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Methods of Philosophic Critique Native to the *Laozi*

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Abstract: Lao-Zhuang thought and the *Laozi* in particular is frequently interpreted as providing a critique of the dominant social values of its time. In English language literature, this often entails utilizing thinkers from the Western tradition of philosophic critique from Kant onwards, thereby obscuring the critical methods unique to the text itself. Chinese language literature, on the other hand, rarely uses the semantics of philosophic critique which thereby prevents the text from contributing its own unique voice to the discourse of critique. This paper attempts to put the *Laozi* into discourse with the wider tradition of philosophic critique, broadening the tradition with a unique "Chinese voice", but allowing it to speak in its own terms according to the text itself, the commentarial tradition, and modern scholarship.

Keywords: Laozi; Daodejing; philosophic critique; critical methodology

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1. Introduction

Philosophic critique is one of the more common paradigms through which Lao-Zhuang 老莊 (or "Daoist") thought is interpreted in contemporary English language academia. The *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* are read as offering critiques of a wide range of issues, spanning ethics (D'Ambrosio 2022), metaphysics (Burik 2020), humanism (Moeller 2006, p. 141), language (Graham 1989, p. 227), the political economy (Stamatov 2017), anthropocentrism (Nelson 2011), and gender (Xu 2003) to name a few. Lao-Zhuang critique is often explained using thinkers identified as influential in the Western tradition of philosophic critique such as Nietzsche, Derrida, and Rorty. While recognizing similarities is helpful for introducing a "Daoist" critical spirit to those more familiar with the Western tradition of philosophic critique through comparison, the projection of these methods of critique onto the Lao-Zhuang texts also obscures the native methodologies unique to them and the traditional commentaries which develop on Lao-Zhuang thought. Within contemporary Chinese language literature on Lao-Zhuang thought, on the other hand, certain methodologies that closely resemble philosophic critique are expressed, but the semantics of the tradition of philosophic critique are rarely utilized to explicate these methodologies (with the glaring exception of dialectics), thereby missing an opportunity to allow the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* to make their own contributions to a global tradition of philosophic critique. More explicitly establishing a "discursive bridge" between the Western tradition of philosophic critique and critique as it is expressed in Lao-Zhuang thought might assist in broadening the tradition of philosophic critique to include a "Chinese voice" beyond mere comparisons by introducing new (and ancient) critical methodologies.

The gap between English and Chinese language discourse regarding philosophic critique is further complicated by the diversity of functions played by the notion of philosophic critique itself. The definitions of philosophic critique as it is represented in the Western tradition beginning with Kant and developed by Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, etc., are as numerous as there are philosophers to use the term, and it is employed with equal variety (and ambiguity) in regard to Lao-Zhuang thought. In English language literature, the Lao-Zhuang texts are interpreted by some as utilizing critique in the sense of *criticizing*[1] perceived social dysfunction and thereby advocating "avoiding, as much as possible,

active political engagement" (Van Norden 2016, p. 13), while others utilize it with a more compatibilist approach to dominant socio-political ideologies such that the *Zhuangzi's* "critiques [of Confucius are] shot through with admiration and even affection" (Nylan 2017, p. 413), or the *Laozi*'s critique reassesses dominant masculine values which "inverts the values of these aspects, pointing out the power of the feminine" (Robin Wang 2017, p. 43). Chinese language literature, likewise, uses "critique", or its equivalent *pipan* 批判, in the sense of "criticizing" such that the "*Laozi* profoundly critiqued the behavior of political governance, mode of political thought, the value set of those in office, and social norms at that time", a form of order that should be replaced by a "natural order of society" (Chang and Wang 2011, p. 10). Compatibilist approaches recognize that while Lao-Zhuang thought "provides a severe reflection and critique on the entire society and culture, civilization, and progress", its critique is intended to remedy rather than replace the dominant form of social order because ultimately "Daoism actually does not oppose the Confucian concepts of benevolence and righteousness, but rather sincerely defends such values as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom" (Feng 2011, p. 2). Thus, in order to discuss the unique method(s) of philosophic critique in Lao-Zhuang thought, or for the purposes of this paper, the *Laozi* in particular, a general framework for what is meant by "philosophic critique" must be established.

A working definition of philosophic critique that encompasses its use from Kant to contemporary thinkers such as Judith Butler can be established based on three interrelated parameters or hallmarks. The first hallmark of philosophic critique is reflexivity, as exemplified by Kant's "Copernican Revolution". This involves a shift in focus from "externally" investigating, in the case of ethics for example, what is morally "good" or "bad" to an internal investigation, or "thought bending back upon itself" (Tauber 2005, p. 50). This reflexively internal investigation might explore the process through which an agent makes moral judgements in the first place, the conceptual relationship between "good" and "bad", or the underlying rationality behind such judgements. The second hallmark of philosophic critique, once again articulated by Kant and reverberating throughout the tradition, involves an enquiry aimed at revealing the conditions for the possibility of certain phenomena, concepts, or modes of thinking. Lastly, philosophic critique can be characterized by the suspension of normative judgement, allowing for an exploration of how the very framework of such judgment may implicitly harbor paradoxes, contradictions, or unintended consequences. In a similar vein, Judith Butler describes Foucault's use of philosophic critique such that "the primary task of critique will not be to evaluate whether its objects—social conditions, practices, forms of knowledge, power, and discourse—are good or bad, valued highly or demeaned, but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself" (Butler 2002, p. 214).

Insofar as the concept of philosophic critique is, even in its broadened scope, defined according to its articulation within a Western tradition, it inevitably projects an interpretation onto Chinese texts "inspired" by thinkers and texts from a distinct historic, cultural, and philosophic context. While this is unavoidable when constructing a discourse across philosophic traditions, it is also crucial to allow for a reciprocal influence. By recognizing the unique elements of the *Laozi*, its commentarial tradition, and contemporary Chinese scholarship, modern scholars have the potential to enrich the tradition of philosophic critique itself rather than simply being assimilated into a pre-existing Western system and thereby becoming "white-washed", diluting their distinctive contributions. The following will introduce some of these unique critical methodologies found in the *Laozi* when read as a text employing philosophic critique.

2. Thinking through Negation

One of the more commonly recognized tactics of the *Laozi* is its use of socio-politically subordinated values (referred to as "feminine" values)[2] to subvert dominant or "masculine" values. Through a methodology characteristic of the *Laozi* variously referred to as "thinking through negation" (*foudingxing siwei* 否定性思維) (Ding 2010, p. 64) or "the rever-

sal of priorities in chains of oppositions" (Graham 1989, p. 223), traditionally subordinated "feminine" values such as suppleness (*rou* 柔), weakness (*ruo* 弱), and nothingness (*wu* 無) are portrayed in terms of their ability to overcome their opposite, those traditionally dominant "masculine" values such as hardness (*gang* 剛), strength (*qiang* 強), or somethingness (*you* 有). Using metaphors such as the power of "soft and weak" water or the fullness of the "empty" valley, this paradoxical relationship is described in terms of "the feminine defeats the masculine with constant stillness" (chp. 61), "the supple and weak defeats the hard and strong" (chp. 36), and "preserving the supple is called strength" (chp. 52). It is perhaps because of the emphasis on those subordinated, feminine values within the text that the *Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 describes "LaoDan valued suppleness (*rou* 柔) above all" (*lüshi chunqiu*, *bu er* 不二). The ability of the feminine to ultimately "overcome" or "defeat" the masculine is further explained by the masculine's *dependency* on the feminine. The feminine is thus described as the very source of the masculine, using metaphors such as "the mother of the ten thousand things" (chp. 1) or the "root of heaven and earth" (chp. 6).

As the source of and that upon which the socio-politically dominant masculine values are dependent, the feminine values always "overcome" or "defeat" (*sheng* 勝). According to the method of "thinking through negation", defending what are ordinarily regarded as subordinate values allows one to:

> deal with the contradictions on every level of society. The *Laozi* discusses what is "natural" in order to negate the behavior of the world that goes against objective laws, discusses "non-activity" to negate the "activity" advocated by the Confucians, Mohists, and Legalists, and discusses "supple and weak" and "preserving the feminine" to negate these schools' reverence for strength and ability. (Ding 2010, p. 64)

With the prioritization of the ordinarily subordinated feminine values and "negation" of dominant masculine values, the *Laozi* could be fairly interpreted as advocating its own particular *dao* comprised of feminine values, behavior, or modes of thinking or/and as criticizing *dao*s of other masters or traditions characterized by traditionally dominant masculine values. Interpreting the *Laozi* as promoting a *dao* superior to those articulated by other masters is certainly not an uncommon position, yet there is a degree to which it represents cherry-picking certain chapters and ignoring those chapters which problematize such an interpretation.

A reading of the text such that it promotes one *dao* over others or criticizes other *dao*s begins to lose interpretive coherence when faced with another characteristic gesture of the *Laozi* which problematizes the adherence of any *dao* in particular on the grounds that "the *dao* that can be treated as a *dao* is not a constant *dao*" (chp. 1). Chad Hansen, using language similar to that of Ding Yuanming above, likewise refers to the *Laozi*'s *dao* as a "*negative dao*" insofar as it represents a reversal of "dominant views", yet also recognizes a fundamental (apparent) contradiction such that "if we are reading it in the spirit of the opening lines, its theoretical point must be more subtle than merely reversing conventional guidance and dogmatically pushing the negative discourse *dao*. We should not take the negative *dao* as a constant *dao* either" (Hansen 2000, p. 223). The tension between the apparent one-sided promotion of the feminine over the masculine and simultaneous suspicion of a dogmatic commitment to any *dao* whatsoever pushes the reader to search for a more sophisticated interpretation which is able to account for both insights.

The tension established by these apparently contradictory positions can be read as serving a wider function as a form of philosophic critique, intending neither to merely criticize the dominant, sometimes read as the specifically Confucian *dao*, nor advocate a competing Laozian *dao*. Rather, the text can be read as critically problematizing value judgements themselves for the sake of coming to a healthier relationship with both those masculine and feminine values and reconsidering their dominant and subordinated positions. What is described above as "thinking through negation" can thus be regarded as the first movement of critique which reassesses of the dominant mode of thought through the prioritization of what were previously neglected or "negated" values, thereby revealing

the paradoxical relationship between binary value judgements. This initial movement of philosophic critique begins with the text's use of binary pairs, such as above–below (*shang-xia* 上下), full–empty (*quan-xu* 全-虛), and, as representative of the binary pairs through the text, female–male (*pin-mu* 牝牡/*ci-xiong* 雌雄) (chp. 28, 55, 61). The object of scrutiny in such cases is not necessarily the specific values depicted, but the paradoxical nature of the relationship between binary pairs themselves.

One of the insights a reflective awareness brought to binary value judgements reveals in the text is that any value judgement whatsoever already implies and is conceptually intertwined with its opposite or "binary other" as soon as it is pronounced. This is made rather explicit in Chapter 2: "the world knows what is beautiful as beautiful and thus there is ugliness. Everyone knows what is good as good and thus there is not good". The boundaries or standards for what is "good" are constructed through establishing that which lies outside of those boundaries, or that which is "not good". The "not good" is thus a condition for the possibility of the "good" insofar as it defines it through contradistinction. This insight is extended to the socio-political realm, using binary pairs with strong political implications (implications which also exist in the beautiful/ugly, good/not-good binary pairs) common to classical Chinese political discourse such as crooked–straight (*wang-zhi* 枉直) (chp. 22, 45), strong–weak (*qiang-ruo* 強弱) (chp. 36, 76, 78), and activity–non-activity (*youwei-wuwei* 有為-無為) (chp. 2, 3, 37, 38, 48, 64). As such, the conditions for the possibility of those "positive" values which are favored, celebrated, and approved according to the dominant socio-political discourse are revealed to paradoxically be their very opposites, those "negative" values which are neglected, overlooked, or disdained.

As the first movement of philosophic critique, revealing the conditions for the possibility of dominant value judgements through the method of "thinking through negation" provides a more holistic approach to binary judgements in general. For example, the first few lines of Chapter 2 quoted above are followed by "presence and non-presence produce one another, difficulty and ease complete one another, long and short form one another, above and below display one another, sounds and voices respond to one another in harmony, before and after follow one another". As such it can perhaps be more coherently read as a critical reflection on how binaries "oppose each other but also depend on and complement each other" (Chen 2020, p. 62) and thus "are always interdependent and mutually generating" (Chen 2020, p. 153). Using the binary presence/non-presence (*youwu* 有無), Chapter 11 epitomizes the recognition of the subordinated feminine as a condition for the possibility for the dominant masculine, thereby revealing the complementary, interdependent nature of binary values: "doors and windows are cut out to make a room. It is because of this non-presence [of the doors and windows] that the room has its usefulness. Thus, presence gives its benefit and non-presence gives its use". Insofar as the text reveals the "complementary" and "interdependent" relationship between binary pairs within value judgements, it cannot be read as simplistically criticizing or rejecting masculine values as fundamentally problematic or destructive. This tension, however, likewise cannot be simplistically disregarded, and "while the terms of the various dyads are often treated as equal, they are sometimes given unequal weights, indicating the presence of an unexpected moralistic torque . . . the first term of the dyad is definitely 'preferred'. It enjoys a higher 'ontological' status" (Schwartz 1985, p. 203). There is still a sense in which those feminine values are prioritized as the generative antecedent, the primordial conditions for the possibility of things, and as such "the mother of the ten thousand things". It is through the very development of things that the relationship between binary value judgements is also revealed as being "mutually generating", which represents the second movement of the *Laozi*'s critical method.

3. When Things Reach Their Extremes They Must [Transform] into the Opposite

Related to the paradoxically opposing yet interdependent relationship amongst binary pairs of value judgements, the text, in an equally paradoxical manner, presents how those ends associated with the dominant (masculine) ideals of political leadership such

as "obtaining" or "overcoming" are achieved through acting in a manner antithetical to them—that is, according to those subordinated (feminine) values. This is most paradigmatically expressed in the line "because [the sage] alone does not contend there is none in the world to contend with him" (chp. 22); whereas "those who act on things are defeated", through non-intentional action the sage "does not act with intentionality and thus is not defeated" (chp. 64) and by having no personal interest is able to "complete that which is in his personal interest" (chp. 7). Chapter 36 describes this typically *Laozian* method of achieving objectives, itself seemingly contradictory to notions central to the text such as "non-intentional action" or "non-desiring", through behavior which according to conventional thought might appear antithetical to those ends.

> Wanting to take something in, you should first spread it out. Wanting to make something weak, you should first make it strong. Wanting to get rid of something, you should first promote it. Wanting to take something, you should first give it.

The paradoxical logic of this chapter, amongst others, reflects the tension between the promotion of the feminine over the masculine and the simultaneous awareness of their interdependence, and a resolution to this tension has been attempted throughout its long commentarial history by interpreting such passages as practical strategic advice for how to achieve one's ends through deceptive or manipulative means.

One of the earliest commentaries to the *Laozi*, "*Illustrating the Laozi*" (yulao 喻老) from the *Hanfeizi*, uses examples from history to interpret Chapter 38, such as "because the Wu army extended its power to the Yangtze River . . . it could be defeated by Yue". Zhu Xi's commentary to Chapter 78 describes "Laozi's scheming method of 'soft and weak' and non-contention" such that "by retreating he is able to take possession of small advantages" (as cited in Liu 2006, p. 733). In the modern era, highly influential scholars such as Qian Mu 錢穆 have described how the *Laozi*'s "political ideas became trickery and tactics, a set of highly manipulative techniques to turn politics into control" (Deng 2016, p. 14) In more contemporary discourse, political or military "manipulative scheming" interpretations are largely rejected as misrepresentations (Chen 2020, p. 410), misunderstandings (Liu 2006, p. 733), or Confucian prejudices (Deng 2016, p. 14), favoring instead philosophical, cosmological, or dialectical interpretations. However, those who read these chapters as a guide for manipulative strategy and those who favor the various philosophical interpretations fundamentally agree in one respect; the text provides insight into the nature of the development and transformation of events.

Serving as the *Laozi*'s model for the development of things, transformation is presented as a process of alternation between positive and negative poles, or a "circular return with which things change into their opposites and then back into what they were before" (Moeller 2007, p. 54). This model according to which phenomena develop is reflected in Chapter 22 as "what is bent is then whole, what is crooked is then straight, what is hollow is then full, what is worn out is then new, what is diminished is then gained", in Chapter 42 as "things are sometimes lessened and thereby added to or added to and thereby lessened", and in Chapter 77 as "the high is pushed down, the low is raised up. The surplus it is lessened, the deficiency is added to". The idea that binary pairs are not only oppositional and interrelated but in their activity transform into one another represents the second movement of the *Laozi's* method of philosophic critique, "when things reach their extremes they must [transform] into the opposite" (*wuji bifan* 物極必反).

"When things reach their extremes they must [transform] into the opposite" is expressed in the commentarial tradition by Song scholar Cheng Yi 程頤, who uses this phrase to describe the development of things such that "where there is birth there must also be death, where there is a beginning there must also be an ending" (Cheng 1999, p. 81), and by Ming dynasty commenter Shi Deqing 釋德清, who writes "expansion is the sign of accumulation; strength must be the sprout of weakness; to rise up and excite must be an indication of abandonment; giving must be the sign of seizing" (as cited in Chen 2020,

p. 228). This movement in the *Laozi*'s critique builds on the relationship between binary opposites revealed by the first movement, expanding it insofar as:

> This kind of thinking is based on the dialectical concept that when things reach their extremes they must [transform] into the opposite. The focus is no longer on the understanding that things are composed of positive and negative poles, but on grasping the trends within the development of things . . . This emphasizes the importance of seeing the developmental direction of contradictions to emphasize the prevention of troubles in the future before it happens, or let the contradiction develop in the direction one foresees. (Cao and Pei 2017, p. 23)

With the tendency of the "developmental direction of contradictions" being inherent in the very relationship between positive and negative poles of binary pairs, the *Laozi* furthermore utilizes this critical insight to reveal the dangers of things developing to their extremes.

When things reach their extreme, they transform into their opposite, and, while change itself is not necessarily portrayed as inauspicious, it is this very point of transformation at the extremes which can be undesirable and even dangerous. The text thus recommends fostering an awareness of the fact "what is correct turns back into strange and what is good turns back into evil" (chp. 58). According to an awareness that "within disaster is concealed the seed of good luck and within good luck the seed of disaster is hidden . . . the *Laozi* warns us to value the 'subtle clarity' in order to prevent transformation in a bad direction" (Li 2000, p. 37). However, the *Laozi*'s critical method of "when things reach their extremes they must [transform] into the opposite" once again involves the central tension regarding the treatment of opposite poles as complementary, interdependent, and mutually generating, on the one hand, and the apparent prioritization of the feminine over the masculine on the other. This is perhaps no more obvious than in Chapter 76, which relates the transformation of life to death with the feminine–masculine binary conceptual pairs, stating "when people are alive their bodies are supple and weak. When dead their bodies are hard and strong . . . the hard and strong are followers of death. The supple and weak are followers of life". As with the apparent re-prioritization of binary poles discussed in the first movement of the *Laozi's* critique, with feminine values such as "supple and weak" representing life and masculine values such as "hard and strong" representing death, the text appears to advocate adhering exclusively to the feminine in order to preserve life and avoid death. As such, chapters such as Chapter 76 lend themselves to normative interpretations which promote one set of values or form of behavior over others, creating a tension with those elements of the text which promote an awareness of interdependency, complementarity, and mutual generation. A possible resolution to this tension can be found in the third movement of the *Laozi*'s philosophic critique oriented around another central concept; returning.

4. Because of Returning, Things Go Smoothly

"Returning" is expressed using three different characters, *fan* 反, *gui* 歸, and *fu* 復, with *fan* 反 being perhaps the most ambiguous, thus allowing for multiple interpretations and intra-textual semantic associations. A prevailing view considers the character *fan* 反 (opposite, reversal) a loanword for, and thus interchangeable with, *fan* 返 (return) (Chen 2020, p. 350) due to their phonetic resemblance, conceptual proximity, and the presence of *fan* 返 in the Guodian bamboo slips. This by no means irradicates the sense of "opposite" from this character, however. While terms such as "returning to the root" (*guigen* 歸根) or "return to the mandate" (*fuming* 复命) more unequivocally establish the theme of "returning", the opposition implied by *fan* 反contributes a more complex polysemy to *fan* 反 in particular and the image of "returning" in general. Wang Zhongjiang argues that the primary connotation of *fan* 反 in three of its four occurrences within the text "refers to fan 返 as in return . . . and are not employed in the meaning of opposites, nor do they indicate cyclicality", (Wang 2019b, p. 2). However, Wang also recognizes the diversity of possible implications such that:

> opposites as well as the transformations that occur between them are a major component of what is usually considered as *Laozi's* dialectics (I prefer to call it transformational dialectics). Precisely for this reason, many scholars explain *Laozi's* idea of *fan* 反 from the aspect of opposites and contradictions. (Wang 2019b, p. 2)

Whereas Wang emphasizes things "returning" to the *dao*, Xu Shan 徐山 voices another perspective that "the four occurrences of *fan* all mean 'opposite' (*xiangfan* 相反) . . . meaning that the *dao* of the *Laozi* is the opposite of worldly values" (Xu 2021, p. 33). As with the other central themes in the text discussed in the previous sections, returning, whether it be understood as going back to an original state of things or taking a position contrary to dominant values (and thereby overcoming them), can thus be read in terms of the prioritization of the metaphysically primordial source or that which is socially undervalued (the feminine), particularly in regard to the other two characters associated with "returning", *gui* (歸) and *fu* (復).

In reaction to the masculine values "movement" (*dong* 動) and "presence" (*you* 有), the text calls for a *return* to their binary opposites in, for example, Chapter 16 "returning to the root is called tranquility (*jing* 靜)" and Chapter 14 "returning to no (*wu* 無) thing". Returning is thus associated with feminine qualities such as tranquility, emptiness, and below, such that "only returning to the root and maintaining empty tranquility allows things to embody natural tendencies and avoid trouble and conflict" (Chen 2020, p. 13). A potential explanation for the text's apparent one-sided promotion of the feminine over the masculine and simultaneous awareness of the danger of any one-sided preference whatsoever is that the promotion of the subordinated feminine values is an attempt to compensate for the preponderance of dominant masculine values in cultural, social, and political discourse. That is to say, while the text itself *does* often promote feminine values over masculine values, it does so in the context of a pre-Qin socio-political world which disproportionately represented one dominant set of values.

Roger Ames takes a similarly contextualized approach, arguing that "the Lao Tzu is not advocating the substitution of a feminine-oriented set of values for the prevailing masculine values", but rather just as the *dao* seeks balance, "as a compensatory measure to respond to and redress a predominance of 'masculine' attitudes, the Lao Tzu is advocating the extension from 'masculine' to embrace 'feminine' qualities as an appropriate antidote for the imbalance" (Ames 1981, p. 32). The result of this re-balancing of values achieved through the promotion of the feminine can be found in the text's representation of the sage-ruler, analogous to the *dao* and the "androgynous ideal", in whom can be found the "reconciliation of these gender traits" (Ames 1981, p. 44). The text compares the sage-ruler to an infant as the source of limitless potentiality insofar as it is the union of, prior to, or *a return to* a reconciliation of the masculine and feminine, whose "bones are weak and muscle are supple, but its grip is firm. It does not yet know about the joining of the masculine and feminine, but its penis is erect" (chp. 55). Images such as the "androgynous" sage and the infant reflect the two dominant implications of "returning", particularly *fan* 反, insofar as they represent the sage possessing values opposite of those conventionally associated with a ruler and are put in terms of a "return to the infant" (chp. 28) or "return to the mother" (chp. 52). The wider constellation of connotations surrounding "returning" is further described by Zhang Dainian 張岱年 using language evocative of philosophic critique insofar as the text identifies the "conditions for" the "mutual transformation" of "interdependent opposites" which occurs in the process of "returning" (Zhang 1980, p. 16).

Insofar as it is read in terms of critical methodology, "returning" involves the prior two movements of critique regarding interdependent binary opposites and their transformation into one another, resulting in the masculine's critical reappropriation of the feminine, a "return" characterized by dialectical sublation, integration, or reconciliation of the masculine and feminine. The reconciliation of oppositional yet interdependent binary pairs achieved by "returning" thereby avoids the consequences of an unhealthy asymmetric relationship revealed by the second movement of critique, thus one "returns with things

and the great harmonious integration (*da shun* 大順) is reached" (chp. 65), or what is referred to by Liu Xiaogan as "because of returning, things go smoothly" (*yin fan er shun* 因反而順) (Liu 2006, p. 637).

Things returning and thus going smoothly is further expressed in Chapter 28 in terms of the integration of binary pairs characteristic of this critical relationship:

> Know the masculine and preserve the feminine, it is the world's river. As the world's river, constant efficacy won't leave you and you will return to the infant. Know the bright and preserve the dark, it is the pattern of the world. As the pattern of the world, constancy efficacy will not err and you will return to the boundless. Know honor and preserve disgrace, it is the world's valley. As the world's valley, constant efficacy will be enough and you will return again to the state of uncarved wood".

The reconciliation of the masculine and feminine achieved through returning to the infant, boundless, and uncarved wood is described as being more efficacious and furthermore averts development into disastrous extremes. Wang Bi 王弼 commented on this chapter "these three (masculine/feminine, bright/dark, honor/disgrace) mean that by returning to the opposite, one is able to preserve one's position". Qing dynasty emperor Qing Shizu 清世祖 (1638–1661) similarly applied this critical insight in his commentary to the *Laozi*; "the affairs under Heaven cannot be benefitted by softness alone, they cannot be managed by darkness alone, they cannot be brought to completion by being below them alone . . . hardness is not born out of hardness, but born out of softness" (Liu 1997, p. 193). As such, a return which integrates binary opposites is expressed in terms of the "truly completed", (chp. 22) "radiance", (chp. 52), and "returning to the root", the hidden sources of potency which "the common people do not recognize" (chp. 64). "Returning" in the form of reconciliation provides the reader with a reflexive philosophically critical awareness, allowing them to, as is said of Foucault's critique through genealogy, discern dangers rather than demonstrate defects" (Koopman 2013, p. 88).

5. Conclusions: "Using the Reverse to Seek the Correct"

The three "movements" of the *Laozi*'s philosophic critique have been described applying the vocabulary and insights from traditional and contemporary Chinese scholarship to a general methodological framework more commonly articulated in the Western tradition of philosophic critique. A version of critique in the Kantian sense of revealing conditions for the possibility of phenomena, concepts, or judgements can be found in the text's exploration of the interdependent nature of binary opposites in value judgements using the method of "thinking through negation" (*foudingxing siwei* 否定性思維), according to which dominant values such as strength and hardness are shown to be contingent upon (and therefore "defeated by") subordinated values such as weakness and softness. The conceptual relationship is further revealed to be such that when the disproportionate promotion of those dominant values at the expense of the subordinated reaches its extreme, it inexorably leads to a transformation into its reverse with unintended consequences in what is referred to as "when things reach their extremes they must [transform] into the opposite" (*wuji bifan* 物極必反). An awareness of this pattern of development allows one to avert these destructive ends through the third movement of critique, "returning", according to which those subordinated values become integrated with the dominant, thereby achieving a healthier and efficacious relationship, or "because of returning, things go smoothly" (*yin fan er shun* 因反而順). These elements of the *Laozi* constitute an overall philosophically critical methodology pervasive throughout the entire text, a methodology which might be summarized as "using the reverse to seek the correct" (*yifan qiuzheng* 以反求正), which Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 describes as "amongst the two sides of opposition, the *Laozi* emphasizes beginning from the opposite side of one's goal. This is the most characteristic aspect of Laozi's thought and is also the easiest to misrepresent and misunderstand" (Liu 2006, p. 377).

Contemporary Chinese scholars of the *Laozi* emphasize themes such as interdependent opposition, transformation, and returning as central to the *Laozi*, and while rarely explicitly engaging with the Western tradition of philosophic critique[3], implicitly gesture toward its philosophically critical significance. The method of "using the reverse to seek the correct" is one such example of a philosophically critical interpretation insofar as it provides the reader with a way to problematize a concept or phenomena by reflexively approaching the issue from the opposite of that which is dominant in conventional society. In doing so, the rationality serving the dominant or hegemonic worldview is brought under suspicion as an object of inquiry "to show that things are not as self-evident as we believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such" (Foucault 1988, p. 154). One of the natural questions posed to those who utilize the method of philosophic critique is to what end is philosophic critique as a practice exercised? Does it aim to produce positive knowledge or merely expose defects (in the sense of *criticizing*)? According to figures such as Zhu Xi or Qian Mu, for example, the method of "using the reverse to seek the correct" in the *Laozi* is a positive strategy to achieve a goal by behaving contrary to it, while others argue "this is inconsistent with the thought of Laozi. He does not teach to pursue the objective of prioritizing oneself" (Wang 2019a) but rather criticizes the selfish desires of conventional society. Philosophic critique as a method need not fall into either of these two camps, but can serve as a method which "takes as its object some set of positive assertions and examines them with respect to their validity or justification" (Bristow p. 55) with the intention of "discerning dangers rather than demonstrating defects" (Koopman p. 88). Likewise, "using the reverse to seek the correct" and the three movements of critique it represents can also be coherently read, both in the context of the text itself and the classical/contemporary commentarial/scholarly traditions, as a method of philosophic critique oriented around revealing the heretofore concealed asymmetric rationality informing conventional value judgements, the potential dangers which lie dormant, a warning against dogmatism, and an appeal to reconciliation of the dominant and subordinated.

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Notes

1 While the terms "critique" and "criticism" are commonly used in both senses of philosophic critique and in the sense of a subjective expression of censoriousness or disapproval, in this paper the distinction will be made by the terms "philosophic critique" or "criticizing".

2 For an account of values presented in the *Laozi* according to a masculine–feminine binary, see: Lai (2000). "The Daodejing: Resources for Contemporary Feminist Thinking", Journal of Chinese Philosophy, 27:2, June, pp. 131–53.

3 One counter-example is the common use of Hegelian dialectics to describe the *Laozi*'s philosophy.

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