Proceedings of GREAT Day

Volume 2012 Article 15

2013

Poohdism

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In Benjamin Hoff's book *The Tao of Pooh*, he uses Winnie the Pooh as an allegorical tool to illustrate the basic principles of the enigmatic Eastern belief system called Taoism. A central Taoist belief holds that if you follow the path, or Tao, that resonates with your inner nature, you will be content with your life. Good living for a Taoist, then, can be sought by what has now become somewhat of a modern cliché—"going with the flow." In the Winnie the Pooh stories, Pooh rarely seems to think twice about his actions; he simply goes about doing whatever it is he has the propensity to do. Because of this fluid behavior, Hoff feels justified in advertising Pooh as an ideal Taoist, but I am inclined to question whether his metaphor holds when comparing Pooh to a human being. Perhaps Pooh can't help but act according to his inner nature. Ignoring the handful of personified traits he possesses, Pooh maintains the same "shallow" free will that a bear has in real life. The possession of a "deep" or "advanced" free will, which Carlo Filice describes in his book *The Purpose of Life*, makes "going with the flow" a much trickier undertaking for human beings. The possession of a deep free will allows a human to reconsider his default nature and make changes if he so wishes. The Buddhists make use of this distinctly human ability when they put forward their Four Noble Truths, which serve as guidelines for rising above the wheel of suffering they call Samsara. The Buddhists claim that if we wish to be blissful and to live the best life, we need to alter our inner nature, specifically our natural inclination to seek gratification, to desire. The Buddhists advocate the use of a deep free will to reprogram, or self-shape our inner nature, whereas the Taoists, at least as Hoff characterizes them, seek only to recognize our inner nature and to live according to it.

I think it's easy to form a few general misunderstandings about Buddhism and Taoism. On the surface, these problems seem to beg us to say that either one or both of these philosophies fail to adequately capture the human existence. Of course one could hold that opinion, but I think that if you look at the alleged shortcomings of each philosophy, you'll see that the second one provides a remedy to patch up whatever problems there are in the first. Put more clearly,

Buddhism does a lot to reveal and remedy some of the problems of Taoism, and vice versa. I think that both philosophies as stand-alone entities are actually respectable in the sense that they get a lot of what it is to exist as a human right. So, I'm not saying that the only way for Buddhism and Taoism to save face is to form a new hybrid, to join forces and create one super-philosophy. I'm saying simply that both would do well to reflect on bits and pieces from the other if they wish to clarify some of their ambiguities and promote a philosophy that accurately reflects the human condition. With that said, when considering the title of my paper—Poohdism—think of it less as the name of a new philosophy and more as a methodology for arriving at a clearer vision of what Taoism and Buddhism are.

So, let us make use of this method: Benjamin Hoff uses Pooh as an emblematic Taoist living a good life. Pooh's life is simple. The quotation on the back cover of *The Tao of Pooh* sums up Pooh's tranquil manner. It reads as follows: "While Eeyore frets…and Piglet hesitates…and Rabbit calculates…and Owl pontificates…Pooh just is." Phrases like "just is" and "going with the flow" are some of the many ways people try to wrap their heads around the outwardly mysterious, inexplicable principles of Taoism. In fact, Taoism is quite simple, like Pooh himself. This is why Hoff chooses to employ Pooh as his representative Taoist. Taoism claims that the universe works harmoniously in accordance with its own ways. To keep this harmony intact, one must align one's will with the way, or Tao, of the universe. Each being has an inner nature that, upon its birth, is harmonized with the universe, and that harmony can be upset only by aggressive acts of one's will. This avoidance of aggressive action is captured in the central Taoist concept of *Wu Wei*. *Wu Wei*, as Hoff describes it, is a "principle of minimal effort," where things happen naturally, without forceful human exertion, simply because "the natural world doesn't make mistakes" and so does not need the aid of aggressive human action. Pooh typifies the Taoist concept of *Wu Wei* because, with what seems like hardly any effort whatsoever, he manages to simply get things done. Essentially, whatever needs to be done will be done naturally (that is, it will be done in accordance with the natural way). Hoff quite capably describes Pooh as a great Taoist master, but in my opinion, the demonstrations he uses with Pooh fail to translate to the human experience. Since the general purpose of Hoff's book is to provide an introduction by way of allegory to Taoism, which can briefly be described as a philosophy aimed at encapsulating the right way for a *human* to live, it must be considered nothing less than

a glaring weakness to fail to have the main symbolic figure, Pooh, accurately represent how a human ought to live.

The allegorical failure in *The Tao of Pooh* stems from the differences in human free will from Pooh's free will. Pooh possesses what Carlo Filice would call a "shallow" free will. All beings are born with an initial set of wants, urges, and inclinations. Beings with a shallow free will are free to go about pursuing those wants and urges, but they cannot change what those wants and urges are. A deep or advanced free will, on the other hand, can change the set of wants and urges that it was born with initially. Humans are possessors of deep free will, but Pooh has only a shallow free will. Even with the array of personified characteristics that Pooh is given, he still can't help but to act in accordance with the nature of a bear—his love of honey being the most obvious example. Humans, on the other hand, often partake in the reprogramming, or self-shaping, of desires after reflecting on values and goals and sometimes deciding, freely, to change their natural urges so that they become conducive to the pursuit of those new goals and values. An example of this, which conveniently contrasts with Pooh's inability to stop desiring a certain food (honey), might be a human who researches the health and/or moral reasons for not eating meat and is then convinced that he will be better off if he chooses to not eat meat. In doing so, the person has replaced the omnivorous diet that was present at his birth with a vegetarian diet that reflects his new values. The human examples are ubiquitous. Indeed, most truly meaningful experiences in our life affect what we value and what we strive for—perhaps such an effect is even necessary in some conceptions of the term "meaningful experience"—and we change our desires accordingly. *The Tao of Pooh* does not seem to consider the significant differences between Pooh's free will and human free wills, which, in my opinion, makes its attempt at allegorically capturing the human experience fall short.

Imagining how Hoff could have dealt with the disparity between the free wills of humans and Pooh is difficult. Deep free will doesn't seem to resonate with the Taoist ideal of *Wu Wei*, where a good life is lived by acting according to one's inner nature, because the inner nature of a human is not fixed; it is constantly in flux due to our ability to change our set of wants. Would this not be a fundamental problem of Taoism if it truly struggles to apply to human agents? It is a *human* philosophy, after all. The Buddhists, however, are a group that do acknowledge our deep sense of free will and use it to promote a strategy to escape from the torturous confines of Samsara. Maybe they can come to the rescue.

The Buddhist Four Noble Truths, to be brief, describe that life is suffering, suffering is caused by our desires, removing desire ends suffering, and following the Eightfold Path is the strategy to remove desire and thus end suffering. Never mind the specifics; what's important here is that implicit in the Four Noble Truths is the fact that we have the ability to change our desires if we wish. Put simply: we have deep free wills. This conscious removal of one of our human traits (i.e. our capacity to desire) seems completely at odds with the Taoist idea of acting in accordance with one's inner nature. Buddhists directly and deliberately tamper with their inner nature to remove suffering. What's interesting is that the Taoists and Buddhists are both seeking the same thing—to live a "good life," a life with minimal suffering—but the ways in which they go about reaching that goal are nearly opposite. Perhaps a tactful convergence of their principles can offer a more practical and reasonable way of minimizing our suffering and living a good life.

I want to try to point out more explicitly some areas where both the Buddhist and Taoist philosophies appear to come up short of capturing the human condition. Fortunately, as we'll see, the weaknesses of the one are mended by the strengths of the other. The first mistake is the more obvious one that the discussion thus far has led up to—Taoists don't acknowledge the idea that perhaps a human's nature *is* to change his inner nature—that self-malleability is essential to the notion of deep free will. In my own less technical language, the Taoists, when characterized this way, remind me of a group of children doing arts and crafts. When someone steps in to offer help, to say "Hey, do you think it would be better if you did such and such instead?" or "Do you need any more popsicle sticks? What about more uncooked macaroni? Don't you think you're going a little heavy on the Glitter Glue?" The children will protectively hover over their projects, alleging, "No, no, everything is exactly how it's supposed to be! Don't mess with anything!" Yes, from Hoff's depiction the Taoists seem to be a lot like that. They treat the universe like it's a brittle house of cards, or a child's Popsicle stick creation, arranged in the best and only way. But what if, within the grand scheme of the universe, the changeability of human inner natures was a *part* of "how it's supposed to be?" What if the cards that built this big house are a little more robust than the Taoists thought? Maybe they only sway instead of collapse under the weight of human volition. I think the Taoists, who really aren't as cranky as the kids I compared them to for effect would accept these ideas, finding that they actually are not contradictory to their concept of *Wu Wei.*

Each change in a human's nature, specifically each change in a human's desires, occurs precisely because it feels like the right thing to do for that person. Consider this—would it not be going against my intuition, my inner nature, to stifle my desire to become a vegetarian once I had been convinced of the moral and health-related benefits of the change in diet? To resist a change like this in my inner nature would be to take the very aggressive action that the Taoists so openly condemn. "Going with the flow" for a human is not like floating down the lazy river at your local water park; it is more like riding turbulent ocean waves. Our goals and values change almost daily and to accommodate that variability we simply cannot ignore those changes. We have to harmonize our actions with our values, we have to lean and paddle in a certain way depending on how large and from what angle the waves are crashing around us. To do otherwise is to deceive yourself into thinking you can sail on calmly in rough waters—you are bound to capsize! Thus, I think the Taoists must acknowledge humanity's possession of a deep free will, lest they advocate a philosophy that encourages us to thwart our uniquely human ability to alter our inner natures. Indeed, for a philosophy to hold a central tenet like *Wu Wei,* which asks us to act in accordance with our inner nature, only to admonish the foremost characteristic of our nature, just seems nonsensical to me. But, since it would not be contradictory for *Wu Wei* to incorporate a changeable human nature, maybe Taoism *does* acknowledge our deep free will. The problem might not be with Taoism itself. Maybe the problem is simply in Hoff's failed allegory with Pooh.

The Buddhist misunderstanding, to switch gears here, rests in their reasoning for wanting to remove desires. Buddhists profess that, from the time of our birth, our nature is to follow our desires, and it is in the following of those desires that we ultimately end in suffering. I want to make clear that the suffering does not come about from the act of desiring itself, but by the consumption and subsequent disappearance of pleasure once a desire has been satisfied. If the pleasure felt at the moment of reaching a desire were eternal, perhaps desiring wouldn't be bad at all. It is the *impermanence* of pleasure, the exposure to pleasure followed by a fall back to normalcy that creates suffering. Buddhists may very well agree with this clarification, but nevertheless I don't think they follow it to its conclusion in their philosophy. I believe that if the problem of suffering is not found in the act of desiring itself but in the impermanence of the pleasure, then perhaps not all desires should be detested. If there exist certain pleasures that last a

lifetime, or even eternally, I think the Buddhists would be okay with the pursuit of, and the desire for those pleasures—for in what else would Nirvana consist?

I have begged the question of whether or not any eternal pleasures exist. I could say that these more noble pleasures might consist in the pursuit of knowledge, or in the act of contemplation, but I think an eternal pleasure might be even closer to home. The act of forming values and shaping your desires to match those values is a human capacity that can never be taken away (barring any form of mental disability). I think this ability is something to be desired and something that we should fully embrace. Furthermore, as I've shown, this ability seems to be consistent with the Taoist concept of *Wu Wei*, since it is innate in every human to self-shape, to remold the predetermined cast in which we were born. If it is in our nature to *change* our nature, I see no discrepancy with the Taoists. *Wu Wei* asks us simply to live according to our nature; it says nothing about what the nature of our nature must be. So, Taoists, you can take a sigh of relief. And, so long as they agree with my previous characterization of the problem of desiring, the Buddhists too can wipe their brow of nervous sweat, as self-shaping is a desire that leads in the long run, only to a better state of being. In other words, we self-shape to avoid suffering, which seems to be the main objective of both Buddhism and Taoism. So, I conclude, Taoism and Buddhism, although it takes a little wrestling with their respective ideas, certainly capture the human condition. Pooh might always find his head stuck at the bottom of the honey jar, victim to his inborn desires, but a human, in accordance with both Taoist and Buddhist principles, can stick his head in whatever jars he chooses.