

Chinese Conceptions of the Self

Lecture 4: Views of the Self in *Zhuangzi*

Structure of the *psyche*

- Philosophic synthesis of Plato and Aristotle posits tripartite structure of the psyche:
 - Reason (*nous*) → thought
 - Appetite (*epithymia*) → action;
 - Spirit (*thymoides*) → passion → will

“The elements of reason, appetite, and will [...] grew to be so much a part of the problematic of selfhood that some characterization of them appears in almost any full-scale treatment of personality, ancient and modern.” (Hall/Ames 1998, p. 8)

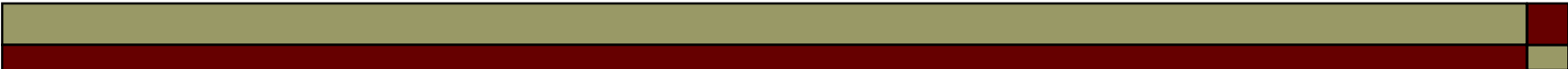
→ Modern sense of self characterised by fragmentation, incoherence, alienation.

Problematic of Self

- ❑ Subjective consciousness; modern concept
- ❑ Semantic contexts that have shaped terms such as ‘individual’, ‘self’, ‘personality’, ‘human being’
 1. Materialist: self a physiological mechanism swirling in social space
 2. Formalist: self a mind or consciousness detachable from its bodily housing
 3. Organicist: self an organic, socially interactive, goal-achieving organism
 4. Volitional: self a willing, deciding, potentially self-creating agent whose meaning is determined by persuasive agency

Mindless self

- Chinese terms that correlate to the Western 'mind': *xin* 心 (hear-mind) *li* 理 and *zhi* 知.
- *xin* 心 includes all three modalities of thinking, feeling and action. **No mind-body dualism involved.**
- Hall/Ames argue against mentalist interpretations of *li* 理 and *zhi* 知. Rather all three terms are "radically situated, integrating the human world and its natural, social, and cultural environments" (p. 31)



Bodiless Self

- ❑ Idea of 'self-cultivation' and the bodies as a means for expression and performance undermine a purely materialistic understanding of the body. Ritualized roles and practices that shape the community and are shaped by it are never separate from the body.

Aimless Self

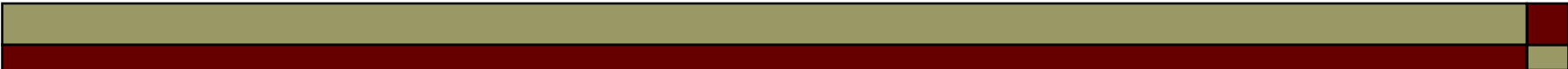
- Aristotelian naturalism find it in the knowledge of what defines the nature of the human organism (ends or aims of what it means to be human). (Hall/Ames 1998, p. 10)
- Hall/Ames argue that organismic thinking in the Aristotelian tradition assumes a *telos* or aim by which the organism is organized. Such an organizing *telos* is absent as a guiding principle in Chinese thought. Rather, the organism in China was construed as being basically congruent with the bureaucratic social order and the state.

Nonwilling Self

- Volitional activity is central to western conceptions of the self. After St Augustine, the interpretation of the "spirited" category of the Platonic *psyche* in terms of volitional categories, as linked to "will", became dominant.
- According to Hall/Ames the notion of a will creates two problems with regard to China:
 1. Actions based on will are conceived as interactions that are born out of an *agon* (contest, struggle), which is a Homeric idea; hence the English word agent and the notion that action has its origin in the heroic genre. An alternative interpretation is obedience to an all-powerful will of God. Both assumption are alien to China according to Hall/Ames. The notion of contest, they argues is "counterproductive in a society grounded in communal forms of ritual practice".
 2. The second argument against the idea of a will is based on an observation about the Chinese language. The Chinese term for 'will', *zhi* ('to go to'; 'to set one's heart on') is closely linked to the notion of 'disposition' rather than a discrete unit or agency.

Self as field and focus

- Daoism and Confucianism focus on engagement defined by deference. Deferential acts involve yielding (and being yielded to) require that one puts oneself in another's place.
- In Daoism this deference is expressed in the three wu-forms:
 - Wuzhi "no-knowledge"
 - Wuwei "no-action"
 - Wuyu "no desire"

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- These *wu-forms* resemble the three faculties of the tripartite psyche: thinking, action, will. But they are different in the sense that they are not faculties but simply activities that express a relationship to the world.
 - Conflict between the different parts are embedded in Western understandings: tension between reason and emotions (Augustine: war between passions and will; Hume: reason is a slave to the passions).

Chinese models of the person

- Psychic dynamics of the tripartite self are not present in classical Chinese culture; no fundamental mind-body dualism --> no division between affective, volitional and rational components, hence no tension between them.
- Nothing is strictly internal to the self. "The Daoist self is a function of its relations with its world." (p. 48)
- No notion of the will (late in Western thought); actions of an agent must be understood without recourse to models of decision-making based upon alternatives
- State of disturbance exists in Daoism but its origin does not lie in tensions within the self (the soul). The disturbance is one between the self and its relationship with the things that are important for its self-realization.
- We avoid disturbance by establishing a friction-less relationship with them.

wuzhi: Mirror-like knowing

Therefore the sage is like a mirror--

He neither sees things off nor goes out to meet them,

He responds to everything without storing anything up.

Thus, he is never injured through the myriad transformations he undergoes.

Is it not the case with him that to gain is to lose

And to lose is to gain! (*Daode jing*)

- The patterns of language and past experience (rules of thumb, habits, customs, standards, methods etc) tend to shape our experiences of the world. The sage mirrors the world as it is, at the moment, "without overwriting it by the shape of a world passed away, or by anticipations of a world yet to come" (p. 51)
- → The sage avoids imposing a given structure or pattern upon the world.

wuwei “non-action”

- ***wuwei***: involves absence of any action that interferes with the focus (de) of those things within one's field of influence → actions that are spontaneous and untainted by habits; actions that impose patterns, norms etc. on things rather than try to go with the grain of things.

Political model

"The most excellent ruler: The people do not even know that there is a ruler.

The second best: They love and praise him.

The next: They stand in awe of him.

And the worst: They look on him with contempt.

Inadequate integrity in government

Will result in people not trusting those who govern.

So hesitant, the ruler does not speak thoughtlessly.

His job done and the affairs of state in order,

The people all say: "We are naturally like this (*ziran*)."

wuyu: objectless desire

- Desire without the need to objectify, control, define that which is desired. Desire is deferential; to let be and let go.
 - For the Daoist, the real world is objectless. Things may be momentarily frozen into a pattern of distinctions, but ultimately the world is in constant transformations and thus beyond distinctions.
 - **Self is forgotten to the extent that discriminated objects no longer provide the environment of the self. (p. 56)**
- Linguistic differentiation between two selves:
- *wu* (embedded, deferential self) and
 - *wo* (objectifying, construing self)

Thank you for listening!