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Tracing Dao: A Comparison of Dao 道 in the Daoist Classics and Derridean “Trace”

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws a comparison between Derrida’s “trace” and the idea of dao in classical Daoism (Laozi and Zhuangzi). It is argued that if dao is read in a non-metaphysical way, then the Derridean idea of “trace” will show large overlaps with dao. I then show how, despite some obvious differences, a “trace” reading of dao enables a clearer understanding of dao that would see it not as a metaphysical principle, ineffable but transcendent nonetheless, but rather as an immanent working of the patterned processes that makes up both the natural and human world. I also argue that the notion of trace in classical Daoism (*ji* 跡, literally footprints) or other characters denoting trace, are most often used in a more traditional way (as pointing to a lost presence) and hence are not useful for understanding what Derrida means with his notion of “trace.”

KEYWORDS: Derrida, trace, Laozi, Zhuangzi, non-metaphysical, transformation

This paper attempts to draw a comparison between Derrida’s idea of “trace” (in connection to the more famous notions of *différance*, supplement, and deconstruction) and the idea of *dao* 道 in classical Daoism (the *DaoDeJing* and the *Zhuangzi*). I will explore how far it is viable to apply Derrida’s thoughts with regard to “trace” to Daoism. I will argue that if *dao* is read in a non-metaphysical way, then the Derridean idea of trace will show large overlaps with *dao*. Yet, due to both historical and philosophical differences, there will inevitably also be large differences between the two notions. I try to show how, despite these differences, a “trace” reading of *dao* can help develop an understanding of *dao* that would not necessarily see it as a metaphysical principle, ineffable but transcendent nonetheless, but rather as an immanent working of the patterned processes that makes up both the natural and human world.

Aside from this, I argue that the notion of trace in classical Daoism (*ji* 跡, literally footprints) or other characters denoting trace, are most often used in a traditional way (as pointing to a lost presence) and hence are not useful for understanding what Derrida means with his notion of “trace.” This is so even in a profoundly non-metaphysical thinker such as the neo-Daoist Guo Xiang. In Guo Xiang, we have a rather traditional use of the term *ji*, as Guo uses it to describe not the *ziran* 自然, self-so process that each thing is, but rather the traces or evidence we have of these processes. So “Yao” as a name is the trace of the actual Yao, but this trace never actually leads us back to its origin. So, for Guo, traces are (as per traditional use and meaning) leftovers and derivatives of something else. The difference in Guo is that this something else is, unlike for example in Wang Bi, nothing metaphysical. The something else is literally nothing, not there; it has come and gone, for each thing is spontaneously itself without the need of guidance from outside. This means that although Guo uses the term *ji* in a traditional way, he does actually provide us with a solidly non-metaphysical reading of Daoism. *Dao*

is literally nothing, things just are, which means they come out of nothing by themselves, then stay for a while, and then return to nothing again.

So, we have to be careful in our interpretation here. At one level, one could say that Guo's use of the idea of traces sounds very much like the metaphysical ideas on language, with the living present voice as the real thing, and the written word as derivative and wrong, but persisting where the voice has gone. However, Guo speaks in terms of persons walking, and the footprints or traces they leave. The sages leaving the footprints are gone, but their traces endure. On this level, Guo exhorts us to not follow the traces, not imitate the sages or the traces that we have of them, but to forge our own way ahead, since we can also never follow the actual sages, since they have left only traces and are no longer present.

It is interesting in the context of this paper that on this level, for Guo, there is nothing behind the traces. So, while the traces may not be the real thing, there is in the end no real thing to follow, everything is *ziran*, self-so, and it is that realization that makes Guo reluctant to posit anything else outside of the natural processes that make up our world. All is *ziran*, so of itself, and the task at hand is to not fall for the traces, but to accomplish a dark merging directly with how things are, which is "always in transformation," and thus to place no trust in the relative permanence of traces. But this use, although clearly, adamantly, and unapologetically non-metaphysical, really has, as we shall see, very little in common with Derrida's idea of trace as *différance*, context, infrastructure, or interdependence. When Guo talks about independence and interdependence, it is to say that dependence and mutual entanglement are really also *ziran* (Ziporyn 2003, 56), and that may be the only connection to Derrida's notion of trace that we can find here, apart from the anti-metaphysical stance both Derrida and Guo Xiang have assumed in denying a final ground. Things are not grounded, they just are.

This means that what Derrida understands by "trace" does not really follow the conventional concept of trace we have, and that in Daoism the notion of trace does not really fit the Derridean trace, but that the notion of *dao* may be understood better by reading it with Derrida's "trace." This is one of the reasons I have long been hesitant to compare the idea of *dao* with Derrida's ideas of "trace" or "tracing," which has connotations with "play" and "supplement," not least because it seems that the two ideas are too far apart in history and intellectual background to suggest any meaningful comparison. Yet, there are certain similarities which should be obvious to anyone with more than a cursory understanding of Daoism and Derrida. The processual emphasis of Daoist thought, with the central notion of continuous change, is clearly sympathetic to Derrida's understanding of trace as the impossibility of closure. In other words, both Derrida and the Daoists seek to convey a message of non-closure. In Derrida, the idea of the trace is one form this message takes, and in Daoism *dao* can be understood as another way of trying to convey this message. But of course, and here lies another important similarity; the conveying of this message is itself fraught with dangers of closure, as language has the tendency to stabilize meanings, to "identify," that is, to give a fixed identity through distinctions, to absolutize and to thereby deny processuality. Again, both Derrida and the Daoists are acutely aware of this, and they seek, in their distinct ways, to inhabit this danger while not succumbing to it. Derrida does this mostly by switching to different concepts within his work, by pointing to semantic variety, and by introducing new forms of conceptuality, such as the term *différance*. In Daoism, it is also understood, in the words of Ames and Hall, but which could equally apply to Derrida, that: "fixed principles, closed systems, the pretense of absolutes and initial origins are intellectually and practically suffocating. Dogma, artificiality, and finality close off the openness and fresh air of new directions in thought and action" (Ames and Hall 2003, 135). But both the Daoists and Derrida recognize that we are necessarily dependent on such structures that are inherently averse to openness, and try to play with this danger in similar ways.

Derrida

Let us start by considering in more detail what Derrida really means by this notion of “trace.” The first thing to note is that “trace” is used by Derrida in a long line of other words, such as *différance*, supplement, iterability, and others, to denote his continuous challenges to the metaphysics of presence. Derrida starts talking about trace early on in his work, and initially the concept is used in his work on signification. Building on the Saussurean idea that language is based on differences, he wants us “to consider every process of signification as a formal play of differences. That is, of traces” (Derrida 1981, 26). The fact that signs, words, can only function by being different from other signs, leads Derrida to say that

no element can function as a sign without reference to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each “element”—phoneme or grapheme—being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. (1981, 26)

Accordingly, the idea of trace denotes the fact that signification only works on the basis of “interweaving” or “texture,” but “trace” is not limited to signification. Neither is the idea of “text” or *écriture* limited to language. In *Limited Inc.*, Derrida says that *écriture*, or “text” as he understands it

does not suspend reference—to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other, since to say of history, of the world, of reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall that alterity (difference) is irreducible. *Différance* is a reference and vice versa. (1988, 137, italics in original)

A bit further he asserts a similar idea when he explains what he means by “text”:

What I call “text” implies all the structures called “real,” “economic,” “historical,” socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. ... That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied ... but it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace (Derrida 1988, 148)

In fact, Derrida seeks to establish that trace really conveys the same idea as *différance*:

[*différance*] ... is “older” than the ontological difference or than the truth of being. When it has this age it can be called the play of the trace. The play of a trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of being, but whose play transports and encloses the meaning of being: the play of the trace, or the *différance*, which has no meaning and is not. Which does not belong. (1982, 22)

In another quote, Derrida again makes the connection between *différance* and trace: “*Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other” (1981, 27, italics in original). Thus, we can say that the notion of trace is meant to convey Derrida’s idea that the world consists of a play of differences, and that each so-called identity will only be such through both differentiation from other things and recognition of the traces of those other things in it, the interweaving. This entails a relational view of becoming instead of Being, in which things are never the pure or ideal substances, identities or essences on their own, but only ever become something by “incorporating” the “always already there” of otherness inserted into a self, or subject, or identity. That is why Derrida can say: “the trace is the erasure of selfhood, of one’s own presence” (1978, 289). Trace is thus a notion which reminds us that the metaphysics of presence is shortsighted in thinking in terms of subject and object, but that such perceived distinct things are always already intertwined. In an interview posted on the Critical Theory website, Derrida

says the following: “In order to access the present as such, there must be an experience of the trace. A rapport to something else, to the Other. ... In everything there is the trace, the experience of a return to something else” (Derrida, n.d.). It is important to note that this something else, this necessarily preceding experience of otherness, is not a transcendent origin, but a realization of the continuous necessity of contextualization, of constant referencing to otherness, or what Ames and Hall have termed the *ars contextualis*. Although they understand this *ars contextualis* mainly as a comparative method, they also explain it as a way of understanding the notion of a self in Classical China: “the focus-field model results from understanding one’s relation to the world to be constituted by acts of contextualization. ... By definition, the focal self cannot be independent” (Ames and Hall 1998, 43). Although in highly different contexts, both Derrida and the Daoists then seek to make us realize that we are contextual and situational creatures at our core, and that nothing we do to undo that contextuality will be successful. We can provisionally make distinctions, halt the process, but eventually it will catch up and undo that artificial fixation. Both Derrida and the Daoists then urge us not to lend too much importance to such distinction-making.

Trace is also used in another way to question the idea of a metaphysical principle, a transcendence that would guide or rule the world. Like Heidegger’s Being, Derrida uses terms such as *différance* and trace to argue for the non-existence of such metaphysical principles or higher powers. Trace, thus, *is* nothing. By its very definition, the trace is not something present in and of itself, but is always the trace of something else: “Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the *a* writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in *différance*” (Derrida 1982, 23). Explicitly, the notion of trace denies the possibility of essentiality. Of course, our normal understanding of trace would be that there is something behind or before the trace that actually left the trace in the first place. A trace would in this understanding point to an origin. But Derrida does not understand trace in this “normal” way, and he strategically turns the trace into the origin. This paradox of reversal is of course not lost on Derrida but employed deliberately to upset the notion of origin itself: “the trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the *différance* which opens appearance and signification” (1976, 65). This is what makes Derrida’s thought different from negative theology: it is *not* that we can only see the traces of a transcendent or metaphysical God or principle, but never this God or principle itself. Traces are not to be understood here in a negative theology fashion, in which all we have is traces of the unknowable origin, but then we continue to postulate that origin nonetheless. In Derrida’s world, traces never refer back to any simple or pure origin; traces are only such that they refer to other traces, and there is no stepping beyond or back from this process. There is nothing but traces:

The trace is not only the disappearance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a presence or from an originary non-trace and which would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. Yet we know that that concept destroys its name and that, if all begins with the trace, there is above all no originary trace. (Derrida 1976, 61)

For Derrida, there is no mystery beyond the interweaving workings of the world. And, we can see *dao* in a similar fashion. Although some aura of mysticism is always appended to Daoism, such mysticism (if it even exists) and the idea of *dao* need not be seen as pointing to a metaphysical or transcendent principle. There is no outside. *Dao* is just a style-name for all the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) going about their business in a quasi-patterned way. There is no need to have recourse to transcendent principles. Derrida’s trace is exactly the denial of the possibility of ever finding pure transcendence and *dao* can be understood likewise. There is no pure origin, there is just the ongoing process of the world, where regularity and order go hand in hand with change, unpredictability, and novelty. Traces of otherness and change are always upsetting that dreamt-of pure presence. This idea is far from novel. Guo Xiang, the neo-Daoist, already argued such a position. And in the words of A. C. Graham:

“In the Chinese cosmos all things are interdependent, without transcendent principles by which to explain them or a transcendent origin from which they derive” (1990, 287). In this way, the notion of *dao* can be read in a non-metaphysical way.

Yet, somehow, both in Derrida and in Daoism, trace or *dao* is also understood as being the condition of possibility for all to exist as it does:

What the thought of the trace has taught us is that it could not be simply submitted to the onto-phenomenological question of essence. The trace is nothing, it is not an entity, it exceeds the question what is? and contingently makes it possible. (1976, 75)

Dao also is not clearly an outside, transcendental. It is “the workings” of the various *wanwu*, and nothing else. “Trace” and *dao* so understood are equally arguments against the metaphysics of presence and transcendence, because they resist duality and opposition, and argue for interdependence or relationality. Both go against the thinking of inside and outside. There is an interesting passage in *Limited Inc.* that could make us fully understand and appreciate this profound relationality in Derrida’s thinking. Expounding on the infamous “There is no outside of the text,” Derrida says that what he was really saying with this is “that nothing *exists* outside context ... , but also that the limit of the frame or the border of the context always entails a clause of non-closure. The outside penetrates and thus determines the inside” (1988, 152–153, italics in original). Context itself is constitutive of any identity, and as a context, it can never be closed off, it is structurally and inherently open, since it is nothing more or less than “the entire ‘real-history-of-the-world’” (Derrida 1988, 136). If there is anything that is the “condition of possibility” of the world, it is the world itself understood as contextuality, interweaving.

To sum up, trace is a notion used by Derrida to refer to the differential workings of the world, where reality is structured in relationality and not in distinct entities or subjects and objects. Rodolphe Gasché has used the term “infrastructure” in this context in his *Tain of the Mirror* (Gasché 1988, 147–154), and I believe this term is pertinent to understanding the similarity of trace and *dao*. Both point to intrinsic relationality, in which things/events/processes are only such in relation to other things/events/processes. Both point to continuous transformation without recourse to a pure original or pure end. An infrastructure does not depend on anything else, it is just a network of relative stability, but meant to connect and be open to change and inherently fluent. It has structure, but that structure is not completely fixed and is contextual.

But let us now see if we can corroborate this interpretation with readings from the *DaoDeJing* and the *Zhuangzi*.

Daoism

Let me reiterate that my concern in this paper is not the use of the classical Chinese characters for “trace” such as *ji* 跡, although it appears frequently, especially in the *Zhuangzi*. As David Chai has mentioned:

During the formative period of Chinese philosophy (8th – 4th C. BCE), the word for trace – *ji* 跡, which can be translated as mark, remains, vestige, or footprint – was relatively commonplace. Although the character *ji* appears at least once in every known text from the period, none can match the *Zhuangzi* in terms of volume of usage. (2017, 247)

But the character(s) for “trace” are mostly used in their standard and traditional meaning of pointing to some other presence. Instead of looking at the “trace” characters, I will see if we can read a similarity to how Derrida understands “trace” in the *DaoDeJing* and the *Zhuangzi*. Let us start with the *DaoDeJing*.

Daodejing

Of course, there are many interpretations of classical Daoism that do see it as a philosophy closely related to some form of metaphysics. Wang Bi is an example, and there are currently also scholars who see Daoism as inherently and profoundly metaphysical. But we need not understand it that way. A. C. Graham has already noticed similarities between *dao* as used in the *DaoDeJing* and Derrida's notion of trace: "Perhaps *Lao-tzu's* Way is how the Trace will look to us when we are no longer haunted by the ghost of that transcendental Reality the death of which Derrida proclaims" (Graham 1989, 228). Graham recognized that, although the context for each was very different, there is a close kinship between the strategies of reversal in the *DaoDeJing* and in Derrida's work:

The affinity of *Lao-tzu* and Derrida is that both use reversal to deconstruct chains in which A is traditionally preferred to B, and in breaking down the dichotomy offer us a glimpse of another line which runs athwart it – for *Lao-tzu* the Way, for Derrida the Trace. (1989, 227)

In more detail, the first similarity obviously lies in the use and function of language. Ames and Hall claim that "the Chinese language is not logocentric. Words do not name essences. Rather, they indicate always-transitory processes and events" (2001, 16). Western languages may be logocentric, but that is exactly what Derrida tried to overcome or turn against itself. The fact that language tends to substantialize, reify, leads Ames and Hall to say:

We can easily and at real expense overdetermine the continuity within the life process as some underlying and unchanging foundation. Such linguistic habits can institutionalize and enforce an overly static vision of the world, and in so doing, deprive both language and life of their creative possibilities. (2003, 45)

This is why Ames and Hall claim that, for the Daoist, "The precise referential language of denotation and description is to be replaced by a language of 'deference' in which meanings both allude to and defer to one another in a shifting field of significances" (2001, 10). This language of "deference" that Ames and Hall discuss is a language which refuses the reification and substance-thinking characteristic of classical Western philosophy. In a long quotation of Ames and Hall:

A misunderstanding of the nature of language has the potential to promote the worst misconceptions about the flux and flow of experience in which we live our lives. There is an obvious tension between the unrelenting processual nature of experience and the function of language to separate out, isolate, and arrest elements within it. To the extent that it is the nature of language to arrest the process of change and discipline it into a coherent, predictable order, there is the likelihood that an uncritical application of language might persuade us that our world is of a more stable and necessary character than it really is. The assumption, for example, that there is a literal language behind the metaphorical can introduce notions of permanence, necessity, and objectivity into our worldview that can have deleterious consequences. (2003, 113)

This does not of course mean that reference is completely denied. We can still temporarily fixate things, as they do display some endurance and persistence. Yet that persistence should never lead us to completely distinguish them from other things. And this is also what the idea of trace is. As we have seen, Derrida himself also acknowledges the idea of reference, but seeks in similar fashion to put it in place, in context. A comparable idea is present in the *DaoDeJing*. Neither Derrida nor the *DaoDeJing* are against language, but they are against its uncritical use. In Chapter 32, it is said: "When we start to regulate the world we introduce names. But once names have been assigned, we must also know when to stop. Knowing when to stop is how to avoid danger" (Ames and Hall 2003, 127). The Daoist seeks to move from language as referring to deferring. But to defer can be read in two ways: as deferment, postponement, it has connotations with trace, but as deference or yielding to authority is has not. Confucianism may be more about deference, but Daoism in its core is surely not

deference to man-made rules; it only seeks deference to nature *tian* 天. But it does deal with deferment in language, as the reifying and substantializing aspect of language is constantly criticized.

In the *DaoDeJing* such an understanding of language as provisional also flows over into the rest of the world. When there is no permanence in language, then we should not expect any permanence in the world. And we do know that Daoism is primarily a philosophy of change. In the words of Ames and Hall: “The Daoist does not posit the existence of some permanent reality behind appearances, some unchanging substratum, some essential defining aspect behind the accidents of change. Rather, there is just the ceaseless and usually cadenced flow of experience” (Ames and Hall 2003, 14). This is corroborated in Chapter 34: “Way-making is an easy-flowing stream which can run in any direction. With all things accomplished and the work complete, it does not assume any proprietary claim” (Ames and Hall 2003, 130). *Dao* is not a transcendent origin, but the infrastructure itself. Or in Ames and Hall’s language:

the natural cosmology of classical China does not entail a single-ordered cosmos, but invokes an understanding of a ‘world’ or *dao* constituted by a myriad of unique particulars, ‘the ten thousand things.’ *Dao* is, thus, the process of the world itself. (1998, 245)

And this is, of course, read in Chapter 62: “Way-making (*dao*) is the flowing together of all things (*wanwu*)” (Ames and Hall 2003, 173). Ames and Hall comment on this passage: “Way-making as the flowing together of all things is properly prized as the enabling context that makes everything possible” (Ames and Hall 2003, 174). In yet other terms:

Dao is not organic in the sense that a single pattern or *telos* could be said to characterize its processes. It is not *a* whole, but many such wholes. It is not the superordinate One to which the Many reduce. Its order is not rational or logical, but aesthetic, which is but to say that there is no transcending pattern determining the existence or efficacy of the order. The order is a consequence of the particulars comprising the totality of existing things. (Ames and Hall 1998, 245)

The fact that both contextuality and the impossibility of a reduction to an outside are realized means that “for the Daoist, there is an intoxicating bottomlessness to any particular event in our experience” (Ames and Hall 2003, 18). Like Derrida’s trace, such an understanding of *dao* denies closure and celebrates the experience of otherness and contextuality. In Daoism, this recognition of “infrastructure” flows over to the human realm and how we should act in it. Terms such as *wuwei* 無為 and *ziran* 自然 are considered relational at the core. As Ames and Hall claim: “Spontaneous action is a mirroring response. As such, it is action that accommodates the ‘other’ to whom one is responding. It takes the other on its own terms. Such spontaneity involves recognizing the continuity between oneself and the other ... ” (2003, 24).

We know that in Daoism opposites are always considered relational in the first place. Daoism does not recognize the strict dichotomies that Western philosophy has always prided itself on. *Xin* 心 shows the interrelatedness of knowing and emotions. In Chapter 42, the discussion of *Yin-yang* 陰陽 dichotomies conveys the idea that everything becomes its other, that there is a constant processuality.

This also means that the notion of *dao* itself, as Chapter 1 says, cannot be pinned down. In Chapter 14, it is said of *dao*: “Ever so tangled, it defies discrimination and reverts again to indeterminacy. This is what is called the form of the formless and the image of indeterminacy. This is what is called the vague and the indefinite” (Ames and Hall 2003, 96). Commenting on this passage, Ames and Hall state that *dao* “will not yield itself up to our most basic categories of location and determination: bright and dark, inside and outside, subject and object, one and many” (2003, 97). So, things are never clear and distinct, there are always traces of otherness involved. In Ames and Hall’s language: “The processive and synergistic forces at work in way-making render the language of discreteness and closure inappropriate” (2003, 99). The same ideas are expressed in chapter 21: “As for the process of

way-making, it is ever so indefinite and vague” (Ames and Hall 2003, 107). And it is exactly this tendency to try to achieve clarity and distinctness at all costs that Derrida’s notion of “trace” also challenges.

But since there is a tendency, in language but maybe also in people, to think in hierarchies and be one-sided (and this, in the form of the Confucian morality, is really what the *DaoDeJing* is arguing against), Chapter 28 warns us to guard the opposite, guard the otherness in oneself and in the world. This guarding entails a reluctance to draw sharp distinctions in favor of continuity between opposites. And this is also found in chapters 36 and 40, where the notion of returning is employed as a warning not to isolate. And this is where the *DaoDeJing* seems to have an edge over Derrida, who ceaselessly points out the problems, but is always criticized for not providing the solutions. The *DaoDeJing* does give us some guidance in the form of exhortations to pay proper attention to this relationality to avoid problems. For example, chapters 63 and 64 teach us that awareness of the trace-nature allows us to nip problems in the bud.

Zhuangzi

Let me remind the reader once more that we are not looking at the notion of trace *ji*, or other related characters with the meaning of “trace.” As in the *DaoDeJing*, where it is said in Chapter 27 that “able travellers leave no ruts or tracks along the way” (Ames and Hall 2003, 119), the notion of trace *ji* 跡 appears quite often in the *Zhuangzi*. For example, in Chapter 4: “To leave off making footprints [that is, when walking] is easy, never to walk on the ground is hard” (Graham 2001, 69). And as briefly mentioned at the start of this paper, we even see the profoundly anti-metaphysical Neo-Daoist Guo Xiang use the term “traces” as a central idea, but in a traditional fashion, connecting tracelessness with the Sage and the traces left with the kind of knowledge that is to be discarded. Such uses of these notions can easily deceive us into thinking that in Daoism the notion of trace is used in a rather straightforwardly metaphysical way. There is “good” presence, and “bad” traces, a bit like Derrida’s assessment of the privilege of the voice over writing.

So instead of looking at traces, I will argue that in the *Zhuangzi*, a similar thinking is present as that suggested by the Derridean interpretation of “trace.” Let us read some passages where this becomes apparent. One of the key ideas the *Zhuangzi* seeks to convey is that nothing is fixed, that continuous change is the only reality. In Chapter 6, it is said that “our understanding can be in the right only by virtue of a relation of dependence on something, and what it depends on is always particularly unfixed” (Ziporyn 2009, 39). And that is why, the *Zhuangzi* says in Chapter 2 that “the Way has never known boundaries, speech has no constancy. . . . Those who discriminate fail to see” (Watson 2003, 39). Hence, the mistrust of language as providing permanence and order is present in the *Zhuangzi* as it is in Derrida. Discrimination, naming, or deeming something to be A rather than B, can only lead to a false sense of security, closure, and it is indeed this closure that Zhuangzi argues against: “Their dividing is formation, their formation is dissolution; all things whether forming or dissolving in reverting interchange and are deemed to be one” (Graham 2001, 53). And in a passage related to this, it is said that “what goes on being hateful in dividing is that it makes the division into a completed set. The reason why the completion goes on being hateful is that it makes everything there is into a completed set” (Graham 2001, 103). Once this knowledge is apparent, and we become aware of the tendency of representational thinking to closure, to turn everything into solidified “objects,” we could, according to Zhuangzi, hopefully return to being like the people of old:

The men of old, their knowledge had arrived at something: at what had it arrived? There were some who thought there had not yet begun to be things—the utmost, the exhaustive, there is no more to add. The next thought there were things but there had not yet begun to be borders. The next thought there were borders to them but there had not yet begun to be “That’s it, that’s not.” The lighting up of “That’s it, that’s not” is the reason why the Way is flawed. (Graham 2001, 54)

Instead of discriminating and isolating one thing from another, the *Zhuangzi* recognizes that “Without an Other there is no Self, without Self no choosing one thing rather than another” (Graham 2001, 51). It is not that it is impossible to temporarily isolate something from something else, but like the notion of trace, relationality, or the idea that there is unity in differentiality before different things as separate entities, is given primacy: “What is It is also Other, what is Other is also It” (Graham 2001, 53).

Zhuangzi also recognizes that we are perspectival creatures, and that any *one* perspective necessarily leaves out something. Zhuangzi even recognizes that his own sayings are not final, and that his perspective on the Confucians and Mohists is exactly that, yet another perspective. But the message behind this, is in the words of Ames and Hall: “The world is a complex set of processes of transformation, never at rest. *Wuhua*, ‘the transformation of things,’ means that one can never pretend that what we seek to hold onto, has any permanent status” (1998, 54–55). This means that, like Derrida, Zhuangzi seeks an openness and responsiveness to otherness, continually, and a realization that any attempt at halting the process or at reification will result in not appropriately responding to otherness, and in denying the inherent process nature of the world.

Zhuangzi also tells us that there is really no metaphysical principle guiding all this change. There is never really any possibility to move beyond the trace or transformation structure:

There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. Suddenly there is being and nonbeing. But between this being and nonbeing, I don’t really know which is being and which is nonbeing. (Watson 2003, 38)

There is always another layer of context to be found. We cannot and should not seek to go beyond the world in any way, it is both unnecessary and unproductive, unhelpful. All we need to know is what Zhuangzi himself realizes in one of the stories about him in which he is pursuing a magpie bird in the woods, and that is that “it is inherent in things that they are tied to each other, that one kind calls up another” (Graham 2001, 118). So it is not so much that all things are one, but the sage treats them as one, as inseparable in the end. There is a clear continuity between ourselves and the rest of the world, in fact speaking of ourselves and the rest of the world might already be incorrect and reflective of exactly the attitude that Zhuangzi seeks to overcome. Both the idea of trace and of *dao* try to highlight this continuity, although in different contexts, and with ultimately different aims. But both try to convince us that separateness, discreteness, and a strict objectivity that sees things as bordered, are not a good reflection of the way we are in the world, and that instead the focus should be on contextuality or interweaving, infrastructure.

And that is why the only acceptable language is “spillover saying” (Graham 2001, 26), or “reckless” words (Watson 2003, 42). Like Derrida, who keeps inventing new words or using words in different meanings, under erasure, “spillover saying” does not pretend to have any permanence, and reckless words risk losing meaning (or actually seek not to fix meaning), because their result is that for the sage “all the ten thousand things are what they are, and thus they enfold each other” (Watson 2003, 42). Again, what this means is that closure is denied in favor of transformation. And this is why the *Zhuangzi* calls *dao* “‘at home where it intrudes.’ What is ‘at home where it intrudes’ is that which comes about only where it intrudes into the place of something else” (Graham 2001, 87).

This is exactly what Derrida’s trace also seeks to convey. It upsets the homeliness of the ideal of presence and fullness; it intrudes into the place that was supposed to belong to something else and to make that thing “clear and distinct.” It upsets boundaries and hierarchies.

The kind of people who understand this are “the sort that roams beyond the guidelines” (Graham 2001, 89). The sorting that evens things out is exactly the overturning of hierarchy and dichotomy that Derrida’s trace also suggests. If there is no such thing as an origin, there is no such thing as a

hierarchy between the origin and its surrogate offshoots. And that also ties in with the fact that Zhuangzi is reluctant to do the thing Classical Chinese thinkers mostly do, appeal to an identifiable tradition and/or past as the origin to which to return. He also seeks to overturn or deny or undo the dichotomy between *tian* and man. “For the sage there has never begun to be Heaven, never begun to be man” (Graham 2001, 111). *Dao*, or *tian* understood as nature, the world, is really the self-generating world inclusive of humans.

The *Zhuangzi* does not seek order behind the changing appearances, but seeks to mirror the endless tracing of a processual world. In the Daoist world, order is indefinite, non-reducible, continuous change. Such a concept of order is, at the very least, closer to Derrida’s notion of trace than it would be to any notion of a metaphysical principle. And the Daoist adept would reflect this. When discussing the genuine person in the *Zhuangzi*, Ames and Hall note that

In the *Shuowen* lexicon, *zhen* is classified under the radical *bi* (匕), the original form of *hua* (化), ‘to transform, to change to,’ so whatever ‘genuine’ might mean, it does entail a process of transformation. ... Similarly, escape from the world and ascent to the heavens as an immortal is anathema to *Zhuangzi*’s notion of total integration in the process of the ‘transformation of things (*wuhua* (物化))’. (1998, 163)

The *zhenren* 真人 or genuine person would be exactly the one who would recognize and live up to the trace or transformational nature of the world and herself. There is no identity without difference, no subject without object, and the Daoist tries to actively put herself in the other’s position, on the assumption that this other is actually not really other at all, but part of a continuously changing world which is both forming and dissolving identities all the time. The Daoist has no need for a metaphysical ground for this changing world.

Conclusion

I have had only a modest aim with this paper, and that has been to argue that for those who are not convinced that Daoism is a metaphysical philosophy, Derrida’s notion of trace offers resources for understanding the notion of *dao* as non-metaphysical. I hope to have shown that although in the Daoist classics the use of characters meaning “trace” or something similar usually follows the conventional meaning of referring to something behind or before that trace, we do in fact find a lot of evidence suggesting such a non-metaphysical understanding of *dao* in relation to Derrida’s trace. And this, in turn, is meant to facilitate a reading of classical Daoism through the lens of Derrida’s trace, hopefully clarifying both more through their interaction.

Notes on contributor

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