

Timothy J. Nulty  
University of Connecticut  
Department of Philosophy  
344 Mansfield Road, U-54  
Storrs, CT 06269-2054  
Email: [tjn99001@uconnvm.uconn.edu](mailto:tjn99001@uconnvm.uconn.edu)

Paper title: “*Derrida, Deconstruction, and Taoism*”

Area: Philosophy / Asian Philosophy

Abstract: This paper is a response to the claim that Derrida’s deconstructive arguments against the notions of presence and logocentrism apply to Taoist philosophy. I argue that Taoism is not susceptible to Derrida’s arguments and that there are in fact similarities between Derrida and Taoism on the topic of language.

### ***Derrida, Deconstruction, and Taoism***

#### *(0) Preface and Initial Characterization*

Zhang Longxi has attributed logocentrism<sup>1</sup> to Taoist philosophy. Admittedly, Taoism does involve some form of presence—that is, a direct and immediate meeting with some ultimate reality unmediated by any system of signifiers, but Zhang is incorrect to claim this presence is of the logocentric kind. Zhang’s 1985 paper “The Tao and the Logos: Notes on Derrida’s Critique of Logocentrism,” while being an excellent introductory comparison of Derrida and Taoism, seems to miss important features of both styles of philosophy that would call into question his main thesis.

I will advance two main arguments in this paper supported by a number of smaller considerations. First, I will argue that Derrida’s arguments against logocentrism are intimately connected with phonocentrism and that the present-to-mind bias he is intent on

---

<sup>1</sup> Logocentrism is the view that there can be a system of meaning immediately present to the mind – pure content untainted by a signifier such as a grapheme or phoneme. More generally, criticism of logocentrism has centered on criticizing the notion of presence necessary to the functioning of logoi.

criticizing is the product of what he calls “auto-affection.” More generally, Derrida is interested in criticizing the view that there can be a system of meanings present to the mind without the influence of any signifiers. Second, I will argue that the references to the distinction between mind and spirit in the writings of Zhuangzi situate Taoist ‘presence’ far outside of Derrida’s line of criticism.

(1) *Derrida Against Logocentrism*

It is important to recognize at the start that deconstruction cannot offer a general argument against all notions of logocentrism or presence. Deconstruction, as formulated by Derrida, denies that there is any privileged theoretical framework within which we can criticize other arguments. Deconstruction works from *within* the text; it undermines the dominant meaning of a text by using repressed and marginalized aspects of the very same text. A general argument against all notions of presence and logocentrism would require assuming a position outside of the specific texts such an argument would be applied to; hence consistency requires the denial of the possibility of such an argument. In *Limited, Inc.*, Derrida stress the role of subordination in opposing metaphysical concepts such as: intelligible/sensible, logical/rhetorical, signified/signifier, etc. (1998, 21). One side of these dichotomies is taken to be primary or the self-sustaining origin of the other derivative term.

According to Derrida, this act of subordination has had no greater expression than in the tradition of Western thought starting with Plato. There are a number of stages in this hierarchical structure. First, writing is subordinate to speech—without the presence of the speaker and her intended meaning the threat of misinterpretation looms large. Second, speech is subordinated to an inner system of meanings that stand in purely logical

relations to each other. Meanings are completely determinate and transparent to the rational mind that contemplates them. This is evident in the notion of Platonic forms and in Husserl's method of transcendental phenomenology. Speech merely becomes a vehicle for the expression of pure meanings immediately present in the mind of the speaker. The phonetic or graphic elements are necessary *only* for the sake of communication and both constantly threaten to taint or distort the intended meaning.

I should mention that Zhang correctly criticizes Derrida for assuming that the Chinese language has developed outside of logocentrism because its system of writing is non-phonetic. Derrida does appear to have mischaracterized how the written Chinese functions to convey meaning. Zhang states: "reading Chinese is, like reading any other language, a linguistic act of comprehending the meaning of a succession of signs, either with silent understanding or with the utterance of sounds" (1985, 390). Derrida thinks the understanding of the Chinese character is fundamentally different from understanding phonetic writing. Although I agree that Derrida needs further argument to show Chinese language is non-logocentric (a view I think is perhaps erroneous), it doesn't follow that Taoism as conceived by Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi is itself logocentric.

Zhang points out that the character *tao* is a polyseme of which "way" is only one possible interpretation. Zhang sites the first poem by Lao Tzu as playing with this shift in meaning. *Tao* can also mean "thinking" and "speaking" according to Zhang. "The *tao* that can be *tao*-ed [spoken of], is not the *tao*" (1985, 391). The possibility of multiple meanings for *tao* leads Zhang to conclude that Lao Tzu considers the *Tao* "both immanent and transcendent" (1985, 391). Zhang analyzes the *immanent tao* and the *transcendent tao* as the spoken-tao and the thought-of-tao, respectively. This last comparison is then further

explained as a form of logos since the word “logos” means both “thinking” and “speaking.” This appears to be Zhang’s main motivation for claiming Taoism is a form of logocentrism. I will put this line of inquiry on hold until the next section where I will question Zhang’s treatment of the “transcendent tao” as somehow being connected to thought.

I will now briefly sketch Derrida’s argument against logocentrism. As previously mentioned, there is no general deconstructive argument so what follows will be an abstraction from various arguments offered by Derrida. The most central theme is the connection of logocentrism to phonocentrism—the privileging of voice (and ultimately thought) over writing.

Derrida questions how the view that there is an inner transparent realm of meaning became so entrenched in Western thinking. Derrida’s answer is that the notion of meaningful entities self-present to the mind is the effect of the suppression of *difference*. Subjectivity is the product of a kind of difference—the dichotomy of speaker and hearer. The traditional view has been that the particular graphic or phonetic element is always arbitrary in relation to the content it conveys; the written word “cat” or its phonetic constitution could mean anything—the connection of signifier and signified is entirely arbitrary. If we remove the graphic element and the phonetic element (the arbitrary and inessential parts), we are left with pure content. Where are we to find this pure content unmediated by any signifier? We allegedly find pure content in the phenomenological voice, namely—thought.

The process of thinking is what Derrida calls “auto-affection.” Derrida denies that there is a unified subject that can rationally contemplate abstract meaningful entities,

rather internalizing speech and hearing produces the subject. There is no prior realm of meanings that an equally prior and independent subject can intuitively grasp. The internalized *difference* of speaking/hearing is suppressed and treated as a pre-existing condition that then gives meaning to graphic and phonetic elements. Derrida inverts the hierarchy. The subject does not impart meanings; instead, the prior functioning of a system of meaningful signs becomes the necessary prior condition for subjectivity.

Moreover, these meaningful entities must somehow maintain their ideal identity through time.<sup>2</sup> What makes any particular meaningful entity the entity that it is is its iterability. Hence, the 'presence' of any of these meanings contains an implicit reference to their past and their future roles in rational contemplation. Once again, there is a suppression of temporal difference as non-presence to provide an account of ideal meaningfulness. Derrida claims that logocentrism is therefore intimately tied to phonocentrism. Zhang also recognizes this close connection, yet doesn't clearly show how phonocentrism functions in Taoism.

#### *(2) The Taoist Distinction of Mind and Spirit*

The logocentric presence criticized by Derrida clearly aims at objects immediately graspable by the rational mind. There is the distinction between rational intuition and verbal or written expression. Zhang thinks this structure finds direct parallel in Taoist thought; there is what we can attempt to express about the Tao and our direct intuitions of the Tao. 'This contrast between intuition and expression already includes the East in the

---

<sup>2</sup> The Platonic forms are eternal and unchanging and the mind has true knowledge when it grasps this unchanging reality. For Husserl, the mind structures the world according to the a priori relations among its meaningful parts that must be repeatedly graspable. This notion of transparent identities in thought is quite nicely characterized and then criticized by Ruth Millikan in chapter 10 of her book: *On Clear and Confused Ideas*. Millikan illustrates the dominance this view of mind has had in analytic philosophy as well as in psychology.

metaphysics of presence. Logocentrism, therefore, does not inhabit just the Western way of thinking; it constitutes the very way of thinking itself (1985, 395). Again, it may be the typical view of thinking and expressing in Chinese thought are logocentric, but does this show Taoism is logocentric? I think not. Zhang even goes so far as to claim “that there is no reason why Plato should not be considered in harmonious company with Lao Tzu in contemplation of the *logos* and the *tao*” (1985, 393). Both may be beyond the expressions of language but this by itself does not entail that both act as a rational foundation for meaningful speech and thought.

The presence of Taoism involves a cessation of rational thought as an attempt to get a hold on reality. Instead, Taoists advocate a type of receptivity that is decidedly not “mental.” This kind of harmony or presence is not with some abstract entity separate from and graspable by a rational subject, rather it is a kind of harmony or orientation toward the context in which one finds oneself. Burton Watson, in the introduction to this translation of Zhuangzi, describes Taoism as advocating a “mindless, purposeless mode of life” (1964, 6). I think the Taoists do allow for rational thought as part of approaching certain aspects of life, but rationality does not act as an absolute ground to which we can appeal to grasp reality. Even this “rationality” is better understood as a kind of carefulness. The central approach does seem to involve a careful awareness of what is at hand, a kind of sensitivity for what the best response might be.

As part of a parody of Confucius, Zhuangzi mentions the idea of fasting of the mind. Confucius is portrayed as saying “no, don’t listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things” (1964, 54). The difference between mind and spirit is

admittedly somewhat obscure and difficult to understand. Part of the difference seems to be that the mind makes judgments and categories; it discriminates into this and that. The word 'spirit' seems to refer to making one's energies harmonious and thereby in tune with the surroundings. The transcendent tao mentioned by Zhang involves something clearly different than his characterization of it as the thought-of-tao.

The presence of understanding, or perhaps more accurately stated, of being one with the tao, is not a stable entity that is iterable across time. The texts of both Zhuangzi and Lao Tzu stress repeatedly the role of constant change. Presence here doesn't function as a motionless, graspable object of intuition; Taoist presence is a dynamic harmony. This idea finds expression in various stories involving types of skill. The highest levels of skill are beyond rational thought and the self-presence of the phenomenological voice. Cook Ting illustrates the role of spirit as opposed to mind in acting in accordance with the Tao. Cook Ting explains his skill at meat cutting to Lord Wen-hui: "And now—now I go it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and *understanding*<sup>3</sup> have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup." (1964, 46).

Derrida's criticisms of the role of presence in logocentrism focus on two areas: (1) the suppression of difference as phenomenological voice and (2) the suppression of the necessity of temporal non-presence due to the iterability of ideal meanings. Both forms of suppression have led philosophers to believe in the unmediated presence of meanings transparent to the rational mind and in the notion of ideal entities that have their identity entirely within themselves—that is, they are non-relational. Zhuangzi opposes this belief in non-relational categories or meanings. "So I say, 'that' comes out of 'this' and 'this' depends on 'that'—which is to say that 'this' and 'that' give birth to each other" (1964, 35). I think

---

<sup>3</sup> The italics are my emphasis.

Zhuangzi would deny any notion of absolute categories, relations, or labels whether in language or in the realm of logos. He even questions whether words actually can say anything since what they say is not fixed—are they any different from the peeps of baby birds (1964, 34)? Moreover, there is no stable, static underlying reality on which to base these categories. Kupperman points out that the Taoist concept of time is dynamic and involves continuous change contrary to the static Forms of Platonic heaven (2001, 126).

For Derrida and the Taoists there is no fixed reality that remains constant and unchanging. Derrida focuses on meaning and argues that a text can never have one privileged interpretation that would exclude the possibility of further reinterpretation. Likewise, Zhuangzi recognizes that we can never justifiably believe we have the final perspective on some ultimate reality. It appears that those who do “understand” the Tao aren’t in touch with some unchanging realm but rather learn to flow with the patterns of constant change. Although we can consider this type of Taoist understanding a kind of presence, it is not the kind of presence that Derrida believes dominates Western philosophy.

### *(3) Conclusion*

Zhang offers an interesting comparison of deconstruction and Taoism. However, the presence or absence of similarities needs to be carefully argued. These two topics are particularly difficult because Zhuangzi and Derrida are weary of anyone taking their texts too seriously or literally. Zhuangzi uses humor to stave off this possibility while Derrida uses what he calls “erasure.” Derrida has to use language to do philosophy but we are not supposed to buy into the metaphysical baggage that comes with much of the terminology. He places certain terms “under erasure” in order to warn the

reader that the term's use, although necessary, is not to be taken in the way intended by the original text.

In order to make the kind of claim Zhang is trying to make about Taoism's logocentrism he would need to offer some type of deconstructive analysis of Taoist literature. He would need to show that there is a clear hierarchy of meaning in which one aspect of the text is suppressed. Zhang would also have to show how the notion of presence is unjustified and functions within some kind of dichotomy. This is extremely implausible given the Taoist treatment of language and their willingness to admit, even flaunt, the fact that meanings shift with context and perspective.

*Bibliography*

- Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (1981)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, John Hopkins University Press, London (1967)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Speech and Phenomena*, Northwest University Press, Evanston (1973)
- Kupperman, Joel J. *Classic Asian Philosophy: A Guide to Essential Texts*, Oxford University Press, New York (2001)
- Lao Tzu. *The Way of Life*, trans. R.B. Blakney, Penguin Books (1955)
- Watson, Burton. *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, Columbia University Press, New York (1964)
- Zhang, Longxi. "The Tao and the Logos: Notes on Derrida's Critique of Logocentrism," in *Critical Inquiry* 11 (March 1985)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*, Duke University Press, London (1992)

