



LAO ZI:

On

Communication

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This is an English summary by the author of his more detailed article which appears in the Chinese section of this issue: the Editors.

Although the term "communication" is not found explicitly in the writings of Lao Zi, it has become an important term in contemporary philosophy, especially in philosophies of language and critical theory. At first glance, it may seem anachronistic and even unfair to project such a modern concept onto a writer of antiquity; but, upon further consideration, we are convinced that it is quite possible to make more explicit a theory of communication that is implicit in Lao Zi's philosophy. Contemporary philosophies of language and modern critical theory have themselves given firm evidence that communication is a permanent and essential element in the linguistic and social-behaviour of all human beings. Even if Lao Zi had written only a few words on the subject, the conceptual framework of his philosophy allows for the development of a basic theory of communication. By using the hermeneutic method, we are able to thematize this implicit theory. Moreover, the relation of man to nature, man to other men, man to his own self, and man to the metaphysical order belong essentially to all human existence. The critical theory of J. Habermas has placed much emphasis on the labour-relation

between man and nature, the communication-relation between man and other men, the reflection-relation between man and self. But Habermas seems to be unable to furnish us with any insights into the relation between man and the metaphysical order. In his eyes, any ontological affirmation falls into the error of objectivism. In contrast, Lao Zi seems to give priority to the relation between man and the metaphysical order (Dao), which relationship, having been properly restored, can justify and harmonize man's relation with nature, other men, and the self. By the use of comparison and contrast, we can build up a dialectical complementarity between Lao Zi and Habermas' theories of communication.

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Hermeneutics and contrast, then, are the two philosophical methods that we will use in this paper. The hermeneutic method can make explicit what is implicit in Lao Zi's theory of communication through such procedures as linguistic interpretation, subjective reconstruction, and the fusion of horizons (Cf. Truth and Method, H.G. Gadamer). By the use of contrast, we are able to build up a dialectical complementarity between the two theories and, thereby, establish a more holistic vision of the problem of communication.

Our hermeneutic reconstruction of the meaning of Lao Zi's text shows, at first, an apparent contradiction between the literal meaning and the dialectical meaning. For example, one proposition "Yet the people there may grow old and die without ever interacting one with another" seems to reject interaction between people and to negate any possibility of communication. However, this apparent negation can be overcome by a fuller interpretation of the whole text, where it then becomes explicit that what Lao Zi is emphasizing is the priority of man's communication with, or his conversion to, Dao as the very foundation for communication, for man's interaction with nature and other men. In this respect, Lao Zi is in disagreement with the controlling action that man, through technology, imposes on nature by means of all kinds of technical instrumentality. "Though people have technical instruments ten-hundred times (more powerful and efficacious), they will have no use for them." Here he did not mean to abandon technology without reservation, but he did mean that technology must not be used without the guiding principle of Wu (nothingness). "Thirty spokes share one hub; adopt the

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nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the cart." Without the function of Wu, man's reason tends to be reduced to mere instrumental rationality. Lao Zi criticizes, just as Habermas does, man's instrumental rationality which seeks to control and to dominate nature. But Lao Zi differs from Habermas in that he doesn't consider domination to be part of the essence of technique, but rather as a consequence of the oblivion of Dao (Seinsvergessenheit according to Heidegger).

As to man's relation to other men, Lao Zi also considers communication with, or conversion to, Dao as of prime necessity. Beginning with an authentic relationship with Dao, man could then form a kind of spiritual community, with others in which the subjectivity of everyone enjoys communion with Dao and intersubjectivity is thereby established. In such a spiritual community, in Lao Zi's view, man would communicate directly and authentically with other men without the intervention of language, especially written language. "Let the people again knot cords and use them (in place of writing)." This is quite different from Habermas who sees communication as essentially linguistic, and dialectical: rationality proper to practical everyday communication expresses itself in argumentation, which, through a dialectical process of reason-for and reason-against, arrives finally at agreement. Lao Zi in contrast, considers the ground of rationality in human communication to be Dao. However, the formation of such a spiritual community needs a stable and harmonious life-world which can exist only if there is little local displacement of people and no more warfare. It is for this reason that Lao Zi seems to oppose the use of transport and instruments of war. "Though people have ships and carts, they will have no occasion to make a show of them." It is in this spirit that Lao Zi states his preference for a life-world grounded in the joy of Being; a world in which people relish their food, dress with an eye for beauty, are content in their homes, and delight in their traditions and customs. We can say that Lao Zi's world is one that takes its joy from the manifestation of Dao, without technological intervention, political domination and war. It is a world made up of spiritual communities living the speculative life.

Unlike Habermas, who sees the process of communication as a dialogue based on argumentation between reason-for and reason-against, Lao Zi considers man's conversion to Dao as the preliminary condition for any free and responsible communication between self and others. Thus the special characteristic of Lao Zi's theory of communication lies in his positing a metaphysical and epistemological foundation for the phenomenon of communication.

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This metaphysical foundation for Lao Zi's theory of communication - the interaction between man, nature, and Dao - consists of two inter-related processes: the process of differentiation from Dao, which begets all things and all men, and the process of conversion of all things and all men to Dao. Dao begets all things through self-differentiation: "Dao begets the One; the One begets the two; the two begets the three; and the three begets the ten thousand things. The simple Origin self-differentiates into concrete things." And then, since all things are begotten by the self-differentiating Dao, they return to it as to their origin: "All things flourish, but each one returns to its origin.... returns to its simple Origin." For Lao Zi these two processes are in unceasing interaction. "He who has found the Mother (Dao)

thereby understands her sons (all things); and having understood the sons, still keeps to its Mother." This interaction confers metaphysical unity and equality on all things and all men. This is the ultimate foundation of men being able to communicate one with another.

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Concerning the epistemological foundation of communication, Lao Zi proposed a practical methodology for grasping and uniting with Dao. It is a characteristic of Chinese epistemology to focus on the "how" of arriving at wisdom, in other words to make of epistemology a practical methodology. For Lao Zi this practical methodology consists of both negative and positive ways. The negative way proceeds by bracketing our kinesthetic activities, social norms and intellectual achievements, by disengaging our consciousness from those constraints unworthy of Dao. The positive way proceeds by vacuity, or an emptying of mind, maintaining tranquility and thus returning to what constitutes the origin of our consciousness, which, ultimately, is to be in communion with Dao: "Attain complete vacuity, maintain steadfast tranquility. All things flourish, but each returns to its root. This return to its root means tranquility. It is called returning to its destiny. To return to destiny is called the constant (Dao). To know the constant is called enlightenment." "Can you keep the spirit and embrace the One without departing from them? Can you concentrate your vital force (qi) and achieve the highest degree of suppleness like an infant? Can you clean and purify your speculative mirror so it will be spotless?" Having followed these procedures, which also resemble those of Husserlian phenomenological reduction, the purity of our consciousness becomes something like a speculative mirror which is able to show forth the essences of all things in Dao. It must be noted here although Lao Zi's method could make manifest the essence of things, it is different from the Wesenschau found in Husserlian phenomenology in that the latter tends to seek to dominate things through our all-grasping perception of their eidos. Lao Zi's method manifests the essences of things merely by allowing the being of things to be. To let the being of body manifest itself, that is the way we grasp the essence of body. To let the being of the world manifest itself, that is the way we grasp its essence. The wisdom thus attained is, for Lao Zi, the epistemological foundation of communication.

As a whole, Lao Zi criticizes, as Habermas does, the tendency towards domination in man's relations with nature, and with other men; but, he differs from Habermas in that for him domination can be avoided only by man entering into communion with Dao as a pre-condition. Habermas has put much emphasis on the dialogue aspect of communication, yet he has neglected (purposely) the metaphysical foundation of communication. The consequence of this neglect is either that the agreement reached through communication results in mere compromise, or the critical function itself becomes mere negation, without any positive grounding in truth. By contrast, Lao Zi has well established the metaphysical and epistemological foundation of communication. His essential point is that the frequent interaction between human beings could become void of any significance, and could even lead to total conflict, should man be deprived of a life full of meaning when informed by and living in communion with Dao. At times, it may seem that Lao Zi has neglected the dialogue aspect of communication. His texts do convey the impression of a monologue. But for us, an authentic man in communion with Dao is one who also truly knows how to dialogue with others. The metaphysical order is not only prior to the socio-political order, it could well be the justification and fulfillment of our socio-political existence.

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