Ziporyn, Brook, The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of GUO Xiang
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In The Penumbra Unbound Brook Ziporyn presents the philosophy of the important Neo-Daoist GUO Xiang 郭象. Hitherto, English language publications on Guo have mainly regarded him as a commentator of the Zhuangzi 莊子. While Guo’s philosophy is available “merely” as commentary, Ziporyn is able to deduce Guo’s own philosophical position. He releases this xuanxue 玄学 (abstruse learning) thinker from being just a commentator and succeeds in showing his distinctive philosophical importance. Ziporyn’s enlightening study shows that Guo had his own Neo-Daoist philosophy that was quite distinct from both other Neo-Daoists (particularly WANG Bi 王弼) and traditional Daoist philosophies (those given in the Daodejing 道德經 and the Zhuangzi).

Ziporyn begins by pointing out Guo’s significance for understanding Chinese philosophy, and, by extension, for pursuing comparative philosophy. By presenting to an English language readership this “third masterpiece of philosophical Taoism” (3), Ziporyn hopes that the eminence and unique nature of Daoist philosophy will be better understood. After all, Guo’s commentary became the standard interpretation of the Zhuangzi, and he is said to have edited and arranged this “classical” text into its current form.

The reader is given a short introduction of the philosophical topics that later become relevant in Ziporyn’s study. The author explains that Ruist (Confucian) and Moist philosophies can be regarded as similar insofar as they both focus on the cultivation of a moral perspective on the world. They also share the tendency to ascribe priority to the state over the individual. With the Laozi 老子, there appears, according to Ziporyn, an “across-the-board rejection of all moral cultivation” (9). In Zhuangzi’s philosophy, spontaneous actions were given high importance; one was expected to constantly shift perspective, without being “committed to any single course of action” (14). Ziporyn remarks that ideas like these will “bear great fruit in the GUO Xiang commentary” (13).
In the next chapter, Ziporyn gives a brief overview of Guo’s thought. He states that “one of his [Guo’s] central philosophical tasks” was “to harmonize ‘Ruism’ and ‘Taoism,’ social norms and spontaneity” (18); he explains that Guo is able to do this by concentrating on entities as self-sufficient particulars. Wang Bi’s transcendent ground for existence (wu 無) and the “substance/function dichotomy” (19) are categorically denied. Guo introduces the concept of “traces” (ji 跡), and then redefines ziran 自然 (spontaneity) using it to explain the “dark joining” or “vanishing into” (ming 鬚) things (19) in contrast to following traces. Ziporyn details the significance of various topics in individual chapters of his book, which will culminate in the “pinnacle of Guo’s thought, the notion of ‘lone-transformation’ or ‘transformation in solitude’ (duhua 獨化)” (20).

Ziporyn then discusses several xuanxue 玄學 scholars from the third to the sixth century C.E. in order to show Guo’s relation to other thinkers. One of the primary concerns of xuanxue scholars, including Xiang Xiu 向秀, was the unification of Ruism and Daoism. Wang Bi began this task by introducing the foundational basis for everything: wu (nonbeing). Other xuanxue thinkers developed similar approaches and their own “metaphysical” concepts. Guo Xiang’s work denied such concepts. Ziporyn notes that since it has been suggested that much of Guo’s work was “plagiarized from an earlier work by Xiang Xiu” (17), the extent of Guo’s originality remains unknown. However, it is clear to him that Guo does “away with Xiang’s residual transcendent ungenerated generator” (26). For Guo, harmonizing Ruism and Daoism means understanding Zhuangzi’s criticisms of Confucius as “merely parables...not to be taken literally” (29). The attitude that Guo takes, according to Ziporyn, can then be summarized as: “Zhuangzi actually intended to praise Confucius as the perfect sage who could harmonize spontaneity and morality, who could remain spiritually lofty and free while at the same time participating in worldly affairs” (30).

Ziporyn shows that Guo was able to essentially rework the Zhuangzi by emphasizing several concepts, including the concept of the “trace.” According to Guo, the Daoist sage has “no deliberate mind or purpose of his own” (47). Instead, he acts spontaneously. People who follow the actions or words of the sages are mistaken in thinking that the sages’ reasoning lies outside themselves: “what is cognized is merely the traces” (39). What counts is the spontaneous action of the sage or “ziran as that which leaves the traces” (19). Ziporyn reminds his readers that the “[r]yan 然 [of ziran] means both ‘being as it is’ and ‘being right’” and that Guo’s philosophy “plays on both of these meanings” (37). Therefore, even “civilization is natural and even morality is spontaneous” (41).

The epistemological error that relates the sages’ spontaneous action to the traces that are left behind by them presents a problem for Guo. Ziporyn comments: “In themselves the traces seem never to have anything but a negative function in Guo’s writings” (61). In the chapter on “The Dangers of Traces,” Ziporyn outlines Guo’s three main objections to traces. First, traces are timeless fixations of the sage’s actions. Ziporyn quotes Guo saying, “[w]hen times change and the generations are different, the rites should change with them” (53). This leads to a second problem; namely making “one thing conform to the model of another” (53) and thereby denying its particular nature. The first two problems lead to the third and most detrimental problem. Ziporyn summarizes that “when something pleasant or good comes to light, it leads to esteem and hence intimidation. But this goodness itself was spontaneous... To try to do it deliberately...is mere falsification” (58).

In Part Two of his book, Ziporyn explores how Guo can account for interaction between entities without recourse to traces. Guo uses the word ming 鬚 (literally: “dark”) to describe this kind of interaction. Referring to the verbal usage of this term (that is often employed by