical Daoism. Although there is still an extensive debate on what the most distinctive theme of philosophical Daoism is—for example, some interpreters propose *ziran*, spontaneously self-so, or *wuwei* (無為) non-purposive action—there is more evidence to claim that *dao* and *de* are the main concepts of philosophical Daoism and that the meaning of *dao* and *de* (*daodezhiyi* 道德之意) is the theoretical basis of philosophical Daoism. The main evidence for this is the central role that the meaning of *dao* and *de* plays in Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s philosophy and in the historians’ commentaries, such as Sima Qian’s *Shiji-Biographies of Laozi and Hanfei*. Spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action are, in fact, two notions derived from the meaning of *dao* and *de*. The latter concept, therefore, represents and summarises the essence of philosophical Daoism.

The second chapter examines more closely the notion of *dao*, which literally means “the way”. The meaning of *dao* is centred on the concept of *wu*, literally meaning “not”, “not-having”, “indefinite”, and thus “emptiness”, “lack of something”. This

interpretation of *dao* was crucial to the development of philosophical Daoism, as it allowed ancient scholars “to ‘venture from the world of ordinary objects to the world of *dao*’ [...] [and to develop] the philosophical meaning of *dao*” (p.12). Since *dao* is formless (*wuxing* 無形), imageless (*wuxiang* 無象), namelessness (*wuming* 無名), it constantly escapes the attempts of ordinary language to define it. Philosophical Daoism, then, formulates a sharp critique of the artificial limits within which language constrains philosophical expressions and “it questions whether the use of name and language can serve the tasks of philosophy, be it the elucidation of the ultimate truth, the highest principle, or the fundamental substance” (p.17).

The following chapter focuses on the notion of *de*, which literally means “virtue” in the sense of creative and spontaneous power, which the Daoist school conceives as murky-*de* (*xuande* 玄德). Murky-*de* is closely related to the concepts of spontaneously self-so and non-purposive action and it is “almost synonymous with *dao*” (p.27). The theory of murky-*de* directly influences Daoist ethical and political conceptions: Laozi and Zhuangzi, the major Daoist thinkers, condemn the Confucian ideas of consummatory conduct, optimal appropriateness, music, and rituals, which are the foundation of the Confucian ethics and political conception, in favour of an idea of the state that follows the natural human propensities and rejects artificial values and unnecessary constraints.

Once the core concepts of philosophical Daoism have been clarified, the fourth chapter focuses on the concept of *ziran*, spontaneously self-so, and its relation to *wu*. *Ziran* refers to things and to their spontaneous transformations, however, unlike the Aristotelian concept of *physis*: *ziran* is not a substance, but rather a state of something. Since “all that appears in our intellect by way of names is no longer what it is as itself and can no longer be as it spontaneously is or what it spontaneously does” (p. 47), the actual process of spontaneously self-so cannot be explained through language, and is therefore unnamable. Then, the author compares the notion of *ziran* to the Greek concept of *physis*: although the two notions both originally meant “the natural world”, their meaning developed in two different ways. While *ziran*, due to its reflexive nature, precludes the idea of a creator God, the early Greek notion of *physis* went through a different conceptual development and finally “transformed into an objectified, external ‘nature’” (p.64). The primary and most

profound meaning of *physis* is “inherent active force” (p.64). “However, in pursuing topics such as the reason for existence as well as the essence and nature of all things, Western philosophers have overwritten and subverted the profound meaning that is inherent to *physis*” (p.64). *Physis* is, then, identified with nature and essence and finally becomes an objectified entity, namely, nature. Through this narrow notion of nature, Western philosophers from ancient Greece tended “to treat natural objects as a kind of artificial product” (p.65), conflating the idea of internal active principle which belongs to the concept of *physis* with the notion of production (p.65). This conception of nature gave way to the idea of a creator God, conceived as the productive power that generates all things. Nature became nothing more than the product of a God’s *techne*.

The fifth chapter focuses on defining what Daoist metaphysics is. The Chinese word for metaphysics is *xingershangxue* (形而上學), a name coined by Inoue Tetsujirō which literally means “study of what goes beyond forms”. Since “philosophical Daoism is a philosophical system that goes beyond *you* (having form and name) and focusses on *wu* (formless and nameless) [...], the theory of *dao* and the theory of *de* in Daoist texts are metaphysical theories in the ancient Chinese sense, that is, the ‘study of what is beyond form’” (p.72). In contrast, the Greek metaphysical tradition, centred on concepts such as *logos* and being, “takes the path of knowing entities ‘beyond form’ with the rational powers of the mind, whereas the philosophers of *dao* reject the use of conceptual, deductive, and judgmental thinking and undertake a path to *dao* that requires a sensitivity to internal experience” (p.81).

The sixth chapter focuses on Daoist physics, which is seen as a transitional phase to Daoist metaphysics. The Daoist view on physics is well explained by Zhuangzi’s natural philosophy: we use perception and intellection to grasp physical things, which possess forms and are comprehensible through names. However, these faculties are incapable of grasping Dao, formless and unnamable. Relying excessively on our intellection can lead us to focus on false problems, such as the end and the beginning of all things or the cause of things, which are a mere product of our intellection. Our conceptual reasoning is, therefore, “responsible for not merely understanding but also the creation of the physics” (p.95). “Negating causal principles in the realm of things is one of the main purports of the *Zhuangzi*’s natural philosophy” (p.98):

seeking a *reason* for the world is a futile task, for things originate from what is formless, *dao*.

The seventh chapter examines the relationship between *dao* and things. In order to explain this relationship, philosophical Daoism theorises a metaphysical framework based on a fundamental, yet paradoxical statement: “that which turns things into things is not itself a thing” (p.139). The relationship between *dao* and things is characterised by a clear division between the dimension of *dao* and the world of things, which, nevertheless, share a close connection: *dao* is not a thing, yet it is the root-source of things. This paradoxical relationship is the basis of the theorisation of philosophical Daoism and it outlines a clear difference from Western metaphysics, in particular, from Plato’s theory of forms. Plato’s forms are indeed intelligible and are separated by an ontological gap from the physical world, whereas *dao* can only be understood through intuition rather than intellection and is not isolated from the world of things. While Plato, and later Aristotle, established an epistemological method to investigate metaphysical questions using deductive reasoning and focusing on the search for “causes”, philosophical Daoism “omits physics (natural philosophy) and builds upon theories of intuitive experience and practical wisdom to establish a unique philosophy of heart-mind and natural propensities that then extends into a metaphysics of state of attainment concerning spiritual freedom” (p.147).

Chapter eight focuses on the paradigmatic theme of transformation (*hua* 化), as it represents a useful example to illustrate the development from physics to metaphysics in philosophical Daoism. The major contribution to this topic comes from Zhuangzi: he emphasises both the reality of transformation, referred to things (*wu* 物), but also the reality of non-transforming (*buhua* 不化), which lies behind the dimension of transformation and represents its ultimate foundation. The analysis is divided into three sections. The first one focuses on the theme of transformation to elucidate Daoist natural philosophy: Zhuangzi invites us to lift our self above the stream of ceaseless transformations by adapting to it through spontaneous transformation (*zihua* 自化), spontaneous action (*ziwei* 自為), and non-purposive action. ““What should you do and what should you not do? In any case, everything transforms spontaneously, you are no exception’ (*Autumn Floods* in the Zhuangzi)” (p.154). The analysis proceeds by considering the theme of non-

transforming in relation to metaphysics: non-transforming is referred to *dao* and to the spiritual state of the sage. The last theme considered is the transformation of things (*wuhua* 物化) in relation to aesthetics. Zhuangzi promotes the idea of the dissolution of “I” into “things” “to reach the aesthetic ideal ‘state of the indistinguishable self’” (p.173), which is fundamental to develop a genuine artistic practice. In this way, the Daoist artist overcomes the distinction between subject and object and enters a more intimate relationship with things.

In conclusion, the author has well summarised and explained the main ideas of philosophical Daoism, citing various interpreters and confronting their views in a productive way. This aspect allows readers who are not familiar with philosophical Daoism to be introduced to its fundamental concepts and follow the analysis the author offers in the second part of the book. The comparison between *xingershangxue* and Western metaphysics is extremely fruitful: the author demonstrates that we can speak of “metaphysics”, understood in its literal sense as “study beyond forms”, with regard to philosophical Daoism. However, this is an idea of “metaphysics” that differs under many aspects from Western metaphysics and its core concepts. Therefore, this valuable analysis invites us to reconsider our ordinary conception of metaphysics in a broader perspective, enriched by the contribution of philosophical Daoism.

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