

Manifesto for a Daoist Theology of Messianic Wisdom

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Manifesto...

This manifesto is an attempt to mark the theoretical foundations for a constructive Daoist theology of wisdom. It asks what the characteristics of such a theology ought to be and establishes the parameters within which such a theology ought to operate. and argues for the necessity of such a mode of theological reasoning. As a manifesto, it has a peculiarly personal quality to it, in the sense that it is my first-person-singular attempt to articulate the value, the necessity and the characteristics of such a mode of theological reasoning. As a manifesto, it also has a public quality to it, in the sense that it is an invitation to others to join with me in the task that I delineate below. The manifesto is not a common genre of scholarly literature, but I have chosen it because it is convenient for the task of constructive theological reasoning that aims, finally, toward what may be termed a deeper "insistence" within the totality of cosmic processes that shape our evolving universe. By insistence I means the recursive nature of our being-within multiple fields of insistence that constitute our environment. Daoist theology takes insistence to be the basic question with

which it must grapple. As I argue later, Christian theology is primarily concerned with existence, extrinsic relationships and responsibilities. Daoist theology, by contrast, is concerned with insistence, that is to say, the relationship of our individual potential (*de*德) or nature (*xing*性) to its determining contexts (*ming*命) or fields (*dao* 道).

A manifesto is usually seen as a response to a critical situation. There is a sense in which all situations are manifestly critical—that is our experience of them is that they seem to necessitate an ethical response: yes or no; left or right; this way or that way. From its very inception, Daoist wisdom has refused—and refuted—this dichotomous experience of the world. The Daoist universe is, ultimately, both plural and monadic, constituted of a plurality of processes each reflecting an evolving Dao. This relationship is encoded in the classical Chinese philosophical dyad of form and function (*ti-yong* 體—用). The essence of this relationship is that although reality seems to be divisible into binary categories (essence and manifestation, form and function, structure and process, stasis and transformation, pattern (*li*理) and energy-matter (*qi*氣) the nature of these cognitive constructs is that the one constitutes the other.¹ As Zhuangzi argues, “this” or “not this” do not correspond to the way in which our bodies engage their environments (*Zhuangzi* 2). Rather, reality manifests itself around us as plurality

¹ This is not to say in some post-structuralist sense that these terms are pure symbolic conventions with no real referent, for, as is argued below, language itself is embedded environmentally in the evolving dao. The mistake is to argue that one of these dyadic terms, in and of itself, captures an essential element of reality which is, in one sense, evolving, plural and reproductive, and in another sense unitary and ultimate.

of “microfields of insistence” which are themselves holographic reflections of the macrocosm of an eternal (nontemporal) field of insistence, known as Dao.

The best way to explain this is to imagine that the Daoist universe is constituted recursively; that it is not a three-dimensional field of space passing through a fourth linear dimension of time but in fact an infinite kaleidoscope of insistences that themselves reflect and refract the myriad other processes of reflection and refraction. The universe—or pluriverse—thus appears to evolve recursively, multiplying the reflections and refractions on top of each other in an infinitely deep recursive loop. This is an old idea. The *Daode jing* puts it simply: Dao models itself after its own spontaneity (or, as I would term it, insistence) (*Dao fa ziran* 道法自然; *Daode jing* 25).

For this reason, a manifesto such as this is not to be seen as a response, positive or negative, to a crisis; nor is it intended to show the way *forward*, as if the way must necessarily be *before* us. In such a worldview one is already committed to a process of action or engagement, stepping out, or *existence*. This transcendental commitment to existence has been one of the most enduring hallmarks of the Western philosophical approach, that is, until its recent “deconstruction.” In attempting to explain his idea of deconstruction, Derrida notes: “The instance of *krinein* or of *krisis* (decision, choice, judgment, discernment) is itself, as is all the apparatus of transcendental critique, one of the essential “themes” or “objects” of deconstruction” (Derrida 1988: 270). Whereas Derrida’s refusal to judge is based on his rejection of transcendental absolutes and his recognition of the irreducible abyss of *différance*, paradoxically the Daoist

refusal is based more on the on the principles of an analogical and correlative metaphysics where likeness and resonance are the underlying ontological principles. Since each field of insistence (*dao*) in some way mirrors all other fields of insistence there is no ultimate basis from which one can make a critical separation or distinction between things. For this reason the *Daode jing* counsels nonaction (*wuwei* 無為), that is, non-extrinsic action, that is, insistence as the mode of being and acting in the world.

Thus a Daoist manifesto, though it precludes existential judgment, cannot be based on the hermeneutics of *différance*, but rather on the far more analogical hermeneutics of communication or “speech” (*dao* 道 or *logos*) that underpins the Daoist metaphysics of recursive insistence: the nature of each *dao* is to manifest itself in an eternal, ontogenetic and multi-dimensional process of communication. A Daoist manifesto should similarly base itself upon this principle of reflective communication.

Daoists literature famously explains the idea of communication (*tong* 通) by analogy with a close homophone (*dong* 洞), translated as “cavern” or “grotto.” The term grotto was most importantly used by Lu Xiuqing (406-477) in his catalogue of revealed Daoist scriptures (*jing* 經). Caverns have four recursively related meanings:

- (1) caverns are celestial libraries from which Dao *dao*-s (communicates), usually via intermediary deities, to humans;
- (2) caverns are also dark recesses in the mountains where Daoists strive to become more attentive to the process of communication around them;

(3) caverns may be places where texts reveal themselves;²

(4) caverns are also locations within the body.³

Thus caverns are empty spaces in the body, the landscape and the sky, and simultaneously, the principle of communication 通 that exists between these three fundamental dimensions of existence, heaven, earth and humanity (天地人). This manifesto similarly aims to set forth the dynamic, communicative reciprocity that exists among these three layers of cosmic evolution.

The aim of this act of communication is thus not to articulate a response to a crisis (an act of morality, ethics or existential responsibility) but simply to manifest the life, the *insistence* that “insists in” the communicative reciprocity between heaven, earth and humans. In this way Daoist wisdom, like Confucian moral wisdom, is constituted within the nexus of reciprocal relationships that constitute the anthropocosmic self. The nature of *daos* are to insist, that is, to manifest innate vital potential (*de* 德 through deeper insistences within the myriad fields of insistence. Many Confucian and Buddhist philosophers take the primary location of this field of insistence as the mind (*xin* 心). Daoists, by contrast, locate

² An example of the way in which the revelation of texts takes place in grottos can be seen in the two mythic explanations for the revelation of the *Scriptures of the Cavern-Divine*. One legend tells of how a Daoist named Bo He was instructed by his master to stare at the north wall of a cave in Mount Emei. Three years later he was able to see writings form on the rock-face. According to the second explanation, the texts carved themselves on the wall of a grotto in Mount Song while a Daoist was meditating there (Benn 2000: 316).

³ As Thomas Hahn writes: “Despite a singular solidity, their physical permeability in terms of air-and water-flow reflects the inner workings of the human body. Blood equals water; air equals breath. Spermatoc liquids form pools; walls constitute shapes like inner organs or viscera. Their resident, left windowless and in an enclosed void, experiences the dignity of complete independence and autarky” (Hahn 2000: 695).

it in the body. For this reason, the primary mode of being for Daoists is not the moral being of existential responsibility, but a cosmic insistence that is primordially rooted in the innate ontogenetic power of the cosmos simply to be in the process of spontaneously arising (*dao fa ziran*). To make a contrast with Christianity, the task of Christians is to *respond* to the *existence* of a nameless deity and unfamiliar neighbours—that is, to name and bring into relation the externality of the experienced world, whether construed as the relative alterity of those whose names one does not know, or the ultimate alterity of the nameless numinous. The task of Daoists is to manifest within their bodies the *insistence* of the cosmic vitality that indwells and constitutes their being. The present text is a literary manifesto of such insistence.

... a Daoist...

By now some of the features of the metaphysical picture of the Daoist universe should be clear. The universe consists of myriad fields of insistence all of which aim to manifest a pattern of cosmic insistence, of being in-and-among; all of which aim to manifest their ontogenetic nature, symbolized as the Dao as mother of all things. The nature of this insistence is thus to manifest life—and from this it is no surprise that Daoists have concentrated on cultivating this life within their bodies. But the complement to this life-insistence is evident in the second meaning of the verb 道, namely, to speak. If we understand “Dao” not only as the cosmic way, but at a fundamental level an act of “speech” then we can construct an interpretation of “Dao” not only as the matrices of the universe, but also a means of communication between the three fundamental realities of the

universe: humans, the earth and Heaven. It was this root meaning of Dao as the pathways or a means of communication that the Daoist religious traditions fully exploited. Dao is thus not only a cosmological principle but also the insistent forms of communication that take place between humans, the earth and Heaven.

Perhaps it is stating the obvious, but one of the most important things to consider when trying to understand any canonical Daoist scripture, is that it is to be read as a manifestation of the Dao itself. Thus when trying to understand what the Dao means in Daoist religion, a key element is that the Dao is revealed in the form of literary scripture as well as in the form of important personages such as Laozi. The ultimate purpose of this communication according to some Daoist traditions is not to “save” or “liberate” human beings from their finitude (though this may be one result) but rather more grandly, to assist in (or insist upon) the continuing evolution of the cosmos. This fact was well recognized in Daoist movements going back as far as the Way of Great Peace in the 2nd century.

This early Daoist movement envisioned the role of human beings as facilitators of a “central harmony” in the cosmos. The central text of that movement, known as the Scripture of Great Peace, asserts that “it is our human mission to preserve, protect, and circulate harmonious communication between the realms of cosmos and humanity” (Lai 2001: 104). There are two chief aspects to the way in which Daoists continue to promote such a “harmonious communication”: communal ritual and self-cultivation. These two activities though different sociologically and phenomenologically can be understood as sharing a common theological purpose, namely to promote the dynamic exchange of

power and vitality within the three levels of the cosmos, heaven, earth and humanity, so as to achieve a level of optimal harmony among them.⁴

The multiplicity of Daoist revealed texts suggests that the communications of the Dao are literary manifestos, that the cosmic insistence of the Dao is at some level a textual insistence. It is not, however, the content of the transmission that is important, but rather the fact that the language of the Dao facilitates communication between the diverse layers of existence (celestial, human and earthly). Daoist texts thus do not prescribe doctrines, but rather modes of conduct that facilitate the intercommunication between humans, the earth and the heavens. Indeed, for most Daoist texts, it is the texts themselves that are the methods of communication. Simply possessing or reciting one of these texts is seen as strengthening the connections between one's own being and the roots of life. Moreover, many such texts describe mythopoetically the ways in which human bodies are implicated in the cosmic processes in our heavenly environment:

The Supreme [Lord] said: People are concentrated essence and accumulated energy. When someone conceives an embryo, blood accumulates, joining yellow and white, ethereal and solidified, cinnabar and purple, melding and vaporizing. In this way one's bones solidify, saliva spews forth, and bodily fluids scatter, diffuse and circulate.

The four limits converge and combine; the nine palaces join unite as one; the five spirits are incarnated in bodily form [i.e. in the five viscera]. The Supreme Unity fixes the tally and register. Suddenly [life] is established. Indistinct, yet it has form. Vague, yet whole. Cast away, yet being born.

⁴ The most mundane level of Daoist cultivation thus consists in ensuring that the physical environment has room to breathe. The early Celestial Masters movement, for instance, included in its list of 180 precepts injunctions against sealing off pools and wells and drying up marshes (Schipper 2001: 81). Ge Hong's (283-343) biography of Zhang Daoling, the first Celestial Master, also relates how the community was instructed to keep the roads and bridges clear and puddles drained of water.

Thereupon the nine spirits come to stay in their palaces. The five viscera mysteriously grow and the five spirits take residence there. Fathers and mothers only know the beginning of giving oneself life and nurture, and are unaware that the Imperial Lord and the five spirits come between them. (*Jiuzhen zhongjing* DZ1376 2.a-b).⁵

Another way in which Daoists understand this connection between text and cosmos can be seen in the Chinese character *jing*經 which conventionally means a classic text or canonical scripture, but refers also to the weft of the cosmos, envisioned as a sacred canopy or fabric suspended from the central cosmic ridgepole (*taiji*太極) towards which the Great Bear or Big Dipper constellation (*beidou*北斗) points.

A Daoist text is thus a cosmic text(ile), woven from the vital threads of the evolving processes of Dao.

...Theology...

Theology is the search for truth about divine matters. In Modern Standard Chinese, the word for truth is *dao*/道理—the pattern of Dao. Given the metaphysical framework of cosmic revelation and ontogeny outlined above, in what sense is it possible for humans to cognize and manifest this *dao*-pattern? Since truth is not immediately manifest to humans, it must be sought. The question is not what is truth? but where is truth? Where can the pattern of Dao be observed? Daoists recognized, however, that Dao is not simply something which one should, in the fashion of Confucius, learn to inquire of (*wen*問), attend

(*ting*聽) or follow (*shun*順). Dao may also be cultivated (*xiudao*修道). In this sense, therefore, Daoist theology has two components: a cognitive appreciation of the communicative (and therefore ontogenetic) processes of the cosmos; and a corresponding communicative (and therefore ontogenetic) stimulation of those processes. This dyadic process of interaction has been understood as stimulus-response (*gan-ying*感應), or, at its simplest level, the inspiration and expiration of vital breath (*qi*氣) in the forms of activity (*yang*陽) and passivity (*yin*陰). Below I sketch out the foundations of how such theological cognition and cultivation could function, but it is important to note that these two modes of theological activity (cognition and cultivation) are complementary and constitutive of each other. To borrow an analogy from computers: cognition is not simply input and cultivation is not simply output for both processes take place simultaneously.

In order to help understand the cognitive mode of Daoist theology I would like to introduce the environmentalist cognitive philosophy of Mark Rowlands (1999). This theory is contrasted on the one hand with the internalist theory of Descartes, and more recent Neo-Kantian cognitive structuralism, in which it is argued that the process of cognition takes place wholly within the structures of the mind—that is the mind fundamentally *constitutes* our experience of the world. Rowlands' environmentalist theory is contrasted, on the other hand, with Putnam's externalist theory (1975) that "it is not possible to understand the nature of cognitive processes by focusing exclusively on what is occurring inside

⁵ The number following DZ refers to the title index of the Ming *Zhengtong daoze* 正統道藏 that can be found in Schipper (1975). For a comprehensive, cross-referenced index of the most important Daoist collections and compendia, consult Komjathy (2003),

the skins of cognizing organisms” (Rowlands 1999: 31). Rowlands’ environmentalist theory argues that Putnam’s epistemological claim must also entail an ontological claim that the cognitive processes themselves are not located exclusively within the body; that the cognitive process itself involves the manipulation of one’s environment. Thus cognition is a hybrid process in which individual bodies engage and manipulate the environment in which they are located. Rowlands uses an analogy from psychotectonics (the study of how to build minds) to show that a mind is not like a computer but rather a robot, that is, a machine that interacts with and manipulates its environment *in order to* process information about it (Rowlands 1999:30).

Rowlands argues for this theory of cognition by examining perception, memory, thought and language. In terms of perception, Rowlands defends Gibson’s (1979) ecological theory of an optic array, that is, the concept of a spatial pattern of light that is manipulated by the optical system of the perceiving person. Thus, crucially, visual perception is does not simply involve the processing of information collected by the retina and delivered to the optic nerve, but rather the total system in which eyes move and focus, heads turn and bodies move thus manipulating the structure of the optic array in their environment. Any comprehensive understanding of perception, Gibson claims, cannot be understood unless it involves the total ecosystem of manipulating and processing information. That is, we do not acquire visual knowledge simply by internally processing information acquired from external sources. Rather, “in certain circumstances, acting upon, or manipulating, external structures is a form of infor-

mation processing” (Rowlands 1999: 116). From examples such as this Rowlands argues that Putnam’s epistemological claims must also be supplemented by an ontological claim—that some forms of cognition involve the manipulation of structures in one’s environment.

A second example of how this works is given in Rowlands’ examination of memory. In this example he distinguishes between biological working memory and external working memory, and argues that memory, like perception, is a hybrid of both internal and environmental elements. He cites for an example Rubin’s theory of memory in oral traditions (1995). Rubin argues that oral memory (for instance remembering a poem or a song) is constructed out of the sequence of sounds that is involved in the performance of the poem. Specifically, the rules of rhythm and rhyme severely limit the quantity of information that it is necessary to remember. Provided that one can remember the beginning word of the poem, each word functions as a phonetic cue for the next word: “Eenie” leads to “Meenie” leads to “Miney” leads to “Mo” (Rowlands 1999: 141).

Rowlands likes this example because it shows that the patterns of ambient sound located outside the remembering mind help constitute the memory process. The manipulation of one’s aural environment (by voicing the first word of the poem) is not only the first stage in the performance of the poem, but also the first stage in the remembering of the poem.

How does this relate to the concept of Daoist theology? Like the example of oral memory, theology is a process of performing and remembering the cues embedded in the environment in order to grasp the truth (*daoli*道理). Like the

example of visual perception outlined above, Daoist theology is both a cognitive and an environmentally manipulative process. That is, it is a process of understanding Dao that also involves engaging Dao and, ultimately, transforming or cultivating it. Daoist theology, moreover, proposes a teleological value to this process of cognition, namely, the promotion of harmonious communication between the three existentially relevant realms of Dao: earth, heavens and humanity. This harmony is realised in the human ability to cognize the sequential patterns, the rhymes and the rhythms of our environmental matrix and to continue this patterning by supporting the continuing evolution of new patterns and ways that harmonise with the existing sequences. In this respect Daoist theology is an aesthetic endeavour of harmony, rather than an ethical endeavour of response. As

David Hall argued

The Daoist world is not to be seen as a Whole but as *many* “wholes.” Because there is no sense of being as a common property or a relational structure, the world lacks a single coherent pattern characterizing its myriad processes. The order of the world is, thus, neither rational nor logical but *aesthetic*. This is the case since there is no transcendent pattern determining the existence or efficacy of the order. Natural order is *ziran* (self-so). (Hall 2001: 252).⁶

Daoist theology thus aims towards the manifestation of the ontogenetic insistence of the myriad *daos* that constitute the universe in such a way as to propagate harmony. It thus involves a type of environmental cognition⁷ and it also involves a hermeneutical performance based on re-membering the cues

⁶ ⁷ Note that what Hall takes to be the radical multiplicity of the Daoist “pluriverse” I prefer to see as the recursive patterning that defies the traditional categories of one and many.

⁷ C.f. Zhu Xi’s “investigation of things” (*gewu* 格物).

encoded within our environment. These cues, of course, constitute the classic texts that are revealed from the hidden recesses of the root of the recursion, that is, the primordial dao (*yuandao* 元道).

...of Messianic...

The environmental hermeneutics of “re-membering the cosmos” outlined above is, however, more than a purely logical or rational process. Given the recursivity of the Daoist worldview, it is a process that involves all three dimensions of the cosmos (heaven, earth and humans). The one who cultivates theological wisdom thus propagates the ontogenetic insistence of his or her environing field (dao). In order to understand the character of such a person, it is helpful to review Julia Ching’s theory of shamanic kingship (1997). Briefly stated, Ching asserts that the notion of kingship provides a key paradigm for Chinese religion. The Chinese character for a king, three horizontal lines connected by a single vertical line, symbolizes the role of the king as the one who mediates between heaven and earth, and, if he is wise and benevolent, facilitates the continuing harmonious transformation of the myriad things that constitute the universe. Ching demonstrates that this paradigm can serve as a powerful key for interpreting the many dimensions of the cosmic role of the Chinese religious functionary. Confucians took as their model the sage-kings of old who, like the pole star in the night sky, merely had to “face south” and all under heaven revolved around them. The sage of the *Daode jing* is a similarly benevolent ruler who, through the charismatic power of actionless-action, spontaneously generates harmonious order throughout his environment. Chinese shamans through ecstatic vision, fly to the

stars, and, like the charismatic kings of old, weave a harmony and unity between the celestial and the earthly realms. The strength of this way of looking at Chinese religion derives in part from the fact that Ching generates this perspective from within the tradition itself. It is thus an internally coherent theoretical category which does not suffer from the weaknesses to which external theoretical impositions are often prone.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Ching's discussion of the sage-king is her use of the term messiah as a cross-cultural comparative category. There are obvious difficulties in using a term from one religious tradition, namely, Judaism, as an interpretive category for understanding another religious tradition. When this cross-cultural interpretation is undertaken in the furtherance of, or under the implicit influence of, political ambitions and ideologies, such interpretations are open to the charge of Western colonialism, aggression and imperialism. Here, by contrast, the term "messiah" functions not as an evaluative tool for judging the merit of someone's religious stance, but as a heuristic device for generating understanding and wisdom.

So how does Ching use "messiah" as a comparative category? First she points to its historical understanding in the Jewish tradition, as the "anointed one," that is the King of Israel. Originally this denoted a king whose reign was consecrated by a rite of anointment with oil. In the intertestamental period, however, the term was applied to the future king, who was expected to restore the kingdom of Israel and save the people from all evil. Next she explains that she is not using the term as "literal parallel" (Ching 1997: 208). "But I am suggesting,"

she goes on to say, “that the idea of an expected political saviour has been very much a part of the Confucian, as well as Taoist and even Buddhist traditions. A belief that the old order was near its end, and a new, better one, was approaching, a ‘millenarian belief’—was often also associated with this expectation” (208). Ching’s use of the term messiah is thus related to her understanding of millenarianism as a feature of Chinese religion. A messiah, by her interpretive definition, is a political saviour who will usher in the millennium—a new age of harmony.

Since the theory of millennialism has been tied up with discussion of linear and circular time (Cohn 1970; 1993) and its application to the Chinese context has been variously debated already (Kohn 1998), I do not wish to comment on this aspect of the term messiah, except to say that the recursive cosmology outlined above could permit both a cyclical and linear view of time depending upon the perspective of the observer. There are, however, two important connotations of the term messiah for a Daoist theology of messianic wisdom. First is the notion that charismatic power is located within a person and radiates outward from that person to bring his or her environment (social, political or natural) into harmony. This first connotation is simply that a messiah has the characteristic of a sage (*shengren* 聖人). The second is the notion that the source of this charismatic power is not the person him- or herself but rather is conveyed through the person to the world as it were from the future. Thus it is the character of such figures to be expected or anticipated. Such a person functions as a catalyst who rebalances the cosmic field when humans perceive that the imbalances in their

environment (social, political or natural) are too great to be affected by those within the imbalanced field. It is as though a listing ship cannot be righted by the efforts of those on board but requires some apparently external intervention. A Daoist “messiah” is such an intervening force in the form of a human person.

Daoist cosmology holds, however, that the nature of the cosmos is to be spontaneously capable of rebalancing itself. Why are such messianic figures necessary? In the Lingbao text *The Roots of Sins*, the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning relates how the law and the texts of Numinous Treasure were made available to the world during various stages of its evolution.

When heaven and earth were established once more, I emerged into world and was called Nameless Lord. I brought forth the Law, to educate and transform, to save [people as] heavenly beings. In this age the actions of men and women were [both] refined and coarse; there was inequality in the same heart. Some believed [in the Dao]; they all obtained long life. Some gave rise to jealousy and hurt, and were evil, rebellious and disloyal; they all died early deaths. At this time there were the roots of karmic retribution of good and evil. After I had passed through, the entire kalpa came full circle. Heaven and earth were again destroyed; there was no more light; dismal and dark it was. After a period of five kalpas came Opening Sovereign, the first year.

The true texts of the Numinous Treasure were opened and made accessible by the three original energies. Heaven and earth were again in correct order; the five writings were blazing and radiant. I became manifest in the Heaven of Beginning Green Energy under the name of the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning to send down broadly the Law, to educate and transform, and save [them as] heavenly beings. At the time when this first began, the people were simple and pure; they lived a life of “knotted cords,” and their minds were free from rigid conventions. They were in harmony with spontaneity, and all attained long life to the extent of 36,000 years. (*Zuigen pinjie* 罪根品戒, DZ457 ch. 1)

Here the Heavenly Worthy graciously appears to save living beings and to restore them to the simple life when people used knotted cords to keep track of their accounts. Co-incident with this plan to save the world is the appearance of the true texts of Numinous Treasure, and as a result of the texts being revealed,

the salvific function of the Heavenly Worthy was fulfilled. Thus in the Numinous Treasure tradition, the process of revealing the texts through the medium of divine beings is itself to be understood as an act of compassion or grace by means of which people are able once again to live a life of harmony and simplicity.

From this it seems that the Daoist concept of a “messiah” is somewhat different from the Jewish or Christian concepts. The similarity is that the messiah is a human figure who is expected in the future to catalyze peace and harmony in the world. The difference is that the Dao itself is the source of the catalytic power. That is, the world itself seems to have a self-healing mechanism built into it. Although it looks as though messiahs appear like a *deus ex machina* to save the situation, the reality is that their charismatic power is itself a function of the ontogenetic insistence of the matrix itself. It itself brings about the harmonious re-balancing that it itself is experiencing. We humans expect this to take the form of some dramatic external liberating force, but in fact the messiah is a function of the ecosystemic balancing power of Dao. It is this characteristic that gives the dao its apparently transcendental character—that it is a force for ecological equilibrium, an ontogenetic insistence, that cannot be destroyed. Humans may try hard to prevent this cosmic flourishing from taking place, but it is impossible that they could succeed. When this transcendental force is schematized temporally within human religious experience, it has the character of faith—faith in the future, faith in some final deliverance by gods or messiahs. It is not the future that saves Daoists, however, but the insistent power of Dao welling up all around. For this reason Daoists prefer the metaphors of return (*fan*反) or

reversion (*ni*逆) to describe their religious journey. This process requires the deepening of connections between their own life, the environment around them, and the root recursion of the primordial dao.

...Wisdom.

By now the characteristics of Daoist wisdom should be readily apparent:

- (1) Wisdom takes the character of a manifesto, that is, a personal exposition or showing-forth.
- (2) Wisdom is cavernous, recursive connectivity that facilitates the communication between the heavens, earth and humans.
- (3) Wisdom is a mechanism of cognition and activation, an environmental hermeneutic that facilitates the ontogenetic insistence of the fields in which one is located.
- (4) Wisdom is the balancing function of Dao, and manifests in individuals to catalyze harmony in their environments. Wisdom in the Daoist tradition is thus peculiarly and resolutely personal, but at the same time a function of the environing field in which one is located. Wisdom thus insists within the webs of connection between the individual and all those factors that constitute the multiple fields of his or her environment.

In this regard it may be helpful to consider two analogies. The first is that of a networked computer system in which the various information processing tasks are distributed throughout the whole system. As Rowlands argues, “In any specification of what a computer can do, the features of the network in which it is embedded must be taken into account” (1999: 143). Similarly, wisdom is not the

property of the individual sage or messianic figure but can only be understood in reference to the network of vital processes in which the sage is inscribed. Even though wisdom may appear to be embedded in a person such as a sage or messiah, this does not mean that it is in a New-Age sense a “personal” or “private” wisdom. It is rather an ecosystemic, holographic wisdom.

The second analogy is based on Wittgenstein’s view of language, that the meaning of a linguistic item depends upon the capacity of the speaker to use it in the context of social conventions (Rowlands 1999: 178; Wittgenstein 1953). This is the very simple point that language is not the property of the individual but a shared set of conventions. These shared conventions include environmental aspects such as patterns of sound and symbols that encode meaning, but more importantly can be cashed out in terms of human behaviour. A similar analogy could be the fact that the manipulation of geometric symbols can be cashed out in our ability to design buildings that withstand earthquakes. The language that wisdom speaks is thus a social or environmental wisdom.

Within the Chinese traditions, I am persuaded that Xunzi developed the most sophisticated understanding of the way in which wisdom functions in terms of the shared codes of ritual behaviour. This wing of the Confucian project, continued to this day in the so-called Boston Confucianism holds that wisdom is ineluctably instituted wisdom; that it is culturally encoded wisdom; that it is powerfully effective wisdom when it knows how to employ the sedimented layers of meaning in ritual acts or to play the complex harmonies of ritual compositions. From the Daoist perspective, this view of wisdom is an excellent view, but is

flawed if it is not ultimately rooted in the language of ontogenetic insistence, or Dao. This Daoist language may be understood as the “deep grammar” of evolution, that is, the codes that define and make possible the transformations of things within the myriad processes of Dao. This language may be encoded symbolically and recorded in texts, but is, fundamentally a somatic/vital language, not a symbolic/mental language.⁸ One American Daoist practitioner has termed this the alchemical language for communicating with nature’s intelligence (Winn 2001).

Daoist theology claims, therefore, that this language of nature (*dao*—in both its senses) is accessible to us chiefly through the connection between our bodies and their cosmic environments. As I have argued elsewhere, it is a wisdom predicated upon a “hermeneutics of the body”:

Daoists engage in what might be termed a critical hermeneutics of the body. It is through the body that Daoists interpret the self-revelation of the world in nature and scripture; it is through the cultivation of the body that Daoists achieve the highest state of perfected being (*zhen*), which is a dynamic, spontaneous identity or transparency between the body and its cosmic environment. Daoist cultivation is thus intrinsically somatic: the cognitive and the spiritual aspects of Daoist cultivation are distributed throughout the whole body and are not the function of specific fields within the body such as the mind or the soul. The entire Daoist tradition may legitimately be viewed as a continuously unfolding history of a critical hermeneutics of the body in which human beings have cultivated a “fusion of horizons” between the conditions of bodily existence (*xing*; nature) and the constellated powers (*ming*; fate) within which individual lives are circumscribed.
(Miller 2002: 18)

Thus Daoist wisdom is, by definition, a kind of somatic process in which the communicative, ontogenetic power of the Dao insists within the body, generating

⁸ For this reason the transmission of Daoist texts is accompanied by oral instructions on how to perform the texts. The meaning of the texts is thus activated or employed, rather

transformative connections within the fields of engagement in which it is located. Whereas Confucians focus on the power of conventional language and symbolic ritual discourse to effect these transformations, Daoists insist that all symbolic communications are, if they are to be strategically effective, embedded within in the deeper language of our evolving environment. It is the task of Daoist theology to articulate the fundamental parameters within which this wisdom may be appropriated and manifested.⁹ I have argued that this wisdom should take the form of a “holographic manifesto” rather than a responsive or responsible communication. It is my hope, therefore, that such wisdom, embodied by sagely figures and reflected by contemporary intellectuals, will supersede the disjunctive ethics of alterity that is predicated on a foundational dichotomy of self/other, and may function instead as an “injunctive” environmental wisdom of being-within.

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than construed in the mind.

⁹ A preliminary comparative sketch of some of these contours can be found in Miller (2000).

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