

WITTGENSTEIN AND TAOISM

RUSSELL B. GOODMAN

What follows is the beginning of an attempt to relate Wittgenstein and the Taoists Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu. I intend this study to be useful to two sorts of people. Those who are more familiar with one of these kinds of philosophy than with the other will discover common ground where they might have expected none. Moreover, the comparisons I make will highlight certain features of these philosophers' writings which deserve more attention than they have received.

I also intend this study to benefit those who are familiar with all three thinkers. This is connected with the fact that understanding often consists in, in Wittgenstein's phrase, "seeing connections." I hope to engender understanding by showing connections between the thought of Wittgenstein and that of the Taoists, producing what John Wisdom calls "a new awareness of the known."¹

What I say here is divided into two parts. I first present one doctrine about language which is maintained by the early Wittgenstein and by the Taoists Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, viz., the doctrine that there are things which cannot be spoken of. I then show how this view and, along the way, several other early Wittgensteinian and Taoist views, can be seen in terms of the notion of a language game, a notion developed in Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

That Wittgenstein concerned himself in all his writing with problems of language, e.g., questions of its relation to the world and of its limits, is well known and obvious. Not as well recognized, but almost equally obvious, is the Taoist concern with language. It is perhaps harder to notice this latter concern because the Taoists so often attack language as inadequate or misleading, but, as Hegel pointed out, fleeing something indicates one's concern with, and even lack of freedom from it.²

Now, the Taoists, as does Wittgenstein, have several perceptive characterizations of the functioning of ordinary language, e.g., the view that words like 'high' and 'low,' 'good' and 'evil,' function in connected ways. I am concerned here, however, with their doctrine that there are things *beyond* language, "beyond" in the sense that they cannot be spoken of. This doctrine is present in the early Wittgenstein, who also shares with the Taoists the view that this realm of what cannot be spoken of is crucial. This latter point may come as a surprise to those under the influence of positivistic interpretations of the *Tractatus*, so it is worthwhile to quote a description of that work which Wittgenstein gave to a prospective publisher: "My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all

that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one."³ One might say that all three philosophers I deal with here have a healthy respect for silence.

The *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu contains more discussion of the nature of the Tao or way than does the *Chuang Tzu*. The first words of the text point to its unnameable nature: "The way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way." Tao is described elsewhere in the *Tao Te Ching* as eternal, though it has no name, and as like an uncarved block. One point of this latter metaphor is that language attempts to *carve up* what is essentially beyond language:

Once the block is carved, there will be names,
And so soon as there are names
Know that it is time to stop.⁴

Those who know the Tao must therefore be silent about it: "Those who know do not speak; Those who speak do not know."⁵

In the *Chuang Tzu*, the Way is described as formless, yet complete, as not susceptible to treatment by numbers, words, or even our minds.⁶ The dangers of treating what is not susceptible to such treatment as if it were, are illustrated by the story of Hun-tun, of Chaos:

Fuss, the God of the Southern Ocean, and Fret, the God of the Northern Ocean, happened once to meet in the realm of Chaos, the God of the Centre. Chaos treated them very handsomely and they discussed together what they could do to repay his kindness. They had noticed that, whereas everyone else has seven apertures, for sight, hearing, eating, breathing, and so on, Chaos had none. So they decided to make the experiment of boring holes in him. Every day they bored a hole, and on the seventh day Chaos died.⁷

The last parts of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* are devoted to a discussion of that which cannot be put into words. This sounds immediately paradoxical, and is so, in the same way as Taoist discussions of the unnameable Tao are paradoxical. Wittgenstein tells us certain things (but not facts) about that which we must remain silent about: it is the 'realm' of ethics and aesthetics, which are therefore both considered "transcendental."⁸ This 'realm' involves, not "*how* things are in the world" (facts) but "*that* it exists." *That* the world exists is said to be "mystical."⁹ Wittgenstein speaks also of "things which cannot be put into words" but which "*make themselves manifest*."¹⁰ There are no questions to be asked about what cannot be spoken of, for when there are questions there must be answers, and there can be no answers where nothing can be said.¹¹ Seeing this will eliminate questions we are tempted to ask "and this itself is the answer."

Wittgenstein was keenly aware of the difficulties in putting down words dealing with the inexpressible, but he nevertheless thought it necessary, because, as we have seen, the inexpressible was most "important."

Nowhere does he succeed better than in the last sentence of the *Tractatus*. This sentence must be seen in the context of the structure of that work. There are seven main sentences in the *Tractatus*, beginning with "1. The world is all that is the case." The numbers indicate a sentence's logical importance, and the stress laid on it.¹² A sentence numbered 1.21 is thus to be understood as a comment on sentence 1.2 and 1.2 as a comment on 1. Now, sentence 7, the last major sentence, is "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." What better demonstration of the view here discussed than the fact that this sentence is the *Tractatus*' last? One might say that Wittgenstein doesn't just say that we should pass silently over what we must, he *does* it. Incidentally, Wittgenstein here shows his mastery of, and sensitivity towards, different sorts of what he would later call "games" with language.

It is fascinating to note that this doctrinal parallel finds expression in a textual parallel. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein explains: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)."¹³ This metaphor finds its parallel at the end of the chapter called "External Things" in *Chuang Tzu*: "The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?"¹⁴

I want now to show that this metaphor and the doctrine expressed by it can be usefully looked at from the perspective of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein. In developing the concept of the language game, Wittgenstein called attention to the diversity of activities we perform with language, "such as giving orders, reporting an event, speculating about an event, making up a story, translating, asking, praying."¹⁵ Now, from this latter perspective we can say that there are at least three different uses of language which Wittgenstein explores in the *Tractatus*. The first of these uses is *saying*. Wittgenstein states that part of the sense of the *Tractatus* is that "what can be said at all can be said clearly."¹⁶ He is here pursuing the logical atomist picture of language in which genuine propositions, i.e., those which really say something, can be analyzed into truth functional combinations of atomic propositions, which reveal precisely what they say.

But this is not the only use or task of language Wittgenstein isolates, for there is also a discussion of *showing*. Showing is used in several places. First, it is applied to the relation which propositions have to the

world: "A proposition *shows* how things stand *if* it is true. And it says that they do so stand."¹⁷ Here, 'showing' must be understood as 'picturing.' An elementary proposition pictures the state of affairs which holds if it is true, in the sense that it has the same structure. Tautologies and contradictions do not *say anything* and "show that they say nothing."¹⁸ They do this by showing, in the case of tautologies, that they are compatible with any state of affairs whatsoever, and in the case of contradictions, by showing that they are incompatible with every state of affairs. The word 'show' is also used by Wittgenstein in relation to *the fact that* the propositions of logic are tautologies. This fact "*shows* the formal-logical-properties of language and the world."¹⁹

We thus have both saying and showing, the former of which is only applicable to propositions, the latter of which is applicable both to propositions and to the statements of logic. Showing is the means by which language hooks up with the world. In the case of atomic propositions, what is shown is a fact; in the case of tautologies what is shown is the scaffolding of the world, its limits. Now the third use of language in the *Tractatus* is used precisely *not* to hook up with the world; it neither aims at revealing the world's logical structure nor at revealing atomic facts. This use has been assimilated by some (e.g., Fann)²⁰ to showing, but this is not supported by the text. It is revealed in the following quotations:

If there were a law of causality, it might be put in the following way: There are laws of nature. But of course that cannot be said: it makes itself manifest.²¹

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.²²

One should also recall the passage quoted earlier describing Wittgenstein's propositions as steps which we climb up and then toss away. One "must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright."²³

The kinds of proposition Wittgenstein has in mind here are those of ethics, metaphysics, philosophy, and religion. These fail to hook up with the world in at least the following senses: First, they do not picture atomic facts (which is all the world is) nor show the world's logical structure. Second, they must be transcended, they are 'not around' to be compared with the world once understood. Indeed, understanding them consists in throwing them away, in going beyond them.

A fairly complicated game is being played with these propositions. It is a game of transcending propositions which nevertheless help one to transcend them. These propositions do not *reveal* what is mystical as one reveals a statue by uncovering it, for Wittgenstein clearly means to say that what these propositions get at makes *itself* manifest. What is mystical doesn't need these propositions to uncover or specify it. These propositions are not *necessitated* by the fact that we make sense in our

language, as atomic propositions are. But they are *important* for us as human beings. Note also that these propositions have *something* to do with the world. Though they have to do with the mystical, they also help us to see *the world* aright. There is no incompatibility here, for "*that* the world exists" is mystical for Wittgenstein.

How these propositions succeed in getting at what is mystical, is not entirely clear. Some of Wittgenstein's own propositions, especially those in the early part of the *Tractatus*, do this by examining the structure and limits of what can be said, drawing the boundaries of the ocean which makes itself manifest from within the bounds of the island of sense. The propositions after 6.4 do this in other ways, less clear. The propositions of ethics and religion also get at what makes itself manifest, but nothing is said about how these work. One might suspect that, in connection with what is mystical, there are several uses of language.

I have refrained, in the above, from calling these three uses of language, saying, showing, and that use whereby we get at what is mystical, "language games," because that concept is notoriously ill-defined. Much recent literature has discussed the problem of whether it is correct to call religion a language game, or several games, or not a game separate from our ordinary language games at all. The main point I wish to make is that whether we call these different uses of language, language games or not, they *are* differences, and important ones. Pointing these sorts of things out is one of the greatest contributions of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The later Wittgenstein was clearly aware of such facts as that theological statements have their own special grammar²⁴ and that poetry is "not used in the language game of giving information."²⁵

Fruitful work can be done in classifying and examining the games being played with language by the Taoists as well. Take the following passage from *Chuang Tzu*:

There is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount T'ai is little. No one has lived longer than a dead child, and P'engtzu died young. Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me.

We have already become one, so how can I say anything? But I have just said that we are one, so how can I not be saying something?²⁶

I suggest that these paradoxical statements are used in a way akin to the way the early Wittgenstein's philosophical statements were used: they are meant to be transcended. As Chuang Tzu puts it, "understanding stops when it has reached what it does not understand."²⁷ Clearly, though, the sage, just as does Wittgenstein, goes on.

One might look also at contradictions, and the various roles to which they are put. When one says, in ordinary language that it is now raining and that it is also not now raining one has clearly said something unhappy.

One might characterize such an utterance as taking away with one hand what one has just given with the other. But contradictions may have important philosophical uses, as they do in the *Tractatus*, where they help show the logical structure of the world. In Taoism, contradictions have another sort of use. In the *Tao Te Ching* we hear of shapeless shapes and forms without form, of things which, when one goes towards them present no front, when one goes after them present no rear.²⁸ These contradictions are neither unhappy in the way ordinary language contradictions are, nor aimed at showing the logical limits or structure of the world (though that they work in the way they do may have something to do with there being such a structure). One role such contradictions have in Taoism is to get us to transcend the distinctions through which they operate, such as that between what has form and what has no form.

Let me now summarize what I have done. I began with a doctrine that figures prominently both in Taoism and in Wittgenstein, the view that there are things beyond language. This view is expressed *in* language, however; I thus spent some time exploring the question of how language gets at the unsayable, suggesting that the later Wittgenstein's concept of a language game, and his general emphasis upon use, provides a useful way of looking at this question. I maintained that Wittgenstein and the Taoists use language in rather special and similar ways when dealing with the unsayable. I conclude by saying nothing that the notions of 'use' and 'language-game' provide only one standpoint from which to assess some of the propositions we have observed. Clearly another such standpoint is one in which they are transcended altogether.

NOTES

¹ John Wisdom, *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, (London: Allen and Unwin) p. 513.

³ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) p. 143.

⁴ Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, (London: Allen and Unwin) p. 183.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁶ *Chuang Tzu*, trans. by Burton Watson, (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964).

⁷ Waley, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961) 6.421.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.522.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.522.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.51.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.54.

- ¹⁴ *Chuang Tzu*, p. 140.
- ¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). p. 23.
- ¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 3.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.022.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.461.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.12.
- ²⁰ K. T. Fann, *Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971).
- ²¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.36.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 6.522.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 6.54.
- ²⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 373.
- ²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press) p. 160.
- ²⁶ *Chuang Tzu*, pp. 38-39.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ²⁸ Waley, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

University of New Mexico