

**The Daoist Conception of Truth:  
Laozi's Metaphysical Realism vs. Zhuangzi's Internal Realism**

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## **The Daoist Conception of Truth:**

### **Laozi's Metaphysical Realism vs. Zhuangzi's Internal Realism**

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In this paper, 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 paper is that both Laozi and Zhuangzi 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 Laozi and Zhuangzi differ in their opinions on whether our judgments could reflect, depict or correspond to the way the world is. In my analysis, Laozi's view on truth is likened to metaphysical realism, while Zhuangzi'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.<sup>1</sup> I will analyze Laozi's and Zhuangzi's views on truth and reality to demonstrate the justification for this comparative study. I will also compare Laozi's and Zhuangzi's views to see if they can proffer a coherent Daoist conception of truth and reality.

#### **I. Metaphysical Realism and Laozi**

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:<sup>2</sup>

- [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.)<sup>3</sup>

Scientific realism (SR), on the other hand, includes the following theses that emphasize the validity of science:<sup>4</sup>

- [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.<sup>5</sup>
- [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 approximation 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 progression towards getting to the real truth. Under this interpretation, metaphysical realism in combination with scientific realism can be used to support commonsense realism.<sup>6</sup> But metaphysical realism can also be interpreted as being incompatible with scientific realism and commonsense 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 Laozi's view on truth is similar to this form of metaphysical realism. Laozi would not accept scientific realism even if he were to live in a world of modern science. To him, science, as part of human's projection of the world, is bound to fall short of capturing the way the world is.

Laozi 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." (I, p. 5) 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 Laozi's metaphysics, there is clearly a reality beyond the descriptions of human languages. Since our languages and our concepts come after the presence of the thing-in-itself reality, Laozi says that this reality cannot be "spoken of" and is "nameless." Laozi 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." (XXXII, 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, Laozi does end up giving it a name: 'the Way.'<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Laozi 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 Laozi's *Daodejing* is devoted to describing the Way.

In Laozi's depictions, we can see many layers of meaning assigned to the Way. For example, Laozi 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." (IV, 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." (V, p. 9) "The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth." (VI, p. 10)

Secondly, Laozi 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." (LI, p. 58) "The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures." (XLII, p. 49) "The myriad creatures in the world are born from Something, and Something from Nothing." (XL, p. 47) "It is the way alone that excels in bestowing and in accomplishing." (XLI, p. 48) In these passages the Way seems to take up a more active role in the production of the world.

Thirdly, Laozi 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." (XXI, 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." (XXXIV, 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 Laozi's ontology? First of all, he seems to believe that there was a beginning of the universe. Laozi says, "The world had a beginning, and this beginning could be the mother of the world." (LII, p. 59) Since elsewhere Laozi 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.<sup>8</sup> This "Something" is what Laozi 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 Laozi calls in the style of "the Way," then this world is not constructed out of our conceptual schemes. Laozi says, "Man models himself on earth, earth on heaven, heaven on the way, and the way on that which is naturally so." (XXV, p. 30) In other words, Laozi 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 Laozi seems to be advocating metaphysical realists' belief that "[t]he world is the way it is, independent of our being able to talk about it or think about it."<sup>9</sup> It is in this respect that Laozi's *Way* is likened to "the mind-independent thing-in-itself" posited by metaphysical realists. It is also in this respect that Laozi'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 the thesis [MR2]. As we shall see later, Zhuangzi accepts metaphysical realists' notion of

reality but rejects their notion of truth. Laozi, on the other hand, assumes this one-to-one relationship between human conception/conduct and the world-in-itself. I think Laozi 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 states of affairs in the world. But for Laozi, truth is not propositional, and thus the correspondence he seeks is not a relation between our statements and the Way.<sup>10</sup> 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. But Laozi 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 Laozi 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 Laozi, there is only one true description of the way the world is. All the descriptions Laozi 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 on 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." (LXX, p. 77) From this remark we see clearly that Laozi 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, Laozi's whole *Daodejing* 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. But for Laozi, 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. Laozi says, "In his every movement a man of great virtue follows the way and the way only." (XXI, p. 26) "A man of the way conforms to the way.... He who conforms to the way is gladly accepted by the way." (XXIII, 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." (XXX, p. 35; also, LV, p. 62) From these remarks, we see that Laozi 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 human conception of the good. Since there is only one good way,

ethics is not relative to different opinions or cultures. Laozi 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."<sup>11</sup> We can see similar problems in Laozi's philosophy: If the Way exists prior to language and cannot be spoken of, then how can Laozi even attempt to capture it in words? If the Way exists independently of human mind, then how can Laozi himself comprehend it? If the Way is dim and vague, then why can Laozi alone see it? It is probably because of these problems in Laozi's philosophy that Zhuangzi chose to move towards a more relativistic and more skeptical attitude.

## **II. Internal Realism and Zhuangzi**

Zhuangzi's view on truth and reality has been widely branded as 'relativism,' 'skepticism' or even 'radical skepticism.'<sup>12</sup> 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 Zhuangzi to Putnam's internal realism, but he ends up concluding that in Zhuangzi there is a "mystical mode of epistemology."<sup>13</sup> In this section I shall argue that

Zhuangzi advocates neither radical skepticism nor mysticism. He is actually a realist.<sup>14</sup> His realism is closer to what Putnam calls 'internal realism' than other forms of realism. I shall not deny that Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi's view on reality and truth. Internal realism to some critic is a form of antirealism. I shall thus begin my analysis with a comparison between antirealism and internal realism.

Zhuangzi'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:<sup>15</sup>

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

Zhuangzi 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. Zhuangzi 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. (Chapter 2, p. 35)

In this passage Zhuangzi seems to remark that every judgment is relative to a certain perspective (a point of view). What is called 'right' or 'wrong' is relative to one's

viewpoint. There is hence 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 Zhuangzi advocates in this argument does seem to be the rejection of the principle of bivalence.

But to say that Zhuangzi 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.'<sup>16</sup> So if the debate between realism and antirealism is construed as a local debate on the existence of the Way, then Zhuangzi is definitely a realist. For Zhuangzi, the Way is as real as Laozi conceives it to be, but any human description (including his own) is bound to fail to represent it. Zhuangzi says, "As to what is beyond the Six Realms, the sage admits it exists but does not theorize." (Chapter 2, p. 39) Therefore, Zhuangzi 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, Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi 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.'<sup>17</sup>

Putnam characterizes internal realism (IR) in the following way:<sup>18</sup>

- [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 Zhuangzi 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'."<sup>19</sup> Zhuangzi also argues that all our thought is internal to our conceptual scheme, and therefore we can never say what fact is other than voicing our value judgments. In a

passage where Zhuangzi presents Wang Ni's explanation of the impossibility of knowledge, Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi'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, Zhuangzi is sometimes interpreted as holding a view called 'radical relativism' or 'perspectivism.'<sup>20</sup> But as I shall point out later, Zhuangzi'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."<sup>21</sup> 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 Zhuangzi 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. Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi 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. Zhuangzi 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 truth as simply a determinant of one’s perspective or that all truths are equal — is no better.<sup>22</sup> Zhuangzi 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 and 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 Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi's claims are the following instead:

**[P3]** Our judgments are relative to our perspectives.

**[P4]** Our judgments are relative to our perspective, 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, Zhangzi 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 Zhuangzi's usage, we may see his view in a better light:

**[Truth<sub>1</sub>]:** It is the notion of truth employed by ordinary people; it is relative to perspectives.

**[Truth<sub>2</sub>]:** 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 Zhuangzi holds the view that there is an ultimate notion of *Truth<sub>2</sub>*, which is not relative to perspectives, and that this *Truth<sub>2</sub>* is superior to *Truth<sub>1</sub>*, he cannot be viewed as

embracing perspectivism. This Truth<sub>2</sub> 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 Laozi puts it, from the point of view of the Way. What Zhuangzi introduces here is actually the absence of all discriminations and the cessation of all fact/value judgments. Truth<sub>2</sub> 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 Zhuangzi, as for Putnam's internal realists, the Truth<sub>2</sub> that transcends all perspectives is "inaccessible to us and inconceivable by us."<sup>23</sup> Since Zhuangzi holds the view that such a notion of Truth<sub>2</sub> 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 Zhuangzi can also be called a skeptic concerning human knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi'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] Zhuangzi presents a sort of Cartesian argument for the impossibility of knowing that we are not presently dreaming. In [B] Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi 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." Zhuangzi 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, Zhuangzi also acknowledges the existence of a mind-independent reality '*Dao* (the Way).' The Way embraces everything and transcends the empirical world. Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi 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, Zhuangzi could only give his description of the Way in a metaphorical and paradoxical way. In Zhuangzi's depiction, the Way is very much like the mind-independent reality that metaphysical realists postulate. But whereas Laozi's focuses on explicating this mind-independent reality, Zhuangzi focuses on explicating the *impossibility of our knowledge and our description of this mind-independent reality*.

One may argue that if Zhuangzi 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."<sup>25</sup> I think this interpretation can be equally applied to Zhuangzi's view.

Both Laozi and Zhuangzi are realists with regard to the Way. What makes Zhuangzi'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's 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)<sup>26</sup> I think Zhuangzi would reject any attempt to give a truthful depiction of the way the world is for the very same reason. Zhuangzi 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 Zhuangzi's internal realism serves as the middle path between metaphysical realism and radical relativism.

### III. Laozi and Zhuangzi 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 Laozi and Zhuangzi 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 Laozi and Zhuangzi 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 acknowledgement 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 no *fact of the matter* as to whether a particular object or kind exists. Heller thinks that internal realism is realism in the epistemological sense.<sup>27</sup> Both Laozi and Zhuangzi would be realists under the ontological sense of the term, but only Zhuangzi would be a realist under the epistemological sense of the term. I think the dispute on whether we can know about the ultimate reality, is what distinguishes Laozi's and Zhuangzi's realism.

Laozi does not share the same skepticism that Zhuangzi adopts in his approach to this mind-independent reality. Laozi 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) (XXI, p. 26) Even though it is not exactly clear what Laozi means by "this" in the quote, it is at least obvious that he does not deny that he can know the father of the multitude, or we may say, the Way.

Furthermore, Laozi does not think that different opinions simply express different points of view, and that our judgments are necessarily confined to our perspectives. To Laozi, there can 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." (XXIV, p. 29) Laozi 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." (XLIX, p. 56) This remark is different from Zhuangzi's remark that good and bad are relative to one's judgment, in that for Laozi, there are people who are good. Laozi's treating good people and bad people equally does

not mean that he is denying the true distinction between good and bad. Finally, Laozi says, "It is the way of heaven to show no favoritism. It is forever on the side of the good men." (LXXIX, p. 86) Here we clearly see his recognition of the true good. Laozi is certainly not an ethical relativist by any means.

Zhuangzi, 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, Zhuangzi does hold the view that there is a mind-independent reality, and as Laozi does, he calls this reality "nameless." But Zhuangzi takes up from Laozi's remark and emphasize 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 Laozi also has the premise that the Way cannot be spoken of and cannot be named, Laozi 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 Laozi and Zhuangzi do not hold incompatible view on the nature of reality, but they have different evaluation of human's 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. Laozi's whole project is to depict this reality to the best *approximation* he can accomplish, whereas Zhuangzi's endeavor is to prove how the whole project of depiction is ultimately impossible. For Laozi, the Way is indeed unspeakable, but he nonetheless tries to speak about it. Zhuangzi sees that this attempt makes Laozi'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 Zhuangzi's internal realism actually pushes Laozi's original thesis about reality a step further, and thereby accomplishes a more coherent Daoist conception of truth.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For commentaries on Putnam's realism see for example Anderson, David L. (1992), 'What Is Realistic about Putnam's Internal Realism?' *Philosophical Topics* 20, no. 1, pp. 49-83; Ebbs, Gary (1992), 'Realism and Rational Inquiry,' *Philosophical Topics* 20, no. 1, pp. 1-33; Heller, Mark (1988), 'Putnam, Reference and Realism,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XII, pp. 113-128; LePore, Ernest and Loewer, Barry (1988), 'A Putnam's Progress,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XII, pp. 459-473; Sosa, Ernest (1993), 'Putnam's Pragmatic Realism,' *Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 12, pp. 605-626; and

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Wright, Crispin (1988), 'Realism, Antirealism, Irrealism, Quasi-Realism,' ' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XII, pp. 25-50.

<sup>2</sup> 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 & Loewer (1988), 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 Laozi's view more in the light of metaphysical realism. Laozi 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.

<sup>3</sup> The parenthesis is added by Ernest LePore and Barry Loewer. See LePore & Loewer (1988), p. 460.

<sup>4</sup> LePore & Loewer (1988), p. 460.

<sup>5</sup> This is Bas van Fraassen's formulation quoted by LePore and Loewer. (LePore and Loewer (1988), p. 460.)

<sup>6</sup> Putnam sometimes calls metaphysical realism 'Realism (with a capital "R")' and commonsense realism 'realism (with a small "r").'

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<sup>7</sup> Laozi 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.' (Laozi, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, (trans.) D. C. Lau, Penguin Books, 1963, XXV, p. 30)

<sup>8</sup> Of course there is the question of how Something can come from Nothing. Laozi does not give us any answer to this question.

<sup>9</sup> This is Mark Heller's description of metaphysical realism, which he calls 'externalism' in his article 'Putnam, Reference, and Realism.' (Heller, Mark (1988), p. 116)

<sup>10</sup> Chad Hansen in his analysis of Laozi'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* 31, no. 3, p. 322) In the same way, I argue that Laozi'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.

<sup>11</sup> This quote is from Gary Ebbs' interpretation of Putnam's argument. See Ebbs, Gary (1992), p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Chad Hansen argues that Zhuangzi defends radical skepticism and relativism; Lee Yearley argues that we can see a *radical* Zhuangzi in his skepticism; A. C. Graham calls the view "skepticism and relativism as extreme as Chuang-tzu's," and Eric Schwitzgebel thinks that Zhuangzi *argues for* radical skepticism, but does not

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*sincerely subscribe* to it. See essays in Kjellberg, Paul & Ivanhoe, Philip J. (eds.) (1996), *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, Albany: State University of New York Press, and in Mair, Victor H. (ed.) (1983), *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, Asian Studies at Hawaii, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, Jung H (1998), 'Disputers of the Tao: Putnam and Chuang-Tzu on Meaning, Truth, and Reality,' *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 25: 4, pp. 447-470, p. 463.

<sup>14</sup> For the purpose of preserving coherence in authorship, I shall use only *the Inner Chapters* from *the Zhuangzi*.

<sup>15</sup> Dummett has another less stringent principle which he calls 'the principle of valence,' according to which every unambiguous statement must be determinately either true or false. (Dummett, Michael (1982), 'Realism,' *Synthese* 52, pp. 55-112.) Zhuangzi would reject both principles, since 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.

<sup>16</sup> Zhuangzi'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 Laozi'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

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(2000), *Global Anti-Realism: A Metaphilosophical Inquiry*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, p. 2)

<sup>17</sup> David Anderson says that Putnam's internal realism "keeps much of the spirit of each of the seven tenets of traditional realism." (Anderson, David (1992), 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.'"

(Anderson, David (1992), p. 77)

<sup>18</sup> Putnam, Hilary (1981), p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Putnam, Hilary (1990), *Realism with a Human Face*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. x.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Chad Hansen uses this interpretation. See Hansen, Chad (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, Jung H. (1998), p. 448, and Ivanhoe, Philip J. (1996), 'Was Zhuangzi a Relativist?,' in Kjellberg & Ivanhoe (1996), pp. 196-214.

<sup>21</sup> Lee, Jung H. (1998), p. 448.

<sup>22</sup> Philip J. Ivanhoe gives a good critique of Hansen's radical relativistic interpretation of Zhuangzi. Under such an interpretation, Zhuangzi would be holding the view that all perspectives are equally valid and all judgments are equally good. Ivanhoe says, "Hansen

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is correct to describe Zhuangzi as a skeptic regarding language, but... such a view does not entail strong relativism." See Ivanhoe, Philip J. (1996), p. 202.

<sup>23</sup> Putnam, Hilary (1981), p. 64

<sup>24</sup> 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 *Zhuangzi* and *Theaetetus*,' in Kjellberg & Ivanhoe (1996), pp. 26-49, p. 29. In my analysis, this incompatibility between the interpretation of Zhuangzi as a skeptic and the interpretation of Zhuangzi as a relativist is dissolved. Zhuangzi is a skeptic with regard to our ability to know Truth<sub>2</sub>, and he thinks that all other *claims* of truth (Truth<sub>1</sub>) are relative to various perspectives.

<sup>25</sup> Putnam, Hilary (1981), p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> Putnam, Hilary (1990), p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> Heller, Mark (1988), p. 113.

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