

Book Review

Giles, James, *The Way of Awareness in Daoist Philosophy*¹

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All alumni of the UST undergraduate and graduate philosophy programs pre-K-12 transitions would have a grasp of Chinese Philosophy, ranging from Chinese Philosophy at the baccalaureate level or Confucianism or even Comparative Philosophy at the graduate level. Encountering these subjects comes with the amazement of learning ancient wisdom from the East yet also with the daunting experiences in the classroom—particularly the scores at the end of each gruesome quiz or exam. This may immediately repel aspiring scholars from the broad topic of Chinese Philosophy or make others more inclined to Confucianism due to the more immediate associations and sound arguments bestowed in the lectures. Yet, it is concerning this experience that the current book under review, James Giles' *The Way of Awareness in Daoist Philosophy*, provides a fresh breeze into learning Chinese Philosophy. As the title of the book suggests, it provides a way of awareness through the Daoist school, or, perhaps better, the *Dao* of awareness, the way or the *nature* of clarity. Central to the book's seven chapters (with a preface and epilogue) is a progression of topics that invites the readers to situate themselves to what philosophy is within the Daoist tradition, and introducing awareness to the readers is no easy feat, considering how Daoism is generally equated to mysticism and frivolity, especially when contrasted to the Confucian praise of rituals and filial piety.²

The first chapter works on the brief historical overview contained in the preface, covering this time the intellectual pursuits of the context. Though the discussion begins with the Period of Warring States, what broadens one's understanding is the common element among schools of thought; the *Book of Changes* or the *Yijing* (易经) contains the terms that are usually discussed more

¹ St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Publishing, 2020, 205pp.

² See James Giles, *The Way of Awareness in Daoist Philosophy* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Publishing, 2020), viii.

in the different schools, such as Daoism's *dao* (道) and *de* (德) with Confucianism's *junzi* (君子).³ This sets the background for the entire chapter's discussion of Kong Zi, Meng Zi, Xun Zi, Mo Zi, and even Han Fei Zi and the legalists.

The second chapter begins laying the foundation of Daoist scholarship, particularly discussing three concepts from Lao Zi, namely the Way, return, and non-action. The interesting choice of Giles to choose to work with the English title of the *Daodejing* (道德经) or the *Laozi* (老子) as *The Way and Its Power*, provides a different perspective for the reader. Opting to use this poetic title might vex some Daoist scholars, but this allows one to focus more on the content of the book – the interplay between *De* and *Dao*, between Virtue and the Way – rather than simply the book's literary and philosophical contents. This excitement may especially be true for neophytes, immediately invoking in one's mind Nietzsche's will to power, which Giles hints at their difference.⁴ Lao Zi's philosophy for Giles evokes the "stillness of awareness" that resembles a "metaphysics of awareness, an account where awareness is not distinct from its objects[.]"⁵ And this discussion provides the backbone for the entire discussion of Daoism in this book.

While discussion on Daoism might immediately proceed to Zhuang Zi after Lao Zi, Giles considers first the association of Yang Zhu's philosophy to Daoism, which is central to the third chapter, and reserving Zhuang Zi for the fourth. Though a scholar not central to usual discussions of Daoism, Yang Zhu is considered by Giles as a thinker who puts forward a distinctly Daoist way of awareness. His take on egoism and fatalism are central to his own understanding of the Way. This ultimately points to Yang Zhu's disregard of arbitrary selections found in life and an emphasis upon the freedom present in living authentically, found best in Yang Zhu's rejection of sacrificing a part of his body (a hair) for the wellbeing of the state.⁶ This regard of the self in fact points to a higher awareness of an individual's freedom, "the freedom to follow our natural leanings without hindrance."⁷

Allowing things to flow is the same theme found in *wei wu ziran* (无为自然) in the philosophy of Zhuang Zi that takes a prominent position in the fourth chapter. Giles takes on this thinker not just of the accustomed passages of his book, such as the Butterfly Dream, but rather selects other passages for deeper consideration, such as the dialogue with Nie Que (啮缺) on an individual sleeping on a damp place (found in *Qi Wu Lun*, the second chapter

³ See *Ibid.*, 4–5.

⁴ See *Ibid.*, 32

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ See *Ibid.*, 66–69.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

of the *Book of Zhuang Zi* 齐物论第二). Zhuang Zi's philosophy is framed as one that "concerns the immediate situations—of the man, the eel, the monkey, and so on—and how that situation affects the individual's agency."⁸ And this situation of an individual is the locale, so to speak, of non-activity naturalness, allowing us "to achieve the appropriate state of awareness the mind needs to be nourished" in the form of "adopting the position of doing nothing."⁹

A meditative pause is evoked by the fifth chapter – entitled "Inward Training and the Mind within the Mind" – that discusses not a single thinker but focuses on the *Neiye* (内业) or, as the selected translation of Giles, the *Inward Training*. Another strength of this book is this chapter, containing an often-overlooked text in Chinese Philosophy that scholars on the *Huangdi Neijing* (黄帝内经) or *zhong yi* (中医) as a whole might be more familiar with. In this chapter, Giles engages with the commentary of the *Neiye*, yet, consistent with the book's overarching theme, exposes its integral capacity of how the "Way fills the entire word because it is awareness."¹⁰ The Way is presented as in itself awareness, the dawning of consciousness, the moment of stillness. The chapter then continues with the cultivation of one's mind and one's very self in Daoist meditation. Giles then proceeds to tackle different forms associated with this such as yoga, breath control, and bodily alignment.¹¹

The sixth chapter looks into Lie Zi, and it frames the freedom of a traveler or of a wanderer, understanding the reality of life from a journey through nature in which one initially is conscious of the distinctions between particular objects, eventually reaching a metaphysical awareness of the eradication of this division. In Lie Zi's philosophy, we are introduced to one's freedom in natural simplicity. This is an awareness of oneself (or, perhaps better, the lack thereof) as the very basis of reality.¹² This is not simply a negation of reality but realizing life from the vantage of transient awareness of the whole, and consciousness as a totality is a sequence of these glimpses into life. Giles continues this by tackling Lie Zi's philosophy vis-à-vis fate and other forms of awareness such as in the case of dreams and even robots.¹³

The last two chapters provide us new ways awareness may be contextualized in Daoism. The seventh chapter presents Neo-Daoism's emergence in two strands, namely those affiliated with Dark or Mastery

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹ See *Ibid.*, 120–123.

¹² See *Ibid.*, 137.

¹³ See *Ibid.*, 145–151.

Learning (*Xuanxue* 玄学) and Light or Pure Conversations (*Qingtan* 清谈), the former focused on “the unnamability [*sic*] of the Way, along with a focus on the notion of Way as non-being,” while the latter expressed itself “in the form of poems, literary essays, biographical accounts, and anecdotes, many of which relate to themes also found in works of the Dark Learning.”¹⁴ Giles provides us with Wang Bi and Guo Xiang as exemplars of the former, while Ruan ji and Xi Kang for the latter. Commendable is this chapter which introduces the readers to the development of Daoism, particularly ways of understanding the “Neo-Daoist ability to argue in new ways for an understanding of the Way.”¹⁵

What this book ultimately offers is not simply a situational narrative but rather it invites readers to see clarity within the Daoist tradition—how this school is not just a loose set of thinkers speaking in aphorisms and maxims but is composed of thinkers with convictions that resound the issues of their own communities. In other words, what is provided are how the various thinkers discussed tried to put forward accounts of awareness that in turn contribute “to our understanding of both what awareness is and how it relates to the world.”¹⁶ This is an awareness of our Daoist thinkers’ own historical and social embeddedness, and how their thoughts took the form of answers to the pressing questions of their time. Seeing the general picture this way allows us in turn to see how their own respective ways of philosophizing are attempts to direct their followers towards clarity of thought and of living. This is not just an invitation to learn and experience an awareness of Chinese philosophy, but, throughout the book’s chapters, a way of how one may understand and situate oneself within this very Daoist philosophy.

What is greatly commendable about the book is its ability to introduce readers to Chinese philosophy, to the thought and practice of Daoist philosophy, without bombarding them with foreign terms and concepts. Conversely, this book allows readers to explore initial themes on cross-culture or comparative philosophy, highlighting certain similarities between Chinese concepts with those of Western and even Buddhist themes. One could say that this book may serve as an introduction to Chinese (Daoist) thought, but at the same time enriching the understanding of those more attuned to the discipline. Neophytes would find this book extremely helpful in mapping the progression of Daoist thought, while those interested in comparative studies would appreciate the affinities drawn. This last point is accentuated in the book’s last two sentences: “Bringing Daoist thought into Western philosophy might well have the effect of expanding Western

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 152–153.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

philosophy into playing more of an emancipatory role than it now does. This is especially so because the Way of awareness in Daoist philosophy is also a way of life.”¹⁷ The introduction of a cross-cultural perspective allows one to further expand the grammar of our own thinking and being, and through discussing Daoist philosophy, Giles invites us all to do just that.

Similar books worth pursuing on the tenor of Daoist Philosophy are Hans-Georg Moeller’s *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory* and, for those who wish to dive deeper in particular strands of Daoist thought, Christine Tan’s *Freedom’s Frailty: Self-Realization in the Neo-Daoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang’s Zhuangzi*.¹⁸

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Moeller, *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004) and Christine Abigail L. Tan, *Freedom’s Frailty: Self-Realization in the Neo-Daoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang’s Zhuangzi* (New York: State University of New York, 2024).