



Taoism and Confucianism (II)

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Consequently Taoism does not attribute importance to outward action, which it ultimately holds as unimportant, and it expressly teaches the doctrine of “non-action”. In general, Westerners have some difficulty grasping this doctrine in its true significance, but they could be helped by recalling the Aristotelian theory of the “unmoved mover” which has essentially the same meaning, but from which they never seem to have drawn all the consequences. “Non-action” is not inertia, but on the contrary implies the fullness of activity, but an activity that is transcendent and altogether interior, non-manifested, in union with the Principle, and thus beyond all the distinctions and appearances that most people mistakenly take for reality itself, whereas they are only more or less distant reflections of it. Moreover, we should also note that Confucianism itself, though its point of view is that of action, nonetheless speaks of the “invariable middle”, that is, of the state of perfect equilibrium shielded from the incessant vicissitudes of the outer world. Now in the case of Confucianism this can only be the expression of a purely theoretical ideal, and in its contingent realm it can at most grasp a mere image of true “non-action”, whereas for Taoism it is a question of something altogether different, namely, a fully effective realization of this transcendent state. Placed at the center of the cosmic wheel, the perfect sage moves it invisibly by his presence alone, without participating in its movement and untroubled by the need to exercise any action whatsoever; his absolute detachment makes him master of all things because he can no longer be affected by anything.

He has attained such perfect impassibility, for him life and death are alike indifferent, and the collapse of the world would move him not at all. By penetration he has reached the Immutable Truth, the Knowledge of the One Universal Principle. He lets all the beings roll on according to their destinies, while himself he keeps to the Immobile Center of all destinies... The outward sign of this inner state is imperturbability, not that of the warrior who for love of glory swoops down upon an army ranged in battle, but that of the spirit, superior to Heaven, to Earth, and to all beings, who dwells in a body for which he cares not, taking no account of the images perceived by his senses and knowing all, in his immobile unity, by a knowledge all-embracing. This absolutely independent spirit is the master of men; if it pleased him to summon them all together, all would run to his bidding on the day appointed; but he does not care to be served.¹

¹ Chuang Tzu, chap. 5.

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If a true sage, much in spite of himself, had to take charge of an empire, keeping himself to non-action, he would make use of the leisure of his non-intervention by giving free rein to his natural propensities. The empire would prosper for having been put in the hands of this man. Without bringing his faculties into play, without using his bodily senses, seated motionless, he would behold all with his transcendent eye; absorbed in contemplation, he would shake all like thunder; the sky would conform obediently to the motions of his spirit; all beings would follow the impulse of his non-intervention, as dust follows the wind. Why should this man seek to guide the empire, when letting it go on is enough?²

We have insisted particularly on this doctrine of “non-action”, for besides the fact that it is one of the most important and most characteristic aspects of Taoism, there are other more particular reasons for doing so that will be better understood from what follows. But one question that arises is this: how can one attain the state described as that of the perfect sage? Here, as in all analogous doctrines found in other civilizations, the answer is very clear. One attains it exclusively through knowledge, but this knowledge, which Kung Tzu admitted to never having obtained, is of an order altogether different from ordinary or “profane” knowledge, and has no connection whatsoever with the exterior learning of the “scholars”, and even less so with science as understood by modern Westerners. This is not a case of incompatibility, although, by reason of the barriers which it sets and of the mental habits it imposes, ordinary science may often be an obstacle to the acquisition of true knowledge; but whoever possesses the latter is bound to hold as negligible the relative and contingent speculations with which most men rest content, the detailed analyses and researches in which they lose themselves, and the many divergent opinions that inevitably result.

Philosophers lose themselves in their speculations, sophists in their distinctions, investigators in their researches. All these men are caught within the limits of space and blinded by particular beings.³

The sage, on the contrary, has passed beyond all the distinctions inherent in external points of view; at the central point where he abides, all opposition has disappeared, having been resolved into a perfect equilibrium.

In the primordial state, these oppositions did not exist. They all derived from the diversity of beings and from their contacts caused by the universal gyration. They would cease, if difference and motion were to cease. They cease at once to affect the being that has reduced his distinct individuality and his particular motion to almost nothing. This being no longer enters into conflict with any other being, for he is established in the infinite, effaced in the indefinite. He has reached the point from which start all transformations, wherein are no conflicts, and there he abides. By concentrating his nature, by nourishing his vital spirit, by bringing together all his powers, he is united to the principle of all births. Inasmuch as his nature is whole, and his vital spirit intact, no being can harm him.⁴

² Ibid., chap. II.

³ Ibid., chap. 24.

⁴ Ibid., chap. 19.

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It is for this reason and not from any kind of skepticism, which is obviously excluded by the degree of knowledge he has attained, that the sage keeps himself entirely outside of all discussions that agitate the generality of men; for him, in fact, all contrary opinions are equally valueless, because, by very reason of their opposition, they are all equally relative.

His own viewpoint is one where this and that, yes and no, seem still to be undistinguished. This point is the hinge of the norm; it is the immobile center of a circumference on whose contours all contingencies, distinctions, and individualities roll; whence one sees only one infinity, which is neither this nor that, neither yes nor no. To see everything in as yet undifferentiated primordial unity, or from such a distance that all dissolves into one, is true intelligence. Let us not busy ourselves with distinguishing, but let us see everything in the unity of the norm. Let us not debate in order to get the better, but let us use, toward others, the method of the monkey-trainer. This man said to the monkeys he was training: I will give you three taros in the morning and four in the evening.” But not one of the monkeys was satisfied. “So be it,” said he, “I will give you four in the morning and three in the evening.” All the monkeys were satisfied. Thus not only did he satisfy them, but also he gave them only the seven taros a day which he had intended for them in the first place. Thus does the sage; he says yes and no, for the sake of peace, and remains calm at the center of the Universal Wheel, indifferent as to the direction of its turning.⁵

We need hardly say that the state of the perfect sage with all that this implies (which we cannot discuss at length here), cannot be attained at one stroke, and that even the degrees inferior to this state, which are as it were so many preliminary stages, are only accessible at the price of efforts of which very few men are capable. The methods employed to this end by Taoism are, moreover, particularly difficult to follow, and the help they furnish is much more restricted than that found in the traditional teaching of other civilizations such as India, for example; they are in any case almost impracticable for men belonging to races other than that for which they are particularly adapted. Moreover, even in China, Taoism has never been very widespread, nor has it ever sought to be, having always abstained from propagandizing since its very nature imposes this reserve on it; it is a very closed and essentially “initiatic” doctrine, which as such is destined for an elite only, and could not be propounded to everyone without distinction, for not all are suited to understand it, and still fewer to “realize” it. It is said that Lao Tzu entrusted his teaching to two disciples only, who themselves instructed ten others; after writing the *Tao Te Ching*, he disappeared toward the West, doubtless taking refuge in some almost inaccessible retreat in Tibet or the Himalayas, and, says the historian Ssu-Ma-Chi”en, “no one knows how or where he ended his days.”

The doctrine common to all, and which everyone must study and put into practice according to his capacity, is Confucianism, which, embracing everything to do with social relations, is fully sufficient for the needs of ordinary life. However, since Taoism represents principal knowledge from which all the rest derives, in a way Confucianism is really only an application thereof to a contingent order and is by right subordinate by its very nature; but this is something that need not concern the masses and that they may not

⁵ Ibid., chap. 2.

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even suspect since only the practical application falls within their intellectual horizon; and the masses we speak of certainly include the great majority of Confucian “scholars” themselves. All questions of form aside, this *de facto* separation between Taoism and Confucianism, between the inner and the outer doctrine, constitute one of the most notable differences between the civilizations of China and India; the latter has only one body of unified doctrine, namely Brahmanism, which includes both the principle and all its applications, so that there is no break in continuity from the lowest to the highest degrees. To a great extent this difference reflects the mental conditions of the two peoples; however, it is very probable that the continuity that has been maintained in India, and no doubt in India alone, also formerly existed in China, from the epoch of Fu-Hsi up to that of Lao Tzu and Kung Tzu.

It is now clear why Taoism is so little known to Westerners; outwardly it is unlike Confucianism, which has visible effects on all circumstances of social life; rather it is the exclusive attribute of an elite perhaps fewer in number today than ever before, which in no way seeks to communicate to outsiders the doctrine of which it is the guardian; finally, its very point of view, its mode of expression, and its methods of teaching are as foreign as possible to the spirit of the modern West. Some people, while aware of the existence of Taoism and admitting that it is still living, nevertheless imagine that its influence on the whole of Chinese civilization is practically negligible, if not altogether null, because of its closed character; this again is a grave error, and it now remains for us to explain the true situation as far as possible.

Referring back to the texts quoted above concerning “non-action”, it will be readily understood, at least in principle if not in the modalities of its application, that the role of Taoism must be one of invisible direction, dominating events rather than taking part in them directly, and all the more efficacious for not being clearly evident in exterior movements. As stated above, Taoism fulfills the function of the “unmoved mover”; it does not seek to interfere in action, and is even entirely uninterested in it insofar as it sees in action a mere momentary and transitory modification, an infinitesimal element of the “current of forms”, a point on the circumference of the “cosmic wheel”. Taoism, on the other hand, is like the pivot around which the wheel turns, or the norm by which its motion is regulated, precisely because it does not participate in that movement, and this is so even without express intervention on its part. Everything that is carried along in the revolutions of the wheel changes and passes; only that remains which, being united with the Principle, abides invariably at the center, immovable as the Principle itself; and the center, which nothing can affect in its undifferentiated unity, is the starting-point of the indefinite multitude of modifications that constitute universal manifestation.

Since the perfect sage is the only being actually to have reached the center, we should immediately add that what we have just said regarding his state and function applies in all strictness only to the supreme degree of the Taoist hierarchy; the other degrees are like intermediaries between the center and the outer world, and, just as the spokes of a wheel start from the hub and join it to the circumference, so these degrees assure the uninterrupted transmission of influence emanating from the invariable point where “non-acting action” resides. The word “influence”, and not “action”, is the most suitable here, although one might also speak of an “action of presence”; and even the lower degrees, though very far from the fullness of “non-action”, nevertheless still partake of it in a

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certain way. Besides, the means by which this influence is communicated necessarily escape those who only see the outside of things; they would be as unintelligible to the Western mind, and for the same reasons, as are the methods by which accession is gained to the various degrees of the hierarchy. It would thus be perfectly useless to dwell upon what are called “temples without doors” and “colleges without teachers”, or upon the constitution of organizations that have none of the characteristics of a “society” in the European sense of the word, and that have no definite outward form, and sometimes not even a name, which nevertheless forge the most effective and the most indissoluble link that can exist between their members - all this would mean nothing to the Western imagination, since it is familiar with nothing that could furnish any valid term of comparison.

At the most exterior level, organizations no doubt exist that seem more comprehensible since they are engaged in the domain of action, although they may still be as secret as all the Western associations which, with more or less justification, claim to possess such a character. These organizations generally have only a temporary existence; formed for a specific purpose, they disappear without a trace as soon as their mission has been accomplished; in fact they are only emanations of other, more profound and permanent organizations from which they receive their real direction, even when their apparent leaders are entirely outside the Taoist hierarchy. Some of these leaders who played a considerable role in the distant past, have left in the popular mind memories that are expressed in legendary form; thus we have heard it said that in the past the masters of a particular secret organization would take a handful of pins and throw them on the ground, and that from them would spring so many armed soldiers. This is precisely the story of Cadmus sowing the teeth of the dragon; and these legends conceal beneath their ingenuous appearance a very real symbolic value which only the common man makes the mistake of taking literally.

It can often happen that the associations in question, or at least those that are most outward, stand in opposition to or even in conflict with one another. As a result superficial observers will not fail to object to what we have just said, and to conclude that unity of direction cannot exist in such conditions. These people will have forgotten only one thing, which is that the direction in question is “beyond” the opposition they point to, and not in the domain in which this opposition occurs and where alone it is valid. If we had to reply to such objections, we would limit ourselves to recalling the Taoist teaching of the equivalence of the “yes” and the “no” in the primordial indistinction, and, as for putting this teaching into practice, we would simply refer them to the fable of the monkey-trainer.

We think we have said enough to make it understood that the real influence of Taoism can be extremely important, while yet remaining invisible and hidden; it is not only in China that things of this sort exist, but there they seem to be in more constant use than anywhere else. It will also be understood that those who have some knowledge of the part played by this traditional organization must be wary of appearances and very reserved in assessing events such as those presently taking place in the Far East, which too often one judges by comparison with events in the West, thus placing them in a completely false light. Chinese civilization has weathered many other crises in the past, and it has always found its equilibrium again in the end; in fact, there is nothing to indicate that the present

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crisis is more serious than preceding ones, and even if it were, this would still be no reason for supposing that it must necessarily penetrate to that which is deepest and most essential in the tradition of the race, and which moreover a very small number of men would suffice to preserve intact in periods of trouble, for things of this order do not depend on the brute force of the multitude. Confucianism, which represents only the exterior aspect of the tradition, might even disappear should social conditions happen to change to the point of requiring the establishment of an entirely new form; but Taoism is beyond such contingencies. Let us not forget that the sage, according to the Taoist teachings we have cited, “remains at rest at the center of the cosmic wheel,” whatever may be the circumstances, and that “even the collapse of the universe would not cause him any emotion.”