

Angie Wong

Dis-located Bodies: Dao and Deep Reality in Embodied Experience

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problems of the totality of Euro-American rationalist thinking that often dis-locates embodied thought and being through a consensus of scientific management and amusement. The culture of consensus perpetuates non-thinking being through the eradication of individuality in a totality. The realization of this tranquilized familiarity is a product of deep reality: the reflection of cultural practices, norms, and epistemologies that existentially affect one's life revealed through the investigation of those very practices, norms, and epistemologies that underlie most cultural assumptions. Access to deep reality reveals the phenomenology of apathy. Examining the consensus of being that rationalist thought dictates and learning from other forms of knowledge such as Daoist philosophy alongside Euro-American thought offers a way of being on the periphery of rationalist thought that resists subsumption. Deep reality takes into consideration that other modes of thinking and being harmonize the mind/body dis-location: it is a way of thinking that attempts to expand beyond the Eurocentric philosophical tradition. Revealing from the periphery that commonality is more present than absent, dis-location forms the realization that the mastery of rationalist thought is alienated from itself, demonstrating that it is one mode of thinking among many that is in constant transformation.

KEYWORDS: deep reality, rationalist thought, philosophical Daoism, dis-location, embodiment, apathy



I would like to present a cultural problematic that at present infiltrates much of the contemporary Western (European and American) intellectual tradition, and through this explication offer not so much a solution but another way of examining the problematic that involves looking outside of this philosophical tradition. The problem of dis-embodiment involves the unrestrained expanse of rationalist thinking from the European tradition that has vastly undermined the ways in which the body can produce and inform value and knowledge production. Western

rationalism, since the period of European Enlightenment, has often favoured a cognitive form of intelligibility that generally posits the mind as transcendental, all-knowing and the highest level of wisdom. I will explicate how tactics of objectification and calculation manufacture epistemologies that displace and replace most bodily intelligibility (and some psychical intensities) for a mechanistic way of thinking and being often proliferated through discourse; this is why I have titled this piece “Dis-located Bodies.” Dislocation can be understood in a two-fold manner: The joints and muscles are dis-located in a contorted and misshapen manner, and the ability for an embodied intelligibility is difficult because the body is contorted in such a way that it is no longer recognizable. The body becomes knotted and we have to try to unbind that knot to let the muscles rest. Parts of the body become numb when they are stuck in an uncomfortable position for too long, and we forget that there is discomfort until we try to move, and that is when it is most painful. But this bodily dis-location extends to a broader cultural context, which is the side of the binary that we will follow, where many of us forget that the body exists, let alone that it produces a different kind of value and knowledge alongside the mind, and as the uncomfortable prickling of confined muscles subside into a numbness, the body falls into a dis-location that has yet to be unbound. The body is displaced and replaced by the apathetic amusements manifested from unyielding structures of rationalist thought. Its effects are paralyzing in both cases.

Rationalist thinking, for the context of this piece, is defined as the way of thinking that disavows other modes of intelligibility through a calculable, efficient objectivity so that it can make familiar unfamiliar ways of thinking and being. Rationalist thought in relation to a dis-located body (of knowledge) has to do with preventing bodies from moving freely and phenomenally expressing another form of being alongside the mind, rather than simply aside from the mind. The use of rationalist thought presented here is a familiar concept to twentieth and twenty-first century European philosophers: Nietzsche called this the “herd instinct” (1967); Heidegger termed it “technology” or “average everydayness” (1996); Orwell defined it as Big Brother (1984); Horkheimer and Adorno called it the “culture industry” or the “economic super power” (1987). Rationalist thought therefore encompasses all of these figures to the extent that it is the prevailing way of thinking that forms the consensus, often taken for granted. There are those who discredit this project by noting that positing the incommensurability of the mind that uses rationalist thought with a bodily intelligibility is not a problem and that rationalist thought has always struggled with this opposition, often choosing the side of cognitive practice. Yet it is naïve to leave the discussion with this fundamental assumption that rationalist thinking has always operated as such and will continue to do so. Instead, this is merely a departure, for there must be a rigorous investigation into such claims that have laid the foundations of the reductionist and often apathetic traps of thinking and being. I am not suggesting that the problem is rationalist thought itself, but the use of it as the only method of thinking and being reduces

one's capacity for deeper levels of consciousness. There are seemingly infinite possibilities for thinking and understanding that go beyond our imperially-drawn borders and if we can attest to the idea of globalization in the sense of forming a network of relations with other cultures of the world, then we must be open to learning that other ways of thinking exist and that those ways often exist in our very embodiment as historical, cultural and geopolitical beings. But this cannot merely be a flippant acknowledgment that other cultures exist: it has to be a truly authentic desire to try to learn the culture of those we want to have relations with. It is useful to begin such a discourse by introducing another way of looking at this problematic of deeming rationalist thought as the highest form of wisdom, and that is through the access to what is called "deep reality." Deep reality is the subjective reflection of the cultural epistemologies that existentially affect one's life and can be uncovered through an investigation of texts and the cultural phenomena that underlie most cultural assumptions. Such reflection causes one to question the constructions forming the established reality and are ones often taken for granted.

I will introduce some basic concepts from Daoist philosophy, which belongs to the Chinese philosophical tradition, as well as the cultural theory of Horkheimer and Adorno from the European philosophical tradition, in order to distinguish the cultural effects that rationalist thinking and deep reality offer. I rely on Horkheimer and Adorno because of their capacity to address dis-located knowledge production filtered through the culture industry, as a component of modernity, has since mutated to eradicate and replace bodily intelligence for a mechanistic and often mindless way of being. Thus, I will be looking at three aspects of Daoist philosophy in comparison to three characteristics constitutive of a particularly narrow way that rationalist thought is exercised to give an idea of a theoretical framework, but I will also examine a method of praxis.

Daoist philosophy is based on the spontaneity, creativity and simplicity of nature that is contingent on the inconstant constancy of life. Each person carries and takes up particular and common experiences that can be questioned to see what those experiences reveal about human potential, both individually and collectively. This kind of cultivation is called self-awareness and self-reflection. The reflection of these experiences—cognitive, embodied, religious, etc—in a Daoist philosophical sense are to bring about a re-examination of the ill-wills of construction that harm experience. It is through the encouraged cultivation of human experiences in Daoist thought that deep reality is disclosed, and so directs changes in habits, ways of thinking and being, and forms relationships at the intersubjective level.

Daoism is characterized as an all-inclusive and syncretic philosophy and way of life that promotes integrity, humility, comfort, and most importantly balance, which includes listening to both the mind and body and giving the mind and body what it needs in order to live in a harmonious and comfortable way. The etymology of the Chinese character Dao (道) encompasses what Kuang-ming Wu calls the

mind-body experience (1997: 249). In its Chinese composition Dao is phenomenological insofar as it captures the human balance in the strokes that make up the character: 道 Dao is composed of the head, feet, and body radical. Without one of these components, Dao would not exist: the head (mind), body, and feet must move together in order for Dao to be Dao, otherwise, the word and concept are fragmented. The human experience in this Daoist phenomenology is defined in the most ambiguous sense, yet ambiguity is a tactic of hermeneutics and maintains a reading of Daoist philosophy as open, rather than totalized or closed. The primary Daoist texts, Daodejing (道德經) and Zhuangzi (莊子), reflect such hermeneutics.

The incommensurability of rationalist thought and Daoist philosophy is not only the fault of the out-of-date Orientalist assumption that Daoism, and Eastern thought more broadly, is esoteric, spiritual and irrational. Daoism ought not to be situated in an ancient epoch of Chinese civilization, and while the Sages could not have foreseen the technicization of the world, the ambiguity of their texts are meant to be interpreted and adapted as time changed and continues to change; they cannot be denied a presence in the present. Such thinking—that Eastern thought is irrational—is not applicable to Daoism since its project is an open totality, yet the methods of forming wholeness contrast with those of rationalist thought. In constructing itself, rationalist thought often subsumes world philosophies by positing a same/other distinction in order that such otherness is graspable. This tactic of learning produces the fundamental cultural assumption that otherness is alien and is often exploited through assimilation.

Dis-located Knowledge (The Consensus)

Rationalist thought is a dis-located form of knowledge that reproduces itself through a consensus. Such reproduction of its productions considers itself to be the most “reasonable.” Everyday language verifies how rationalist thought is infused with comments such as, “that makes sense because it is the most reasonable” and “this is the most rational (common sense) way to do things,” and indeed this may be true of how the English language has come to be—this is how it communicates itself most efficiently. These statements encompass the language of scientific management. To be certain, I acknowledge that there is nothing wrong with this kind of language and that even as philosophers, we fall prey to particular speech patterns. I must continue to stress the importance that there is nothing wrong with this kind of thinking, unless it cuts itself off from other modes of thinking or cuts other modes of thinking off from itself, which, because rationalist thought is contingent on high efficiency and calculation, does exactly that. Its efficiency has become so normative to its function that rationalist thought does not recognize that in denying other thought, it denies its own growth. This is why the current form of rationalist thought is contorted. In the 1940s, Horkheimer and Adorno wrote that this leads the individual to be nullified in the face of economic powers; this is

because economic powers, based on making followers consent to an apathetic comfort, floods information and amusements into the mind, “making people smarter and more stupid” (1987: xvii).

Dis-located knowledge has to do with equating all thinking into a scientific system that lies in conformity to one principle, which establishes a unified mode of being by subsumption into that singular principle (63, 65). Totalizing dis-locates possibilities to learn from other modes of thought and supplants them with what the consensus grasps and is grasped by, namely a mutated, but highly intelligent form of efficiency. The language of economics and science creates the totality of a rationalist system. Deep reality does not exist for the consensus because the consensus has a constructed reality that totalizes and therefore disavows individual experience. The flood of amusements and information that Horkheimer and Adorno critiqued (television, film, music—popular media which they considered to be trivial cultural constructions of the time) bombard the minds of those in the totalizing system and contaminates the ability for one to listen to the body. What is the alternative to this?

Embodied Knowledge (The Periphery)

You can listen to the body and give it what it needs instead of having the consensus think for and tell you what you want. Poem 33 of the *Daodejing* says that the harmonious balance of what one needs to live is often disrupted by the desire to conquer (Ames and Hall 2003: 128). Although Laozi composed his work during the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE) and was evaluating how rulers enacted his desires to conquer land and territory, “the desire to conquer” also refers to conquering the self through emotions, the body, the mind and others such as the intersubjective relationship. Such desire to conquer draws in even those who prefer to stay in the periphery by absorbing all modes of production, language, epistemologies into the totality. This is what Heidegger called the uncanniness of “falling prey” to average everyday idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. Horkheimer and Adorno note that inauthenticity, which is the inability to listen to the mind and body in this case, is what the culture industry does to the consensus in order to present the “same everyday world as paradise” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1987: 113). Creating the illusion that the “same everyday world” can be a paradise is a way in which the amusements of the culture industry forces anxieties out of mind, including suffering, even when it is on display (1987: 155). The trivial amusements of popular television and film were and still are distractions that dis-locate conditions of human suffering by concealing or veiling the phenomenon of the suffering body in terms of how one experiences pain — regardless if it is somatic or a-somatic. Amusements that contort the mind and body are contrapuntal ways of being that resist or escape a deeper reality, foiling the awareness of unawareness as the entire purpose of popular amusements is to numb the body into a non-thinking, non-emoting state. This is how the body is forgotten: by allowing the consensus to think for us, we fall prey to the totalizing trap that rationalist thought sets up through

the marketing ploys of comfort and happiness that trivial trends propagandize. The culture of consensus perpetuates non-thinking being through the eradication of individuality in a totality.

Eradication via Totality (Sameness)

Such unconscious acts of being are a result of how the “culture today is infecting everything with sameness,” and as a result, the individual no longer has to submit to the burden of decision-making regarding things that are either unimportant or profound because one falls into the means of consumption without being conscious of how, why, or what one consumes (1987: 95, 168). The consensus constructs mannerisms of how one should be. Knowledge of varying epistemologies also fall into a totality of undifferentiated “knowledge.” To be certain, assimilation as a method of cultural integration is more sinister than pure absorption. Assimilation leaves a spectre of the thought being assimilated, whereas pure absorption is complete eradication without a trace of origin. While such spectres haunt the consensus, their presence is often ignored. Assimilation of other cultural phenomena reproduces the assumption that rationalist thought has the authority to master other modes of being, as was mentioned earlier. The representation of Daoist thought and philosophy as a grassroots movement that attempts to overthrow the structures of rationalist thought is counter-productive to the tenets of simplicity and non-coercion that Daoism perpetuates. Appropriating Daoist thought to disassemble how rationalist thought is currently used in its rigid form is alienation of Daoism to the extent that our thinking still remains contaminated with the desire to replace and make absolute one form of thinking over another: the solution to the problem can never be the problem itself. Rather than attempting the gargantuan task of overthrowing an established system of being, the task of living authentically in the midst of discomfort is of greater immediacy and can perhaps yield better results.

Self-cultivation via Inclusion (Relationality)

Self-cultivation through inclusion is based upon allowing ideas to stand on their own. Daoism is a syncretic philosophy that combines elements from Confucianism and Buddhism, and recognizes that without one or the other—analogue to the whole composition of the head, feet, and body radicals—the concept of Dao may not exist, or in the very least, Dao would be very different. Just as there are the necessary etymological component of Dao (道), so too is there the necessary component of Confucianism and Buddhism in Daoist philosophy and religion. This form of inclusion can be made analogue to elements of influence that each person is thrown into and enacts. The world provides us all with possibilities, and self-cultivation is a matter of how each person freely chooses to take up and enact the possibilities given to them that determine how one authentically lives. Syncretism in Daoist philosophy means that Dao is a cultural hermeneutic that influences and is influenced by other ways of thinking compatible with already-established Daoist

thought; therefore, in following the syncretic models of Daoism, one is willing to engage with the freedom of interpretation.

Daoist philosophy helps with the cultivation of human experience and while there are guidelines that the Daoists follow, such as the return to simplicity and non-coercive, non-forceful interaction, they are by no means fixed prescription. Self-cultivation, however that may be interpreted, is a method of attaining a deeper level of consciousness, and therefore crossing the thresholds into a deeper reality. Cultivating each experience is a means of understanding how the self exists and is constructed in the world in all capacities. Having such an awareness suspends the illusion of the tranquilized familiarity that rationalist thought commits all of us to, and creates moments of existential discomfort. The access of a deep reality through self-cultivation, however, is not a means of escaping the world of the consensus and sameness, for there is no outside of a closed totality. Instead, it means attempting to cope with the ways of inauthentic existence. Once again, Daoist philosophy is not a means to undermine the established epistemological structures in the Eurocentric tradition. Rather, Daoism acts as a guide for those attempting to live harmoniously within a totalizing system in the most compassionate and dignified ways possible.

Tranquillized Familiarity (Presence is Absence)

The term “tranquilized familiarity” comes from Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and describes how the consensus falls into the routine of everyday averageness (1996: 176-7). This idea relates to Horkheimer and Adorno’s remarks on turning the same everyday world into a paradise. Tranquillized familiarity suggests that the power of the consensus is so pervasive that even in moments of presence the body and mind still remain absent. The think-tank of the culture industry, of rationalist thought that enforces tranquilized familiarity, operates on the premise that the less it has to promise the consensus, the less meaning it offers in terms of a meaningful existence, and as such, empty ideology disseminates into a vagueness that functions as control (1987: 118). The insidious nature of such an existence, or lack thereof, is a result of how rationalist thought has been distorted to dis-place the body, and in turn also deadening the mind. The consensus is comprised of the spectre of a silenced majority, voiceless and lacking agency. Horkheimer and Adorno write that our culture is “stripped of all responsibility to thought and transformed into a neutralized element of the all-embracing rationalist of an economic system long since grown irrational” (72). By dis-placing other ways of thinking and being, rationalist thought becomes highly mechanical, so much so that it does not realize that it is itself mechanized. This is how the machinery of rationalist thought operates in the Euro-American West. Presence in the culture industry, in tranquilized familiarity and in the mechanism of rationalist thought exists as a collection of a ghostly majority. The philosophical Daoist counsel to mitigate the absence of presence (presence as absence) encompasses the conception of permanent impermanence.

Permanent Impermanence (Absence can be a Form of Presence)

Being conscious of bodily phenomenology and cultivating somatic and a-somatic experiences into a deeper reality is the allowance of experiences to existentially inform one's being, which reveals the recognition of permanent impermanence. The Daoist conception of permanent impermanence comes from the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi whose writings inform the traversal of boundless boundaries. The constant impermanence of all things in the world does not suggest meaninglessness in Euro-American nihilistic terms, but instead offers assurance in the freedom of possibilities. In seeing that thought and being is permanently impermanent (ever-changing and inconstant), one does not have to be bound to a univocal body of knowledge that assumes the position of mastery over peripheral thought. Unbinding the body from paralyzing amusements and moving freely in a world of possibilities is a phenomenal way of being that affirms the notion of interrelation or interconnection, which is to say that all established epistemological orders arose from a foundation that also gave rise to all other intellectual traditions. Because all elements are informed and informing, influenced and influencing one another, the idea of a structural rigidity is a distant threat to Daoist philosophy as its ambiguity allows it to evade capture. This is how the concept of yin-yang (陰陽) operates in much of Chinese thought. Such a way of being, naturally following the flow of energies, does not allow for the dominance of one mode of being over all other modes of being.

What I have tried to demonstrate is how current Eurocentric rationalist thought has dis-placed and alienated itself from not only other modes of being, but also from itself. Horkheimer and Adorno write that the culture industry has made thinking entirely unrecognizable. But regardless of how it polices other ways of being and thinking into a calculation and mechanization through assimilation, rationalist thought, despite its most unreasonable forms, is still considered reasonable (169)—our language used in its basic everyday manner is evidence of this. The epistemological endeavour to mastery is one possibility among many in knowledge production. Mastering discourse and experience as contained in a totality is an epistemological format that never grows. Other conditions of possibility must be taken into consideration. “The Allegory of the Butterfly” by Zhuangzi offers clarity into such contemplation. “The Allegory of the Butterfly” is as follows: one day Zhuang Zhuo dreams of himself being a butterfly and when he wakes up we do not know whether Zhuo has become a butterfly in his dream, or whether a butterfly has become Zhuo in its dream (2003: 45). The circumstances of both realities are valid, regardless of the content of those realities. What I have tried to offer is consideration that there are other forms of intelligibility in the world including the very bodies that house the mind and deep reality, which can inform our values and ways of valuing. Simply acknowledging their existence is not enough to shake us from our heavy slumber. Embodying a philosophical task reveals what has been concealed beneath contortions: an unfamiliar and long forgotten presence can

manifest itself externally if there is a willingness to let it guide us. It is true that a tranquilized familiarity is comfortable, but when it produces absent-mindedness, it denies a presence (awareness) of both mind and body. A crossing of boundaries from what is absent into presence and from what is present into absence unveils a phenomenology of experience as the form of a deeper level of consciousness that resides in the body and is accessible through the body. By persevering with the psychical, sensuous, emotional, and/or religious experiences that comprise our modes of being and that inform inauthentic and authentic existence, it is possible to cross a boundless threshold of humanity where thinking and being can be, and a discourse of difference can continue to unfold.

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