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Some Taoist Reactions to Impending Fascism

introduction:

The American thinker is sitting alone on the riverbank of a drowning nation. The oppressed and targeted rise against the biting waves, their struggle echoing louder than the orange child who pushed them in, and thus fell into the river himself. Members of the progressive party shout a call to action from within the thinker's psychical parliament while the serene silence of Tao both resonates and does not resonate from the distant forests of historical reflection—directed at the inevitable lifespan of a fascist regime. It is no ineffable instantiation of noetic realization that the United States is undergoing the shedding of its Neo-Liberal mask under the bloody orange boot of the Trump administration. The fixedly oppressive and authoritarian nature of the American colonies is approaching new heights of public bourgeois comfortability and outright baronism. Dog whistling and strawdog[1] whistling Nazis fill both the elected and unelected roles of the tripart confusion ironically known for its *freins et contrepoids*. The unapologetic culling of the most dangerous citizens—the compassionate, the *ren*—has already begun.

The American thinker is faced with a dilemma that is not so easily dissolved by Nagarjunean quantification: to resist or *not to resist*. Notice that the very term *not to resist* is a negation of *to resist*—a resistance against resistance—this will be important later on. In this paper I will show that Russell Kirkland's reading of the Taoist principle of non-intervention applies to moral crises like impending fascism just as securely as drowning babies and extinct whooping cranes. Then I will argue against the possibility–both logical and physical–that one

[1] One Taoist perspective found in section 5 of the Tao Te Ching proposes that "Heaven and Earth . . . treats the things of the world as straw dogs . . . The sage . . . treats the people as straw dogs."

can *not intervene* in the present, leading to the formulation of an inconsistently more consistent Taoist reaction to a crisis like fascism. Before continuing on, it is crucial to recognize that any nominalization, conceptualization, or expression of Tao is chimeral, especially that of a specific thinker. The moment one speaks of Tao is the same moment one ceases to be a Taoist. The following information and argumentation is thus necessarily filled with benevolent deceit by the lights of its very subject matter. I will also be using terms like *the Humanist* which are liable to produce instances of misplaced concreteness, but there is a certain degree to which this linguistic faculty cannot be avoided.

the riverbank:

Kirkland's *"RESPONSIBLE NON-ACTION" IN A NATURAL WORLD: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NEI-YEH, CHUANG-TZU, AND TAO-TE CHING* begins with the following thought experiment: "At one time, my colleague Lee Yearley sought to impress upon students the differences between the thought of the Confucian thinker Mencius and the thought of the Taoist thinker Chuang-tzu. The starting point was Mencius' famous insistence that human nature is such that none of us would fail to be moved if we saw an infant facing imminent death, such as by falling into an open well; Chuang-tzu, meanwhile, presumably believed that humans are incapable of comprehending the true meaning of the events that constitute the context of our lives, and urged us to refrain from the delusion that we can correctly analyze those events and correctly govern the events that occur to us . . . Mencius and Chuang-tzu are sitting together on a riverbank, when an infant was described floating precariously on the river, apparently on its way to its death from drowning" (1). This concise example presents the Progressive question in its barest formula:

1. There is a crisis occurring in my vicinity by which suffering will proliferate.

2. I may or may not be able to prevent this suffering but I can try.
3. To act or not to act?

The Mencian Confucian, who has a xin in common with the American Progressive, believes in a moral imperative incumbent upon their circumstantial relation to suffering, enacted in accordance with a grander dualistic notion of the Good, the proliferation of which can be qualified as *ren* and *moral progress* respectively. The Confucian and the Progressive—henceforth the Humanist—complete their ethical framework with a sense of meaningful agency: the idea that we can know the Good, either circumstantially or absolutely, and effectively act upon this knowledge to produce what are assumed to be good results (Kirkland, 6). This is their motivation for attempting to save the child. This is their motivation for resisting fascism. Kirkland's construal of the Taoist, who will hitherto be referred to as *Kirkland's construal* for the sake of efficiency, will never attempt to save the child due to their higher comprehension of the simultaneously caring and uncaring valueless benevolence of Tao (6). Following the original Taoist style, which aims to deconstruct conventional dualistic meaning as a step in the reader's transition towards intuitive truth, Kirkland's paper is filled with aporic contradictions and noetic inconsistencies such as the conflation of Tao's goodness and its lack thereof, the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of value judgements, and the human's equally supposed ability and inability to recognize and carry out actions with good results.

These conflicting yet simultaneously true propositions act as chauffeurs to one's higher contemplation of the way things are, yet where Kirkland goes both right and wrong is in attempting to attribute a consistent normative output to one's accordance with Tao. It is just as much of an "arrogant assumption" to act upon a specific normative conception of Tao as it is for the Humanist to act upon the notion that they are some kind of God of the earth (Kirkland, 3).

The following quote from Kirkland on page 21 highlights the paradox of normative skepticism and lays the groundwork for my demonstration of non-intervention's impossibility: "there is no way to know whether any given event is 'good' or 'bad' . . . it therefore follows that the only good actions are actions that are not taken, and the only good people are the *people who are thoughtful enough, considerate enough, humble enough, and brave enough* *not to take any interventional action at all*." Regarding the drowning baby and the governmental crisis they now represent, Kirkland says that "Just as Chuang-tzu would not dive into a river to save a floating baby, he would not take deliberate action to save the world from apparent destruction" (2). In characterizing a specific interpretation of Tao's moral effects on the individual who travels alongside it, Kirkland organizes a set of concepts related to Tao into an active disposition—this being Kirkland's construal of non-intervention: responsible non-action—and consequently fails to respect the expansiveness of Tao as an ineffable X that is exclusively accessible through direct experience. With this in mind I will demonstrate the reactions to impending fascism from both Kirkland's construal and my own attempt at capturing Tao in language—which, despite being equally inadequate at the task of capturing Tao—shall be developed in contrast to Kirkland's construal.

wuwei and time-travel:

Kirkland's interpretation of Taoist ethics, which originates from his careful study of the Nei-Yeh, the Chuang-Tzu, and the Tao-Te Ching, can be qualified as the serene flowing through the convention of spacetime in accordance with the Way things are. Things are permanently impermanent. Things are benevolently not benevolent. It can be known that things cannot be known. From within the structure of this contradictory noesis Kirkland's construal of the Taoist strictly abides by *wuwei*—the principle of non-action—the principle of non-intervention from

hereonout. "'Returning to the Tao' in the Tao te ching means learning to see that force at work in the world and to rely upon it, rather than our own beliefs or actions, for the fulfillment of the health and harmony of all living things, human and otherwise" (Kirkland, 21-22). This sagely lifestyle is supposed to allow the Taoist to find peace in all matters of circumstance. No crisis warrants enough empathy to penetrate the serenity of non-intervention. Be it a drowning baby, an extinguished species of whooping cranes, or the fatal collapse of an empire, Kirkland's construal of Taoist non-intervention contains both an epistemic and a practical element of justification.

The epistemic element is a comprehensive skepticism towards and suspension of value judgements aside from the affirmation of Tao's perfect existence which allows the Taoist to calmly accept whatever manifestation of change arrives to consciousness. Chuang Tzu's dead wife, a son's broken leg, and even the extermination of innocents under an authoritarian regime would all, on Kirkland's reading of the human relationship to Tao, be equally liable to the trope of *blessings in disguise*. "After all, one might muse, one never knows . . . when an event that seems fortunate is actually unfortunate, or vice versa" (10-11). If one can never know the goodness or badness of a given occurrence or action, however, how is that one can know that non-intervention is a good disposition to hold? This is where one's intuitive apprehension of Tao enters the scene as the foundation of Taoist epistemology. The foundationalism of Taoist epistemology mirrors that of Cartesian reliance on the *I Am*, and functions similarly as a necessary and self-evident assumption within the realm of what can and cannot be known.

The practical element rests on an inversion of what I call the *time-travel dogma*, a lesson that many have come to know from science fiction. The canons of sci-fi media such as *Back To The Future* and its bastard children *Rick and Morty* have so securely fastened into our minds the

dangerous consequences of so-called *fucking with time*[2] that it has become near Reidian common sense. Going back in time to augment events as they have already occurred, such as killing baby Hitler in order to stop the rise of the Third Reich, is widely acknowledged to be a fruitless, unethical, and potentially catastrophic endeavor by the marks of most thought systems. Kirkland takes this caution a century further and applies the same concern to action in the present, asking "What if the baby in the water had been the ancient Chinese equivalent of Adolf Hitler, and the saving of young Adolf — though occasioned by the deepest feelings of compassion, and a deep-felt veneration for "life" — led to the systematic extermination of millions of innocent men, women, and children?" (11). Kirkland's construal of the general Taoist argument against *intervention in the present* operates with the same logic as the time-travel dogma: One can neither know the moral value of a given action in itself nor the moral value of said action's consequences, so intentional action of any kind is founded upon a Humanist pretension to comprehensive understanding and effective power—functionally *playing God*. Acting in order to bring about or prevent a specific outcome in the present—just as it does in science fiction portrayals of interference in the past via time-travel—assumes a particular human significance within the totality of congruent events, specifically in our capacity to effect meaningful change that does not eventually boil down into a tragically "unintended but quite avoidable . . . self-serving defense of egotistical activity" (Kirkland, 19-20). Thus, for Kirkland's construal, intervening with affairs of the present is just as fruitless as intervening in the past by means of time-travel, so one ought to resist the Humanist impulse to *do good* and simply *be good* instead.

the impossibility of Kirkland's construal:

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[2] Paraphrased from the following scene:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPX8wDPQ-7g&ab_channel=RadicalDryix

But what does wuwei actually demand of a Taoist? Kirkland defines "the ancient Chinese term *wei* as denoting 'human action intended to achieve results'" (20) and *wu* means "'non-being' or 'to lack'" according to Oxford Dictionary—leaving us with *the absence of human action intended to achieve results* as a reasonable qualification of the term. As I have demonstrated above, Kirkland's construal remains on the riverbank in order to maintain a stance of non-judgement and avoid the accidental proliferation of unforeseen negative consequences. These justifying elements are not only purported *results* of non-intervention, which would make non-intervention on the part of Kirkland's construal cease to be non-intervention—they are logically irreconcilable to the effect that Kirkland's construal falls in on itself. One cannot avoid a negative consequence without judging said consequence to be so, and this stance of non-judgement taken to avoid the Humanist pretension to moral knowledge is predicated on a moral knowledge claim itself: that humans cannot know what is good and that it is therefore bad for us to act as if we do.

The inverse time-travel dogma that Kirkland employs to support the practicality of serenely letting the baby drown is equally based upon these consequentialist moral assumptions, and is ultimately irrelevant to ethical dilemmas occuring in the present. This is because it is impossible not to participate in the creation of present events, whereas one can easily imagine not engaging in time-travel. Non-action implicates one in a given present occurrence just as much as action, for the intentional refusal to intervene in the present moment is an *intervention on the will to intervene* which contributes to the unfolding of the present moment to the same degree as merely intervening in it would. Intervening in the past via time-travel requires the insertion of one's will into a chain of events that has already transpired—an act that is truly an instance of *playing God*. Intervening in the present, which is effectively synonymous with

existing in the present, cannot be escaped by any means other than the intentional exiting of the present by means of suicide. One is implicated in the creation of the present moment at all times—whether one leaps off of the riverbank or not. Acting, intervening, and resisting according to our limited moral and intellectual faculties—our comprehension of the Good—is not *playing God*. It is not even strictly *playing human*. All organisms function in this manner, as does one angle of Tao as Kirkland construes it: "The world itself is . . . designed wisely and operated wisely, by a force that is like a caring mother" (24).

Not to act is to act. Not to intervene is to intervene on the impulse to intervene or even the bare possibility of intervening. Not to resist is to resist resistance. If one isn't satisfied with the fact that *standing* by is an action in itself, then let it be known that the word *not* is a negation of its subject—in this case the act of resisting—which is also an action in itself. Thus, since there are no reactions that are not involved in forming the present moment, and all actions have results even if a given result is generated by the absence of a given action, there is no response to a crisis that is more Taoist than another. The fact that Kirkland's construal falls in on itself does not make it any less valid of a Taoist position, it rather illustrates the intensely personal and circumstantial nature of a given person's association with Tao in proximity to a given conventional crisis. Living in accordance with Tao does not generate a specific or identifiable pattern of outputs in response to ethical dilemmas. If totality is already perfect, then so are the myriad human actions that are among its constituents. Wuwei is a mindset—a pattern of focus in relation to one's actions, surrounding events, and inclusion within Tao—as opposed to a guide for or general disposition towards specific actions, events, or conceptions of Tao. Mencius is not struggling against Tao by trying to save the baby any more than Chuang-Tzu is by letting the baby drown. They are both grappling with the totality of the way things are to the best of their

respective faculties. They are both equally part of that totality in just the ways that they already are, and thus move in accordance with Tao by necessity: one leaping from the riverbank, one standing by.

conclusion:

Drawing the discussion back to the topic at hand—a nation caught in the roaring waters of a fascism no longer impending—I will begin the ending of this paper, the passage from one stage to the next, with a personal anecdote from a walk I took earlier today. As I was meandering the sunny sidewalks surrounding campus I stumbled upon a dying darkling beetle. The tenebrionidae being one of my favorite insects, I commiserate with the plight of these writhing creatures so pitilessly flipped upside down by the jaws of death. Among others, the purpose of my walk had been to ponder my own position in Yearly's thought experiment: am I a constituent of the drowning baby? A thinker on the riverbank? Am I even anywhere near the riverbank? The answers to these questions inform the extent to which I feel capable of genuine resistance—of effective action—so they are no passing irrelevancy. The beetle was draining guts from the bottom of its abdomen and kicking up into the air. Upon trying to help it back onto its feet, which it painfully accepted before quickly falling back into its previous throe, I recognized that I was sitting on the riverbank of this beetle's crisis.

Cognizant of the beetle's suffering to the extent that my anthropocentric umwelten allowed, I heard the positions of Mencius and Kirkland's construal of Chuang-Tzu debating not only the correct reaction to the dying beetle, the drowning baby, or even the totality of fascism as it currently exists, but the suffering of the entire world as it lurched alongside the fighting kicks of that beetle. As I crouched there contemplating the primeval *right thing to do*, I realized that the creature was suffering throughout the entirety of my deliberation, and whether or not it was

the right thing to do—whether or not the beetle really did prefer to be put out of its misery as I anthropomorphically assumed that it did—I had been sitting there watching it die. This certainly wasn't leaving its fate up to the benevolence of the cosmos. That would have required me to stroll past the writhing organism and let it fade back into the formless void of *behind*. I realized that by entering the beetle's proximity I had already made my decision, and executed it later than I ought to have.

Is acting upon one's limited moral understanding playing God? If the beetle conceived of my presence at all before I took the Humanist route, it would have been that of a cruel god who stood by and watched it suffer. Kirkland's construal of the Taoist may have reminded me that "all human activity — no matter how well-intentioned — can add nothing of value to such operation [of the world], and can logically only interfere with the course of nature as it is already unfolding" (2), but I would retort that to pull human activity out of the unfolding of nature is more presumptuous of human significance than the Humanism of even the most tuna-disparaging moralist. The processes of nature cannot unfold without us unless we are categorically separate from nature—gods above and beyond it—and the same applies to the universe, to Tao. To "sit down and shut up, and let the universe work" (Kirkland, 2) is a defeatist attitude in its rawest form, seeing as the universe cannot work without the congruence of all constituent things—Homo Sapiens included.

To live in accordance with Tao is to live in accordance with the universe as it appears to one, for this is the way things are—at least as they appear to me. If the human species were to go extinct tomorrow, this may not ultimately be a bad deal. The cosmos may actually be better off. Heaven-and-earth (as in the expressive *hell)*, the human species may be better off. Regardless, even if destruction and purveyance of death are merely recurring seasons of a cycle too vast to

comprehend, creation and preservation of life are just as crucial to the totality of things, and some of those things naturally prefer the latter grouping of seasons. It is not infantile to prefer conventional goods over conventional bads as a conventional person in a conventional society. Societies are just as much a part of Tao as hurricanes and budding flowers. If my profoundly Humanist bias has not been made abundantly clear in my arguments against Kirkland's construal and my consequent interpretation of Tao, I will put this essay out of its misery with a quotation detailing a practical step in resisting the comfort of sorrow—which is synonymous with resisting the orange hand.

"**I wrote and read poems, which I believe in itself is a revolutionary act.**" -Jampa Dorje on page 56 of SHOCK AND AWE AND OTHER HALLUCINATIONS by Bouvard Pécuchet.

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