CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Daoist Conception of Truth: Lao Zi's Metaphysical Realism vs. Zhuang Zi's Internal Realism

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In this essay, I shall present a comparative study of two leading Daoists' different conceptions of truth in the context of modern metaphysical debate on realism and antirealism. My basic contention in this essay is that both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi embrace the realist's thesis that the world is largely independent of us and the way we are; it has its own objective nature. But Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi differ in their opinions on whether our judgments could reflect, depict, or correspond to the way the world is. In my analysis, Lao Zi's view on truth is likened to metaphysical realism, while Zhuang Zi's view on truth is likened to internal realism. Hilary Putnam at one time or another championed both forms of realism. My exposition of the two forms of realism will be based on Putnam's interpretation and others' analysis of Putnam's usage.[1] I will analyze Lao Zi's and Zhuang Zi's views on truth and reality to demonstrate the justification for this comparative study. I will also compare Lao Zi's and Zhuang Zi's views to see if they can proffer a coherent Daoist conception of truth and reality.

Metaphysical realism and Lao Zi

To begin with, I shall separate metaphysical realism from scientific realism. In contemporary discourse, "metaphysical realism" and "scientific realism" are often used interchangeably, or at least jointly. But the two views make separate claims that do not have to be endorsed together. Metaphysical realism (MR) basically includes the following theses:[2]

[MR1] The world consists of a mind-independent reality. This reality is external to our conception and our conceptual schemes.

[MR2] Truth involves some sort of correspondence relationship between thought and the way the world is.

[MR3] There is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is (though we may never have a language capable of expressing it or may never know it).[3]

Scientific realism (SR), on the other hand, includes the following theses that emphasize the validity of science:[4]

[SR1] Science aims to give us, in its theories, a literally true story of what the world is like, and acceptance of a scientific theory involves the belief that it is true.[5]

[SR2] The truth of a scientific theory is independent of our beliefs concerning it. Any theory we presently hold we may come to reject for good reasons.

[SR3] Nevertheless, successive theories can often be viewed as better approximations to the truth. There may eventually be a "finished science" that gives us the "one true and complete description of the way the world is".

Metaphysical realism can be interpreted as being compatible with scientific realism if the view is combined with epistemic optimism. If the finished science will give us the "one true and complete description of the way the world is", then what we believe to be tables and chairs do not have to be totally different from the conception that our present science gives us. Science is making steady progress towards getting to the real truth. Under this interpretation, metaphysical realism in combination with scientific realism can be used to support common-sense realism.[6] But metaphysical realism can also be interpreted as being incompatible with scientific realism and common-sense realism. If the mind-independent reality is what Kant calls the "thing-in-itself", the "noumenal world", then it is beyond any human conception and human theorization. There is not only no guarantee, but also *no way*, that we can ever know it. Under this second interpretation, metaphysical realism actually undermines scientific realism in that science is not going to give us any story that is more "true" than other nonscientific accounts of the world. Putnam thinks that this latter kind of metaphysical realism cannot be coherent. But I shall argue that Lao Zi's view on truth is similar to this form of metaphysical realism. Lao Zi would not accept scientific realism even if he were to live in a world of modern science. To him, science, as part of humans' projection of the world, is bound to fall short of capturing the way the world is.

Lao Zi says, "The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name. The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; the named was the mother of the myriad creatures" (*Dao-De-Jing*, Chapter 1, p. 5).[7] I think the "nameless" here refers to the thing-in-itself reality, and the "named" here refers to the use of language. Myriad objects come from the introduction of human languages and human concepts, but this does not mean that the world itself is dependent on human conception. In Lao Zi's metaphysics, there is clearly a reality beyond the descriptions of human languages. Because our languages and our concepts come after the presence of the thing-in-itself reality, Lao Zi says that this reality cannot be "spoken of" and is "nameless". Lao Zi says, "The way is forever nameless ...

Only when it is cut are there names. As soon as there are names, one ought to know that it is time to stop" (Chapter 32, p. 37). In this passage, he seems to be presenting the impossibility of using our linguistic conventions and our conceptual schemes to depict this mind-independent reality. Nevertheless, when pressed, Lao Zi does end up giving it a name: "the Way".[8] Furthermore, Lao Zi does not really shy away from using our language and our concepts to depict the Way. As a matter of fact, we can say that half of Lao Zi's *Dao-De-Jing* is devoted to describing the Way.

In Lao Zi's depictions, we can see many layers of meaning assigned to the Way. For example, Lao Zi first describes the Way as being the origin of the universe: "The way is empty, yet use will not drain it. Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures" (Chapter 4, p. 8); "[The way] is empty without being exhausted: The more it works the more comes out. Much speech leads inevitably to silence. Better to hold fast to the void" (Chapter 5, p. 9); "The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth" (Chapter 6, p. 10).

Secondly, Lao Zi also describes the Way as the creator of the universe: "Thus the way gives [the myriad creatures] life and rears them; brings them up to fruition and maturity; feeds them and shelters them" (Chapter 51, p. 58); "The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures" (Chapter 42, p. 49); "The myriad creatures in the world are born from Something, and Something from Nothing" (Chapter 40, p. 47); "It is the way alone that excels in bestowing and in accomplishing" (Chapter 41, p. 48). In these passages the Way seems to take up a more active role in the production of the world.

Thirdly, Lao Zi sometimes talks about the Way as the substance or the essence of the universe: "As a thing the way is shadowy, indistinct. Indistinct and shadowy, yet within it is a substance. Dim and dark, yet within it is an essence" (Chapter 21, p. 26); "The way is broad, reaching left as well as right. The myriad creatures depend on it for life yet it claims no authority" (Chapter 34, p. 39). Under this interpretation, the Way is not an "author" of the creation; it is merely the foundation on which myriad objects get generated.

These different interpretations render the relationship between the Way and our commonsensical world confusing. What is Lao Zi's ontology? First of all, he seems to believe that there was a beginning of the universe. Lao Zi says, "The world had a beginning, and this beginning could be the mother of the world" (Chapter 52, p. 59). As, elsewhere, Lao Zi also discusses the generation of being from nothingness, we can speculate that in his view the commonsensical world, the world in which we reside, has not always existed. At the beginning there was Nothing, which generated Something.[9] This "Something" is what Lao Zi calls "the Way". This *Something* exists prior to the introduction of human conception and human languages. It is therefore nameless. Once our language introduces names to differentiate objects, the myriad creatures are

"created". In this analysis, the relation between the *Something* that is "dim and indistinct" and the myriad creatures that are all "named" is simply that between the world without discrimination and the world with discrimination. Or we can say it is a relation between the pre-language world and the post-language world. If there is such a pre-language world, which Lao Zi calls in the style of "the Way", then this world is not constructed out of our conceptual schemes. Lao Zi says, "Man models himself on earth, earth on heaven, heaven on the way, and the way on that which is naturally so" (Chapter 25, p. 30). In other words, Lao Zi does not entertain the possibility that it is we who created or constructed the Way. The Way is the way things "naturally are". We can only copy from it through our observation of the operations of heaven and earth. *The way the world naturally is* exists prior to our own existence and is the source of our conception. Even if there were no humans, no languages, no concepts, there would still be *the way the world naturally is*. Thus, Lao Zi seems to be advocating the metaphysical realist belief that "the world is the way it is, independent of our being able to talk about it or think about it".[10] It is in this respect that Lao Zi's *Way* is likened to "the mind-independent thing-in-itself" posited by metaphysical realists. It is also in this respect that Lao Zi's theory is said to incorporate [MR1].

The distinguishing feature of metaphysical realism is not so much its interpretation of the nature of reality (as a mind-independent thing-in-itself), as its interpretation of the nature of truth (as a one-to-one correspondence relationship). This is thesis [MR2]. As we shall see later, Zhuang Zi accepts the metaphysical realist notion of reality but rejects its notion of truth. Lao Zi, however, assumes this one-to-one relationship between human conception/conduct and the world-in-itself. I think Lao Zi would not reject [MR2], because he does think that when our thought corresponds to the Way, then our thought is considered true. However, his notions of truth and correspondence are different from those of metaphysical realists. Metaphysical realists commonly employ a propositional or sentential treatment of knowledge, and a statement is true if and only if it corresponds to the state of affairs in the world. But for Lao Zi, truth is not propositional, and thus the correspondence he seeks is not just a relation between our statements and the Way.[11] It is rather a relation between our thought or our conduct and the Way. We can give close-to-being-true descriptions of the Way if our descriptions really match the way the world is; we can have objectively good conduct if our behavior meets the standard of the Way. As we said earlier, because this ultimate reality exists prior to the use of language, our descriptions and our theories are bound to be inadequate. Nevertheless, Lao Zi seems to think that his descriptions (such as "female", "empty", "inactive", "constant", "vast", "dim and dark", "silent and void", etc.) can be viewed as giving an *approximation* to the way the world actually is.

This approximation of truth is how Lao Zi views his own theory of the Way. [MR3] states that there is exactly one true and complete description of the way

the world is (though we may never have a language capable of expressing it or may never know it). To Lao Zi, there *is* only one true description of the way the world is. All the descriptions Lao Zi gives to the Way, however inadequate they may be in terms of representing the Way, are nonetheless regarded as the only *true* description of the Way. He says, "My words are very easy to understand and very easy to put into practice, yet no one in the world can understand them or put them into practice. [My] words have an ancestor and [my] affairs have a sovereign. It is because people are ignorant that they fail to understand me. Those who understand me are few; those who imitate me are honored" (Chapter 70, p. 77). From this remark we see clearly that Lao Zi does not think that his theory is merely relative to his own conceptual scheme, or that other theories may be equally true. In this respect, Lao Zi's whole project of *Dao-De-Jing* can be seen as the manifestation of his belief in the thesis [MR3].

Metaphysical realism is typically an ontological theory, or, in contemporary treatment, a semantic and epistemological theory. For Lao Zi, it is also an ethical theory. In the context of ethics, correspondence is a relation between our conduct and the Way. This correspondence relation comes in a prescriptive form: one *ought to* act in accordance with the Way. It demands a one-directional match: from the sage to the Way. Lao Zi says, "In his every movement a man of great virtue follows the Way and the Way only" (Chapter 21, p. 26); "A man of the Way conforms to the way. ... He who conforms to the Way is gladly accepted by the Way" (Chapter 23, p. 28); "A creature in its prime doing harm to the old is known as going against the Way. That which goes against the Way will come to an early end" (Chapter 30, p. 35; also, Chapter 55, p. 62). From these remarks, we see that Lao Zi embraces a kind of ethical naturalism, the view that an act is good if and only if it corresponds with what naturally is (the Way). Morality consists in imitating the Way, which transcends the human conception of the good. Since there is only one good way, ethics is not relative to different opinions or cultures. Lao Zi would definitely reject ethical relativism, which is often associated with antirealism.

Putnam argues that metaphysical realism is an untenable theory because it is incoherent:

> The reason is that it depends on the assumption that we can conceive of a complete representation of the world which is radically detached from all of our beliefs. In order to conceive of such a representation, our conception of the entities to which our words refer would have to be available independently of all of our beliefs about those entities. But we have already seen that our conception of the entities to which our words refer is not available independently of all of our beliefs about them.[12]

We can see similar problems in Lao Zi's philosophy: if the Way exists prior to language and cannot be spoken of, then how can Lao Zi even attempt to capture it in words? If the Way exists independently of the human mind, then how can Lao Zi himself comprehend it? If the Way is dim and vague, then why can Lao Zi alone see it? It is probably because of these problems in Lao Zi's philosophy that Zhuang Zi chose to move towards a more relativistic and more skeptical attitude.

Internal realism and Zhuang Zi

Zhuang Zi's view on truth and reality has been widely branded as "relativism", "skepticism", or even "radical skepticism".[13] Jung H. Lee in his "Disputers of the Tao: Putnam and Chuang-Tzu on Meaning, Truth, and Reality" is, to my knowledge, the first to contrast Zhuang Zi to Putnam's internal realism, but he ends up concluding that in Zhuang Zi there is a "mystical mode of epistemology".[14] In this section I shall argue that Zhuang Zi advocates neither radical skepticism nor mysticism. He is actually a realist.[15] His realism is closer to what Putnam calls "internal realism" than other forms of realism. Zhuang Zi is also a skeptic with respect to human knowledge, and a relativist with respect to human conception. But my main contention is that "internal realism" is a more appropriate description for Zhuang Zi's view on reality and truth. Internal realism, to some critics, is a form of antirealism. I shall thus begin my analysis with a comparison between antirealism and internal realism.

Zhuang Zi's view on truth can be described as "antirealism" if we employ Michael Dummett's criterion of antirealism. Dummett says that any antirealist would reject the principle of bivalence:[16]

[The Principle of Bivalence]: Every statement is determinately either true or false.

Zhuang Zi would clearly reject this principle. He argues that the content of a judgment is relative to the speaker's conceptual scheme, and the claim of truth is relative to the speaker's perspective. Zhuang Zi says:

> Everything has its "that", everything has its "this". From the point of view of "that" you cannot see it, but through understanding you can know it. So I say, "that" comes out of "this" and "this" depends on "that" – which is to say that "this" and "that" give birth to each other. But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth. Where there is acceptability there must be unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be acceptability. Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. (*Zhuang Zi*, Chapter 2, p. 35)[17]

Here, Zhuang Zi seems to remark that every judgment is relative to a certain perspective. As "right" or "wrong" is relative to one's viewpoint there is no absolute right or wrong. No statement can possibly be made outside all

conceptual schemes or from the point of view of *nowhere*. To judge whether a statement is true or false, therefore, we need to first evaluate in what conceptual scheme this statement is embedded. A statement true to human conception is not necessarily true to another creature's conception. A statement true from one individual's perspective is bound to be false from her opponent's perspective. Statements are not determinately true or false independently of our conception; they simply do not have any intrinsic truth-value in and of themselves. The view that Zhuang Zi advocates in this argument does seem to be the rejection of the principle of bivalence.

However, to say that Zhuang Zi rejects the principle of bivalence is not to say that he denies the existence of the world-in-itself, which he also calls "the Way".[18] So, if the debate between realism and antirealism is construed as a local debate on the existence of the Way, then Zhuang Zi is definitely a realist. For Zhuang Zi, the Way is as real as Lao Zi conceives it to be, but any human description (including his own) is bound to fail to represent it. Zhuang Zi says, "As to what is beyond the Six Realms, the sage admits it exists but does not theorize" (Chapter 2, p. 39). Therefore, Zhuang Zi does not indulge in the effort of explicating the Way. No word could possibly do the job of giving us the truth of the Way – even his own description would be relative to his conceptual scheme. Therefore, Zhuang Zi resorts to using metaphors, fables, parodies, stories, etc. to give us a mental picture of what the goal ought to be. We could probably say that Zhuang Zi is skeptical of our linguistic ability to express the truth of reality, but he is not skeptical of the existence of this reality itself. This combination of what we may call "semantic antirealism" and "ontological realism" is close to what Putnam describes as "internal realism".[19]

Putnam characterizes internal realism (IR) in the following way:[20]

[IR1] Internal realism is the view that a sign that is employed in a particular way by a particular community of users can correspond to particular objects *within the conceptual scheme of those users*.

[IR2] Signs do not intrinsically correspond to objects, independently of how those signs are employed and by whom.

[IR3] Objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description.

According to Putnam, internal realism is compatible with conceptual relativism, and I think Zhuang Zi does defend some form of conceptual relativism. What Putnam means by "conceptual relativity" is the renunciation of the fact/value dichotomy. Putnam says, "The doctrine of conceptual relativity, in brief, is that while there is an aspect of conventionality and an aspect of fact in everything we say that is true, we fall into hopeless philosophical error if we commit a 'fallacy of division' and conclude that there must be a part of the truth that

is the 'conventional part' and a part that is the 'factual part'."[21] Zhuang Zi also argues that all our thought is internal to our conceptual scheme, and therefore we can never say what a fact is other than voicing our value judgments. In a passage where Zhuang Zi presents Wang Ni's explanation of the impossibility of knowledge, Zhuang Zi puts forward an argument for the relativity of judgments:

> If a man sleeps in a damp place, his back aches and he ends up half paralyzed, but is this true of a loach? If he lives in a tree, he is terrified and shakes with fright, but is this true of a monkey? Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the proper place to live? Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? (Chapter 2, p. 41)

We can formulate Zhuang Zi's argument in this way:

1 Our judgments depend on our natural/physical compositions. For example, men judge a dry place a better place to live whereas loaches would judge a damp place a better place to live; men find animals tasty whereas deer would find grass tasty.
2 Different compositions generate different perspectives.
3 Therefore, all judgments are made in accordance with a particular perspective.
4 Therefore, there cannot be universal judgments among agents with different compositions.

As we can see, this argument can be seen as an argument for conceptual relativism. Different species have different physical/biological make-ups and their judgments are bound to be determined, or affected, by their make-ups. Because of remarks like the above, Zhuang Zi is sometimes interpreted as holding a view called "radical relativism" or "perspectivism".[22] But as I shall point out later, Zhuang Zi's view, like Putnam's internal realism, is not to be identified with either radical relativism or perspectivism. Perspectivism is the view that "all knowledge is knowledge from or within a particular perspective".[23] It can also be characterized as a form of radical relativism, which argues that truth is simply what each person recognizes as true and there is no value distinction between different claims of truth. All perspectives are simply equally good. In other words, perspectivism is making the following claim:

[P1] The truth of our judgments is relative to our perspectives. Incompatible statements can both be taken as true as long as they are *true relative to the speaker's perspective*.

But Zhuang Zi merely points out that all our judgments are *made* in accordance with our make-up, our culture, or our perspective. He does not say that all our judgments are *made true* by our culture or our perspective. Zhuang Zi says:

> Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He too recognizes a "this", but a "this" has both a right and wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a "this" and "that"? Or does he in fact no longer have a "this" and "that"? A state in which "this" and "that" no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way. (Chapter 2, p. 35)

The notion of truth that Zhuang Zi advocates relies on the denial of discriminations (of right and wrong, of good and bad, of this and that, etc.). But he is not denying the separation of truth and falsehood. To him, there is clear falsehood: to present one's perspective as the only correct one. Zhuang Zi says, "But to fail to abide by this mind and still insist upon your rights and wrongs ... . This is to claim that what doesn't exist exists" (Chapter 2, p. 34). To move to the perspectivist level – to view perspective as a determinant of truth, or to claim that all truths are equal – is no better.[24] Zhuang Zi says, "[Waiting] for one shifting voice [to pass judgment on] another is the same as waiting for none of them. ... Right is not right; so is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument" (Chapter 2, p. 44). The paradox he is posing here is that the truly right would have no opposite, and the ultimate "Truth" would actually be the elimination of the distinction between truth and falsehood. What Zhuang Zi proposes is the notion of truth that is the synthesis of all perspectives:

[P2] True knowledge is the knowledge that denies perspectival knowledge. Truth is not relative to perspectives; rather, truth transcends all perspectives.

In contrast to the perspectivism thesis [P1], I think Zhuang Zi's claims are the following instead:

[P3] Our judgments are relative to our perspectives.
[P4] Our judgments are relative to our perspectives, but Truth is *not* relative to perspectives. Therefore, none of our judgments is true.

In other words, instead of granting all perspectives as equally true, Zhuang Zi is arguing that all perspectives are necessarily false. What he expresses is actually the opposite of perspectivism.

If we separate the two levels of "truth" in Zhuang Zi's usage, we may see his view in a better light:

[Truth$_1$]: It is the notion of truth employed by ordinary people; it is relative to perspectives.
[Truth$_2$]: It is the notion of truth that is beyond human conception of truth and falsehood; it transcends all human perspectives and it is a clear representation of the Way.

Since Zhuang Zi holds the view that there is an ultimate notion of Truth$_2$, which is not relative to perspectives, and that this Truth$_2$ is superior to Truth$_1$, he cannot be viewed as embracing perspectivism. This Truth$_2$ is not what *we* could deem as true, because once we call it "true", it is brought back to the cycle of truth/falsehood. It is also not an absolute Truth from a God's eye view, or as Lao Zi puts it, from the point of view of the Way. What Zhuang Zi introduces here is actually the absence of all discriminations and the cessation of all fact/value judgments. Truth$_2$ is not a mapping between our conception and the way the world is, because there is no such mapping possible. Things for us or from our point of view are necessarily *internal to* our conceptual schemes, and different conceptual schemes cannot compete for being the best "match" for the world-in-itself.

For Zhuang Zi, as for Putnam's internal realists, the Truth$_2$ that transcends all perspectives is "inaccessible to us and inconceivable by us".[25] As Zhuang Zi holds the view that such a notion of Truth$_2$ is unavailable to us, he would often make the comment: "How can I really know?" If we say that knowledge is *true* justified belief, then even when we think our beliefs are justified (relative to our perspective), we can never obtain knowledge. In this respect, Zhuang Zi can also be called a skeptic concerning human knowledge.[26]

Zhuang Zi has several arguments for the impossibility of the certainty of our knowledge:

(A) The Argument from Dream:

> He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt. While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. (Chapter 2, p. 43)

We can formulate his argument as follows:

1 Our dreams seem to us as real as when we are awake.
2 When we are dreaming, we never know that it was just a dream.
3 Therefore, when we think we are awake, we could also be dreaming.
4 Therefore, we can never be sure of our judgment that we are awake.

(B) The Argument from the Impossibility of Judgment of Truth:

> Suppose you and I had an argument. If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? ... Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, then how can he decide? Shall we get someone who agrees with both of us? But if he already agrees with both of us, how can he decide? Obviously, then, neither you nor I nor anyone else can know the answer. (Chapter 2, pp. 43–44)

We can reorganize Zhuang Zi's remark into a *reductio ad absurdum* argument:

1 We are capable of judging a statement to be true.
2 But different judgments are necessarily relative to different perspectives, and Truth transcends all perspectives.
3 Therefore, no two people with different perspectives can ever give the judgment of truth.
4 If a third party sides with A, then she takes up A's perspective;
if she sides with B, then she takes up B's perspective;
if she sides with neither A nor B, then she has her own perspective;
if she sides with both A and B, then she takes up the perspective of a compromise.
5 Therefore, no third party can ever give the judgment of truth either.
6 Therefore, we are *not* capable of judging a statement to be true.

In (A) Zhuang Zi presents a sort of Cartesian argument for the impossibility of knowing that we are not presently dreaming. In (B) Zhuang Zi expresses the impossibility of obtaining truth on the basis of rational discourse and mutual agreement. They both support the conclusion that *we can never know for sure*. All our knowledge is relative to our understanding and our perspective. The true knowledge that is beyond perspectives is impossible for us. Whatever we do know and whatever we claim to be true is necessarily relative to our conceptual schemes. I think this skepticism about knowledge is what motivates Zhuang Zi to move from metaphysical realism towards internal realism.

Even if one embraces the relativistic character of *truth*, one does not necessarily embrace the relativistic character of *reality*. One can argue that there is no such thing as "a view without a viewer", without ascertaining that there cannot be "a world without a viewer". Zhuang Zi certainly does not argue that reality is relative to perspectives or conceptual schemes, that there is no fact of the matter with regard to the reality in itself. As we explained earlier, Zhuang Zi also acknowledges the existence of a mind-independent reality: "*Dao* (the Way)".

The Way embraces everything and transcends the empirical world. Zhuang Zi says, "[W]hether I succeed in discovering his identity or not, it neither adds to nor distracts from his Truth" (Chapter 2, p. 33). The closest Zhuang Zi gets to describing the Way is the following, seemingly paradoxical, remark:

> The Way has its reality and its signs but is without action or form. You can hand it down but you cannot receive it; you can get it but you cannot see it. Before Heaven and earth existed it was there, firm from ancient times. It gave spirituality to the spirits and to God; it gave birth to Heaven and to earth. It exists beyond the highest point, and yet you cannot call it lofty; it exists beneath the limit of the six directions, and yet you cannot call it deep. It was born before heaven and earth, and yet you cannot say it has been there for long; it is earlier than the ancient times, and yet you cannot call it old. (Chapter 6, p. 77)

Because names and assertive statements are limited, Zhuang Zi could only give his description of the Way in a metaphorical and paradoxical way. In Zhuang Zi's depiction, the Way is very much like the mind-independent reality that metaphysical realists postulate. Whereas Lao Zi focuses on explicating this mind-independent reality, Zhuang Zi focuses on explicating the *impossibility of our knowledge and our description of* this mind-independent reality.

One may argue that if Zhuang Zi believes in the existence of a mind-independent reality, then he is really not an internal realist. However, from Putnam's description of Kant's internal realism, we can see that accepting the existence of a mind-independent reality is at least not incompatible with upholding internal realism. Putnam says, "[Kant] does not doubt that there is *some* mind-independent reality. ... But we can form no real conception of these noumenal things; even the notion of a noumenal world is a kind of limit of thought rather than a clear concept."[27] I think this interpretation can be equally applied to Zhuang Zi's view.

Both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi are realists with regard to *the Way*. What makes Zhuang Zi's view internal realism, and not metaphysical realism, is his relativistic attitude towards the content of our conception and our judgments. Because what we think is necessarily determined by our own conceptual scheme, we cannot use language to express any fact about the way the world is. Putnam explains his rejection of the metaphysical realist correspondence theory of truth in this way: "What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call 'language' or 'mind' *penetrate so deeply into what we call 'reality' that the very project of representing ourselves as being 'mappers' of something 'language-independent' is fatally compromised from the very start*" (his italics).[28] I think Zhuang Zi would reject any attempt to give a truthful depiction of the way the world is for the very same reason. Zhuang Zi is a realist with regard to the way the world is, but he is also a relativist with regard to the way we conceive the world. His arguments show that we can never have a conception of the way the world is independently of our perspective, but he does not go as far

as radical relativists in upholding that all perspectives are equally right. We can probably say that Zhuang Zi's internal realism serves as the middle path between metaphysical realism and radical relativism.

Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi in comparison

The debate between realism and antirealism is often seen as a local disagreement in the assumed existence of a particular kind of thing. Both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi acknowledge the existence of the Way, the reality that is beyond human conception and even human understanding. With regard to this particular thing, then, both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi are "realists". But what makes the former a *metaphysical* realist and the latter an *internal* realist? In Mark Heller's analysis, there are two broad senses of "realism". He calls the first sense the "ontological sense of realism", which is the acknowledgment of the *existence* of particular entities or kinds of entities. The second kind of realism, according to Heller, is the "epistemological sense of realism", which claims that there is a *fact of the matter* as to whether a particular object or kind exists. Heller thinks that internal realism is antirealism in the epistemological sense.[29] Both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi would be realists under the ontological sense of the term, but only Zhuang Zi would be an antirealist under the epistemological sense of the term I think the dispute on whether we can know about the ultimate reality is what distinguishes Lao Zi's and Zhuang Zi's realism.

Lao Zi does not share the same skepticism that Zhuang Zi adopts in his approach to this mind-independent reality. Lao Zi says, "From the present back to antiquity, its name never deserted it. It serves as a means for inspecting the fathers of the multitude. How do I know that the fathers of the multitude are like that? *By means of this*" (italics mine) (Chapter 21, p. 26). Even though it is not exactly clear what Lao Zi means by "this" in the quote, it is at least obvious that he does not deny that he can *know* the fathers of the multitude, or, we may say, the Way. Furthermore, Lao Zi does not think that different opinions simply express different points of view, and that our judgments are necessarily confined to our perspectives. To Lao Zi, there can only be one true perspective: the perspective of the Way. He says, "From the point of view of the way these are excessive food and useless excrescences. As there are Things that detest them, he who has the Way does not abide in them" (Chapter 24, p. 29). Lao Zi also says, "Those who are good I treat as good. Those who are not good I also treat as good. In so doing I gain in goodness" (Chapter 49, p. 56). This remark is different from Zhuang Zi's remark that good and bad are relative to one's judgment, in that for Lao Zi, there are people who *are* good. Lao Zi's treating good people and bad people equally does not mean that he is denying the true distinction between good and bad. Finally, Lao Zi says, "It is the way of heaven to show no favoritism. It is forever on the side of the good men" (Chapter 79, p. 86). Here, we clearly see his recognition of the *true good*. Lao Zi is certainly not an ethical relativist by any means.

Zhuang Zi, on the other hand, accepts a modest form of relativism. He is not a radical relativist who holds the view that all opinions are equally right. He is also not a radical skeptic who would even deny the validity of his own position. But he is, nonetheless, a modest conceptual relativist concerning our thoughts and beliefs, and a skeptic concerning our ability to know the ultimate Truth. As we demonstrated earlier, Zhuang Zi does hold the view that there is a mind-independent reality, and, as Lao Zi does, he calls this reality "nameless". But Zhuang Zi takes up from Lao Zi's remark and emphasizes the fact that human language is in an eternal predicament: it distorts the Way. "If the Way is made clear, it is not the Way" (Chapter 2, p. 40); "Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured" (Chapter 2, p. 37). Since Lao Zi also has the premise that the Way cannot be spoken of and cannot be named, Lao Zi himself should have come to the same conclusion that it is futile to describe the Way, and that no one can ever know its truth.

In conclusion, I think Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi do not hold incompatible views on the nature of reality, but they have different evaluations of the human capacity to understand or to depict this reality. What is the Daoist conception of *Truth*? Ultimately it is still a form of correspondence relationship, but the correspondence that constitutes Truth is not a relation between our statements and the commonsensical world; it is rather a relation between our thought and the world that exists independently of us and is forever closed to our conception. Lao Zi's whole project is to depict this reality to the best *approximation* he can accomplish, whereas Zhuang Zi's endeavor is to prove how the whole project of depiction is ultimately impossible. For Lao Zi, the Way is indeed unspeakable, but he nonetheless tries to speak about it. Zhuang Zi sees that this attempt makes Lao Zi's metaphysical realism incoherent. If the Way is pre-linguistic and contra-linguistic, then we can never speak about it or think about it. If all our thoughts are relative to our conceptual scheme and our cultural/biological constitution, then we can never know what *the way the world is independently of our conception* could be like. I think Zhuang Zi's internal realism actually pushes Lao Zi's original thesis about reality a step further, and thereby accomplishes a more coherent Daoist conception of truth.

Notes

1 For commentaries on Putnam's realism see, for example, Anderson, David L. (1992), "What Is Realistic about Putnam's Internal Realism?", *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 49–83; Ebbs, Gary (1992), "Realism and Rational Inquiry", *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 1–33; Heller, Mark (1988), "Putnam, Reference and Realism", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XII, pp. 113–128; LePore, Ernest and Barry Loewer (1988), "A Putnam's Progress", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XII, pp. 459–473; Sosa, Ernest (1993), "Putnam's Pragmatic

Realism", *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 92, no. 12, pp. 605–626; and Wright, Crispin (1988), "Realism, Antirealism, Irrealism, Quasi-Realism", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XII, pp. 25–50.

2 The summary of theses comes mostly from Putnam's own remark (Putnam, Hilary (1981), *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 49), and from LePore and Loewer's formulation of Putnam's characterization of metaphysical realism (LePore and Loewer, "A Putnam's Progress", p. 460), but I deliberately changed some wordings. What Putnam calls "the fixed totality of mind-independent objects", I change to "mind-independent reality". What Putnam calls "words or thought-signs", I change to "thought". I think the rewording does not alter the spirit of metaphysical realism, but it allows us to see Lao Zi's view more in the light of metaphysical realism. Lao Zi thinks that reality exists independently of our conception, but distinctions of objects come from the conventions of language/signs. So he would not call this ultimate reality "the totality of objects", though he does embrace its mind-independence.

3 The parenthesis is added by Ernest LePore and Barry Loewer. See LePore and Loewer, "A Putnam's Progress", p. 460.

4 Ibid.

5 This is Bas van Frassen's formulation quoted by LePore and Loewer, ibid.

6 Putnam sometimes calls metaphysical realism "Realism (with a capital 'R')" and common-sense realism "realism (with a small 'r')".

7 The page numbers following the chapter numbers of Lao Zi's *Dao-De-Jing* here and below refer to those in Lau, D. C. (trans.) (1963), *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, London: Penguin Books.

8 Lao Zi says, "There is a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and earth, silent and void. It stands alone and does not change, goes round and does not weary. It is capable of being the mother of the world. I know not its name, so I style it 'the Way'" (Chapter 25, p. 30).

9 Of course there is the question of how something can come from Nothing. Lao Zi does not give us any answer to this question.

10 This is Mark Heller's description of metaphysical realism, which he calls "externalism" in his article. Cf. Heller, "Putnam, Reference and Realism", p. 116.

11 Chad Hansen in his analysis of Lao Zi's view on knowledge points out that "where Western or Indian analyses of knowledge focus on propositional knowledge (knowing-that), Chinese, especially Taoist, critical theory focuses on practical knowledge *cum* skill (knowing-to or knowing-how-to)" (Hansen, Chad (1981), "Linguistic Skepticism in the *Lao Tzu*", *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 31, no. 3, p. 322). In the same way, I argue that Lao Zi's notion of truth is also not to be viewed as expressing a relation between some proposition/sentence and some states of affairs in the world.

12 This quote is from Gary Ebbs' interpretation of Putnam's argument. See Ebbs, "Realism and Rational Inquiry", p. 17.

13 For example, Chad Hansen argues that Zhuang Zi defends radical skepticism and relativism; Lee Yearley argues that we can see a *radical* Zhuang Zi in his skepticism; A. C. Graham calls the view "skepticism and relativism as extreme as Chuang-tzu's", and Eric Schwitzgebel thinks that Zhuang Zi *argues for* radical skepticism, but does not *sincerely subscribe* to it. See essays in Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe (eds) (1996), *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuang Zi*, Albany: State University of New York Press, and in Victor H. Mair (ed.) (1983), *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, Asian Studies at Hawaii, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

14 Lee, Jung H. (1998), "Disputers of the Tao: Putnam and Chuang-Tzu on Meaning, Truth, and Reality", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 447–470, p. 463.

15 For the purpose of preserving coherence in authorship, I shall use only the *Inner Chapters* from the *Zhuang Zi*.

16 Dummett's less stringent principle, "the principle of valence", assumes that every unambiguous statement must be determinately either true or false (Dummett, Michael (1982), "Realism", *Synthese* 52, pp. 55–112). Zhuang Zi would reject both principles, as for him, the problem of indeterminacy does not come from ambiguity. All statements are intrinsically without a determinate truth-value because they are relative to conceptual schemes.

17 The page numbers of the *Zhuang Zi* here and below refer to those in Watson, Burton (trans.) (1964), *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, New York: Columbia University.

18 Zhuang Zi's position on reality may be another example to show the inadequacy of Dummett's distinction between realism and antirealism. Dummett treats the debate as a semantic issue, as a debate on the truth conditions of a certain class of statements. But if viewed as a semantic issue, then even Lao Zi's view could be called "antirealism". As Andrew Cortens points out, Dummett's distinction seems to be too narrow to capture a lot of the actual disagreements between realists and antirealists (Cortens, Andrew Joseph (2000), *Global Anti-Realism: A Metaphilosophical Inquiry*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, p. 2).

19 David Anderson says that Putnam's internal realism "keeps much of the spirit of each of the seven tenets of traditional realism" (Anderson, "What Is Realistic about Putnam's Internal Realism?", p. 76). Of these tenets Anderson lists "semantic realism" and "ontological realism". However, he is using "semantic realism" in the context of verificationist semantics. Anderson's conclusion is that Putnam's internal realism "has a reasonable claim to the attribution, 'realistic'" (ibid., p. 77).

20 Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 52.

21 Putnam, Hilary (1990), *Realism with a Human Face*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. x.

22 Chad Hansen uses this interpretation in his (1990), *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 266. Both Jung H. Lee and Philip Ivanhoe challenge this perspective interpretation. See Lee, "Disputers of the Tao", p. 448, and Ivanhoe, Philip J. (1996), "Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?", in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuang Zi*, pp. 196–214.

23 Lee, "Disputers of the Tao", p. 448.

24 Philip J. Ivanhoe gives a good critique of Hansen's radical relativistic interpretation of Zhuang Zi. Under such an interpretation, Zhuang Zi would be holding the view that all perspectives are equally valid and all judgments are equally good. Ivanhoe says, "Hansen is correct to describe Zhuang Zi as a skeptic regarding language, but ... such a view does not entail strong relativism." See Ivanhoe, *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuang Zi*, p. 202.

25 Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 64.

26 Lisa Raphals argues that skepticism and relativism are mutually exclusive in that "skepticism precludes relativism". She says, "A skeptical thesis holds that we cannot know anything; a relativist thesis holds that we can know, but knowing is relative to our (individual, cultural, etc.) perspective. To put it another way, if we doubt our ability to recognize truth (the skeptical position), we must also doubt our ability to know that there isn't any (the relativist position)." See Raphals, Lisa (1996), "Skeptical Strategies in the *Zhuang Zi* and *Theaetetus*", in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuang Zi*, pp. 26–49, p. 29. In my analysis, this incompatibility between the interpretation of Zhuang Zi as a skeptic and the interpretation of Zhuang Zi as a relativist is dissolved. Zhuang Zi is a skeptic with regard to our ability to know Truth_2, and he thinks that all other *claims* of truth (Truth_1) are relative to various perspectives.

27 Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 61.

28 Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 28.

29 Heller, "Putnam, Reference and Realism", p. 113.