

Nothingness in the Philosophy of Lao-tzū

In order to understand the true meaning of nothingness in Lao-tzū's philosophy we must make every effort to dissociate our minds from Western ideas of nothingness. By nothingness we generally mean a lack of quantity or a blank in the reasoning process which we can ignore. In Lao-tzū, a negative statement is often an expression of the most positive truth. Nothingness is the way to the very positive truth of spontaneity.

All things in the universe share in "thingness"; they also share in nothingness. In this blanking out of their temporal nature we come to the eternal, the generating principle, the spontaneity, which is fundamental to all existence.

Why? What is the meaning of this? Since everything in the whole universe shares this principle, then we must be able to find the same thing in our own selves. Let us examine this situation.

As everyone knows, the equipment of the physical organization within the body is like that of a factory. There are many pieces of equipment which perform their special parts in the general function of breathing, circulation of blood, digestion, etc. We know these things in a very general way, but if we try to get down to them in any special detail we are glad to excuse ourselves with the comment: "It is all so complicated."

The most amazing thing is that this complicated equipment does not require any help from us (fortunately), but in the main goes on with its functions quite spontaneously. All we have to do is to feed in some materials periodically for it to work on, and it goes on quite spontaneously to perform whatever it is that needs to be done. We are very much relieved to have the doctor tell us that worrying about it will not help and that it is best to forget it. We do that anyway.

It is only by thorough dissection of the physical organism that we know about the parts. Lungs, liver, heart, stomach, kidneys, bladder, and the functions they perform are quite below the threshold of consciousness in

times of good health. Our feeling is of a single unity, an integrated "I," and all of these other things are forgotten.

That is the real meaning of nothingness. We do not know, and we forget that which we might know so that the whole will be an operation of spontaneity. This is the order of health of our own organism, and it is the order of health for the parts of the universe. This nothingness is in the very nature of the universe, exemplified in spontaneity.

Confucius also understood this principle. Confucius said: "I would prefer not to speak."

His student Tzu-kung asked: "If you, O Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record and to follow?"

The Master replied: "Does the universe speak? The four seasons pursue their course and all things are produced in their order, but does the universe say anything?"¹

Out of the nothingness of not-speaking arises the spontaneity of continuous production.

Having a general view of "nothingness" as it is involved in the theory of Lao-tzū, let us treat the context in which it occurs. It is necessary to understand the metaphysical system wherein it obtains its value in the teaching of Lao-tzū. In this case we ask: (1) Since nothingness is not merely negative but has a positive meaning, what is it that it contains? (In more formal language: "What is the *content* of nothingness?") Then we will be ready for the second question: (2) How does the concept of nothingness fit into the system of Lao-tzū, i.e., what is its significance for his metaphysical system? What is the *value* of nothingness?

1. The content of "nothingness" is discovered by considering the condition which is necessary for spontaneity. It must, of course, arise from a balanced system in which each force is balanced by an equivalent counterforce, in which there is symmetry and proportion of parts, and in which a return upon itself or a completion produces a condition of self-sufficiency. That is, a delicately balanced system of weights and forces, or of electric circuits, causes the needle to rest at the null point, and indicates true "nothingness," only when it is in the condition of spontaneous action. A formula of symbolic logic is in a condition to allow true spontaneous expression of wisdom when its propositions are balanced by counter-propositions and symmetrical arrangement in which the completion arrives at the null class, or "nothingness." It is quite as important for the orderly acquiring of external indirect knowledge as it is for the acquiring of immediate understanding. Again, we have a basic principle of all knowledge. Lao-tzū makes

¹ *The Analects* XIX.17.

"nothingness" the means of acquiring knowledge by direct contact, which is too profound for the indirect channels of discursive reason.

In a gross way, we take the example of a whirlpool as a case of pure spontaneity, which signifies nothing. The force of the stream tumbling over a fall is matched by the force of the inertia of the body of water which has already collected. These two forces interact with such proportion and symmetry that a circular motion is formed. The flow of the water in this form is the completion which very nearly supplies the conditions of complete spontaneity. Of course, actually, the power lost downstream is made up by a continuous supply from the upper stream, and so the completion of the spontaneity is dependent upon the weather.

Then, again, we may find the same principle in our own breathing. We are aware, if we stop to notice, that there are inhalation and exhalation in alternation. It is a reflex action in which no conscious effort is expended. The pushing out of the air in exhalation brings about a condition of vacuum in the lungs; when this becomes great enough it starts the inward movement of the air to fill the lungs. This inhalation continues until the pressure of the inner expansion is great enough to start again the outward movement of the air. That is, there is a continuous cycle of pressures from positive to negative and back again. As long as it is in complete balance and all parts of the cycle have their equivalents, there are symmetry and harmony and complete return, in which each inhalation moves directly into the following exhalation over a smooth course, as it were. This is a condition of complete spontaneity and, of course, it is nothingness, being completely below the threshold of consciousness.

We may generalize to show the several parts of spontaneity. It is important to have proportion, symmetry, and harmony. Then, too, each force must be countered by an equivalent force, and the whole system must return upon itself in such a manner that it will continue in its cycle with self-sufficiency. In such a system there will be the spontaneity which is the result of obtaining a complete null point, or nothingness.

The general intent may be clearer if we contrast the system of complete null-point spontaneity with an unbalanced system. Such a system requires continuous adjustment. It is the way of the extreme, in contrast with the balanced way of the mean, and implies a defect in the structure. While it may be compensated for, there will come a time when it will wear itself out, even though it is supplied from the outside.

We may contrast the operation of a gasoline motorcar, as an example of that extreme sometimes called progress, with a carefully constructed set of scales, as an example of something which approaches the null point of spon-

taneity. Of course, the motorcar is soon the victim of its own progress, while the set of scales will continue its spontaneity of sensitive response almost directly insofar as the proportion, symmetry, harmony, balance of forces, and return to the condition of the start of operations are maintained.

2. Since the structure of nothingness is so complex, we may well suspect that it has a very complex or at least an important part in the structure of things. Let us find out how valuable nothingness can be.

The value of nothingness has to be considered with some care. It is very common practice in modern Western thought to show that terms cancel themselves out and leave nothing. This is a convenient instrument of logical analysis, but it is very poor metaphysics to make the leap and say that therefore the terms have no value. We know perfectly well that a term that can be shown to be equal to nothing must be handled with great care or it will be the source of new factors entering the proposition.

Lao-tzŭ comes to the situation from a direction opposite to that of modern logicians. Instead of adopting methods which would keep nothingness in a position where it could not generate disturbing new factors, he definitely places it as the generating principle of all things. That is, his metaphysics is also an epistemology, and the order of the universe, the cosmos, is also the scheme of direct knowledge.

What does this mean? How could nothing be the source of all things?

We have shown that the principle of nothingness is based upon spontaneity. We might go further and say that the principle of spontaneity is based upon equivalence, and then that the principle of equivalence (or equilibrium) is based upon proportion and symmetry. The principle of proportion and symmetry is grounded on a principle of order.

Consequently, we might show that order is a generating principle: everything follows a certain order. In a condition of disorder where proportion and symmetry are lacking, no production of things can be expected.

If, then, we call order the generating principle, we must remember that it was derived from proportion and symmetry; proportion and symmetry are derived from equivalence; the principle of equivalence was derived from spontaneity; and the principle of spontaneity was derived from nothingness. That is, each of these, in turn, might stand as a kind of secondary generating principle. They all work back, however, to a dependence upon nothingness, which we might call the ultimate of simplicity and therefore consider it the primitive or original of the other generative principles. Therefore, Lao-tzŭ says: "All things in the world come from existence, and existence comes from non-existence."²

²*Tao Tê Ching* XL.

"Spontaneity" and "nothingness" are mere words as the logical positivists have shown. However, they represent that reality beyond the power of words to express, which we can know only by means of direct, immediate knowledge or intuition. They symbolize that point at which the extremes of process meet, in infinity, as we say, and in which every beginning has its equivalent. The alpha and omega, beginning and end, of existence are simultaneous in this moment. It is pure nothingness and pure spontaneity, but it is order, the cosmos which generates and which is the universe.

The words of which we speak are not concrete nouns but abstract, perhaps adjectival, nouns. They do not represent any concrete quality; the very nature of the universe is within them, or that which they represent. Culmination and generation are at one in spontaneity and nothingness, and that is the true universe.

If spontaneity and nothingness do not contain both beginning and end, then this is not the true universe. It is only a universe of discourse, which is limited. It is not self-contained and self-sufficient in itself. It wants something from outside which is other than its own self. There would not be completion, or order, or proportion, and the equivalent could not be formed. Consequently, no order and no thing could be produced. Therefore, we see that it is necessary that the true universe contain both spontaneity and nothingness, for in them are the generation and completion of all things. Again, we may find the exemplification (to borrow a word from Whitehead) of our principle in the operations of our own organism. Introspecting, we see that every part of the system (such as breathing, circulation of the blood, digestion, etc.) works with sufficient force and brings forth good results from its labor, yet without interfering with any other parts, though confined to a very limited space. There exist a certain order and proportion and symmetry which we could see if we knew how to write an equation to express them.

If we ask where the order, proportion, and symmetry come from, we shall notice a principle of equivalence. From this, we can find the presence of spontaneity and nothingness. Thus we see the prime importance of these two. When they are present, the others follow by necessary order of the universe or the Tao. They represent a principle of integration by which every part harmonizes with every other part. This principle is in every part and at the same time transcends every part because through its spontaneity and nothingness there is generation and completion of the universe. And this is the true meaning of the principle of nothingness in the philosophy of Lao-tzū.

The real meaning of "nothingness" or non-being is based upon spon-

taneity, and can be derived in the following manner: Spontaneity is the nature of being; the full development of spontaneity results in forgetfulness; forgetfulness results in a feeling of nothingness. From the viewpoint of the manifestation, it itself is being, but the nature of being is forgetfulness and therefore nothingness.

The interpretation of "nothingness" in the philosophy of Lao-tzū by modern Chinese scholars, however, is often one of two extremes: Some have taken it as nihilism, and some have interpreted it in terms of being, ignoring the fact that nothingness results from the nature of being. Fung Yu-lan is an example of the latter. In his book *The History of Chinese Philosophy*, he regards the particulars or individuals as being, and the universal, the metaphysical One, or Tao, as non-being. He says that because particular things are limited and definable, we can give them names. Tao, however, is the all-embracing principle and is in all things, can be simultaneously one thing and another, and is, therefore, infinite and undefinable. We cannot give Tao a particular name, and hence it is nothingness.³ This interpretation, however, is far from the real meaning of nothingness in Lao-tzū. For, although Tao is infinite and undefinable, because it is in everything and can be both one thing and another, it remains in the realm of existence with particular things. We may say that Tao or the metaphysical One is the infinite or the all-embracing principle. However, despite the fact that we cannot give it a definite particular name, the all-embracing principle does exist, and, therefore, is not the meaning of nothingness. The real meaning of nothingness in Lao-tzū is something beyond existence. Lao-tzū said: "Thirty spokes meet in one hub, but its vacuity [the axle hole] makes the carriage capable of use. Clay is fashioned into vessels, but their emptiness gives them usefulness. Doors and windows are cut to make a house, but their apertures make a useful dwelling. Hence, existence has profits, but from non-existence [vacuity] we derive utility."⁴ From this quotation, we see that the real meaning of nothingness in Lao-tzū is something beyond existence, and is quite different from Fung's interpretation. Therefore, the true concept of Lao-tzū's nothingness is neither nihilism, as some scholars hold, nor the infinite, the all-embracing principle—the concept of the concrete Tao, as Fung Yu-lan asserts. Rather, the key to the true meaning of nothingness lies in spontaneity, which results in forgetfulness and unconsciousness, and it is therefore beyond existence. Hence, spontaneity results in nothingness.

³ Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (reprinted; Shanghai: North-China Daily News, 1949), pp. 177-179; and Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), pp. 94-97.

⁴ *Tao T' Ching* XL.