

Luhmann and Laozi on Self-Reference and Mutual Arising

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道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。無名天地之始，有名萬物之母。老子¹

Introduction

Comparing ancient Chinese and current Western (meta)physical thinking is not merely an exercise in setting two completely different things side by side in order to elucidate both. David Halls claims that ancient Chinese thought seems to have been “already postmodern”: compared to traditional Greek hierarchical dualities – sky/earth, divine/human, mind(soul)/body, subject/object – the ancient Chinese (meta)physical model (e.g. in the *I Ching* or *Daodejing*) looks more like one of “pervasive immanence.” It lacks a clear sense of these dualities and also of what Hall calls an *archai* or transcendent first principle that stands “outside the system.”² One aspect of this seeming equivalence of transcendent and immanent worlds is that in ancient China we have, rather than “gods,” ancestral spirits forming a sort of extended human family. This pervasive-immanence model may be compared to the contemporary western (poststructuralist, “postmodern”) (meta)physical *Weltanschauung* most conveniently traced back to Nietzsche.

However, while there have been several interpretations of Chinese Daoism, Buddhism, the *I Jing* and even Confucian texts which, in very generally pursuing the above-mentioned parallel, bring to bear (and serve to elucidate) the thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida,³ there have been surprisingly few attempts to explicitly compare classical Daoism (Laozi, Zhuangzi) with systems theory, cybernetics, information theory, chaos-complexity theory.⁴ Yet such a comparison is

¹ “The Dao which can be expressed is not the constant Dao./ The name which can be named is not the constant name./ No name (Nothing names) heaven-earth’s origin./ Named (Being names) the mother of the ten thousand things.” (Laozi, *Daodejing*, Chapter 1; in citations from the *Daodejing*, unless otherwise noted, the authors tend to combine Lau’s (1963), Yen’s (1976) and Henricks’ (1989) translations with their own, and are also influenced by the Daoist scholar Wang Bi’s 3rd century A.D. interpretation of the text).

² For the Greek/Chinese difference see Hansen (1992, *Introduction* 1-29), Hall and Ames (1987, 11-25), and Hall (1978, 1983, 1987); for the postmodern quality of ancient Chinese thinking see Hall (1991, 57-59).

³ Heidegger, who discusses the aesthetic quality of *iki* in “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” speaks at some length of the Dao, and is clearly open to the possibility that his own “thinking of Being” shares some common ground with the ancient “Thinking of Dao.” Chung-Yuan Chang (1975), among others, pursues the Heidegger-Laozi connection.

⁴ One exception is Frank Stevenson’s essay, “Zhuangzi’s Dao as Background Noise” (2006), which offers an interpretation of the Daoist Zhuangzi’s *Qiwulun* in the light of Michel Serres’

clearly invited by the alleged “postmodern” or “poststructuralist” tendencies of traditional Chinese thought, and more specifically by that view of Laozi’s Dao which sees it as, not an *archai*-outside-the-system but itself a system that is “self-generating” (see note 4) and perhaps also “self-ordering.” Indeed, when George Spencer-Brown, whose logic influenced that of Niklas Luhmann, prefaced his *Laws of Form* (1979) with Laozi’s line 無名天地之始 (*Wu ming, tian di zhi shih*, “No name [Nothing names], heaven-earth’s origin”), he may have been anticipating or even inaugurating a systems-theory reading of the *Daodejing*.

I. Horizontal and Vertical Levels of Interpretation

Following his Daoist epigraph, Spencer-Brown (1979) begins his first chapter (“The Form”): “We take as given the idea of distinction and the idea of indication, and that we cannot make an indication without drawing a distinction. We take, therefore, the form of distinction for the form” (1). Immediately there is a dilemma here, or paradox. We begin by indicating *something*, and yet it seems we also begin with *distinction* rather than indication – we begin with the “form of the distinction.” Are we then beginning with a purely “objective” distinction between X and Y on the flat surface at which we gaze, or are we beginning with our own *act of indication* which distinguishes us as observing, indicating *subjects* from the flat surface at which we point, the surface on which we draw a formal (logical, mathematical) distinction?

Arguably we get a similar sort of problem (puzzle, paradox) in the famous opening line of Laozi’s *Daodejing*: *Dao ke Dao, fei chang Dao; Ming ke Ming, fei chang Ming*; “The Way that can be spoken (of) is not the constant Way;⁵ The Name that can be named is not the constant Name.” The traditional metaphysical reading gives this “constant Way” and “constant Name” a higher status than the “Way that can be spoken (of)” and “Name that can be named”: the former are transcendent, cannot be spoken, rationally known or objectified, or perhaps even distinguished from the “I” who “speaks” and “names” the *Dao ke dao* and *Ming ke ming*. The latter, “mystical” reading, which takes the *chang Dao/ chang Ming* as being so far beyond us that, through a paradoxical reversal, they also become our inmost nature, might preserve the transcendent-immanent equivalence.

chaos/information theory.

⁵ Dao, in ordinary Chinese also a “movement through,” can mean both “way” (“path”) and “speech” (speaking), just as Heraclitus’ Logos (from *legein*, “to speak”) is “word” (“speech”) as well as a transcendent metaphysical principle or “Dao.” A more “postmodern” translation or reading of this line (e.g. Hansen 1992) gives the priority to the *Dao ke Dao*, taking this cryptic line to mean: “The only Way is a spoken (linguistic, *discursive*) way and it must therefore be an *impermanent, ever-changing* way.” This can have a systems - or chaos-complexity-theory interpretations (as well as Derridean-poststructuralist ones), and thus may also be tied to Luhmann.

But here we are assuming that the key distinction is (in Spencer-Brown's terms) between the *act of indication* (speaking, "naming," "calling") and the *object* that is indicated (spoken of, named, called). Might we not also begin with the distinction itself (or the "form of the distinction") rather than the subject's act of indicating, that is, begin from the purely objective distinction between the *Dao ke Dao* and the *chang Dao*, "constant Dao"? Might we not simply begin from this X/Y distinction or difference – X is not Y – on a blank "horizontal" surface, rather than from our own "vertical" stance or standpoint "back behind" as "speaker"? And the same question holds for the "*Ming ke ming, fei chang Ming*."

Of course, if distinguishing is a kind of "calling" (Spencer-Brown's term) then we usually think it is only we ourselves who can "make the call." In negative theology, God is described by what He is not: "X is not God," "Y is not God," "God is neither X nor Y" – but here it seems we normally presuppose the vertical (or subjective) perspective.⁶ On the vertical reading of Laozi's opening lines, then, I cannot "speak of" the *chang Dao* or "name" the *chang Ming*, yet in speaking of/naming what this is *not* (*dao ke dao, ming ke ming*) I indirectly also speak of *chang Dao/Ming*, or acknowledge its (transcendent) "existence" or "subsistence." Indeed, through this negative vertical X/Y distinction the nameless/unspeakable Y remains (in) a sort of empty space.⁷

However, on the "horizontal" reading of the opening lines we begin with the objective distinction between speakable (nameable) Way/Name and constant Way/Name and do not "include" the subject that makes this distinction. Now perhaps the *chang Dao* (*Ming*) becomes once again a sort of blankness or empty space, but one that is set *beside* the real "contents" (Spencer-Brown's term) of the *Dao ke dao* (*Ming ke ming*) – as the "other side" of a distinction that is not even made – rather than, as on the vertical reading, set "beyond" it. And yet, if in both cases the *ch'ang Dao* (*Ming*) is a "blank" then how can we really distinguish these two pictures of "saying Dao (Logos, God) by saying what it (He) is not"?

Laozi emphasizes the operation of reversal in *Daodejing* 40: 反者道之動, *Fan zhe dao zhi dong*, "Reversal is the movement of Dao." Interestingly, the character 反 pictures hand-under-cliff and thus "hand turned cliff-like, turn over, flip, reverse, oppose" (Harbaugh 67): this might almost serve as the *model* of horizontal (plane)-to-vertical (axis) movement or *projection* and/or its reverse. And in *Daodejing* 78 we

⁶ Perhaps indeed "The God that can be spoken is not the true (real, actual) God" is the general form or rule of all such "speaking."

⁷ And if we remove the term "constant" to get "The way/name that can be spoken/named is not the Way/Name," we get a more complex form of the straight paradox ("X is not X"), a kind of conundrum: perhaps if *we are silent* (which still implies a subject or observer, a potential speaker "back behind") we will have the Way/Name appear before us, but when we try to speak/name it, it disappears. Luhmann and Fuch's *Speech and Silence* (1989) is also interesting in this context, even if it focuses mainly on Buddhism rather than Daoism.

get 正言若反, *Zheng Yan Ruo Fan*: “Straight words are reversed” (“The truth is paradoxical”), which clearly could be applied to the above discussion in various ways.

II. Self-Reference and Reversal in Luhmann and Laozi

To further elucidate this issue of horizontal and vertical undecidability or “mutuality” let us briefly return to Spencer-Brown and Luhmann. In his last chapter Spencer-Brown expands upon his paradoxical statements, at the opening of *Laws of Form*, that “we cannot make an indication without drawing a distinction” and that we therefore take “the form of distinction for the form”(1): “The conception of the form lies in the desire to distinguish. Granted this desire, we cannot escape from the form, although we can see it any way we please. (...) We see now that the first distinction, the mark, and the observer are not only interchangeable, but, in the form, identical” (1979, 75-76).⁸

We may at first want to take this on the purely horizontal level, as with two (perhaps overlapping) circles on a plane-geometrical surface, yet with the act of “marking” we are immediately forced back to the perspective of a “subject” who is now drawn into the picture. In a sense not just the two sides of the horizontal distinction are identified (or reversed) but the inner (or outer) subjective space of the “marker” and the space of that which is marked are also identified (reversed, inverted). This also means that the form of the distinction itself, the space containing the boundary with its two sides (X and Y) always “re-enters” both X and Y. Luhmann elucidates Spencer-Brown’s “re-entry of the form into its own space, that is, of the distinction into what is distinguished” in “The Paradox of Form” (1999, 15) by asking the reader to reflect on what “form” could possibly mean if it no longer had an opposite (such as “content”).⁹

Luhmann’s operation of self-reference – a self (body, system) distinguishes itself from its other (its “outside”) and then reabsorbs this distinction into itself in order to

⁸ The last sentence is preceded by the lines: “We may also note that the sides of each distinction experimentally drawn have two kinds of reference. The first, or explicit, reference is to the value of a side, according to how it is marked. The second, or implicit, reference is to an outside observer. That is to say, the outside is the side from which a distinction is supposed to be seen. (...) The value of a circumference to the space outside must be, therefore, the value of the mark, since the mark now distinguishes this space. An observer, since he distinguishes the space he occupies, is also a mark. . . . In this conception a distinction drawn in any space is a mark distinguishing the space. Equally and conversely, any mark in a space draws a distinction.” (Spencer-Brown 1979, 75-76)

⁹ “A form ... does not possess any ontological status ... Form not only is the boundary, but also contains the two sides it separates. Form has, as it were, an open reference to the world; this might underlie Spencer-Brown’s enigmatic statement ‘Distinction is perfect continence’ (1979, 1). Are we to understand “perfect continence” to say that the distinction contains itself as well? How can the distinction be perfect otherwise?” (Luhmann 1999, 16-17) “Continence” (related to “contain”) means “self-restraint” or “modesty”; in the sense of “self-contained” it can also mean “perfection.”

reconstitute, reorder or regenerate itself – can thus be understood both horizontally and vertically. That is, we may be dealing here with the relation between two independent bodies which nonetheless in some way interact or (as with circles) “overlap,” or with that between a body and its encompassing environment. Either way – as with the chaos-theory progression from disorder to order to disorder, where we might also begin with “order” – we can begin with the body’s act of identifying (by distinguishing) itself or with its pre-existing state as being part of (or overlapped with) its outside/other: without this pre-existing condition the body would not need to distinguish itself in the first place, nor would it be able to reabsorb into itself the difference between itself and its other.

For Luhmann as for Spencer-Brown, the *act* or *operation* of indication (marking, reference) is crucial: “the operation of reference is included in what it indicates. It indicates something to which it belongs. This is no tautology. The operation of reference does not indicate itself as an operation. Always guided by a distinction, it indicates something with which it indicates.” (1995, 442).

In Chapter 43 of the *Daodejing* we get a “dynamic operation”:

What is of all things most yielding (water)
Can overwhelm that which is of all things most hard (rock).
Being substanceless it (Dao) can enter even where there is no space;
That is how I know the value of action that is actionless. (Waley 197)

In certain respects – as with “Dao’s movement is *fan*-reversal” where *fan* pictures a sort of horizontal-vertical (mutual or *Gestalt*-switching) “projection” – it also seems this is more like an abstract “model” of Luhmann’s theory rather than a concrete instance of it. Immediately the question arises as to whether, in this interaction between solid rock and “substanceless” water, we are dealing with two independent (and more or less equivalent) bodies/systems rather than one (we more likely would assume rock but it could also be water) *within* another. Either way we look at it, it is the *wu you*, non-being or non-substantiality of Dao-water that enables it to enter into all of the “non-spaces” of rock – from our perspective and from the rock’s perspective these are non-spaces but from Dao-water’s perspective they may be infinitesimally small (and to us invisible) spaces – and thereby “overwhelm” the rock.¹⁰ But does this mean that (as we would normally assume) the ultimately more encompassing water “absorbs” into it the rock, even though at first we tend to picture the rock as absorbing (into its own infinitesimal spaces) the water?

¹⁰ In *Zhuangzi* 3 Cook Ting carves the ox so smoothly, as if his knife were dancing, that he is asked his secret. He says: “There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room” (Watson 1996, 47).

The theme of Dao's "infinitesimal" nature is indeed already sounded in Laozi's first chapter, whose fourth and fifth lines go: "*Wu ming, tian di zhi shi; You ming, wan wu zhi mu*; "No name ('Nothing names'), heaven-earth's ('nature's') origin; Named ('Having name,' 'Being names'), the mother of the ten thousand things."¹¹ This duality of *wu ming/you ming* of course correlates with the dualities of *dao ke dao / chang Dao* and *ming ke ming / chang ming* that immediately precede it, and in this larger context it is echoed at the end of Chapter 1: "These two (*wu/you*, being/nothing, having/not-having/named/nameless) are the same in origin, yet different in manifestation (different in name). / Together, they are called *xuan*-profundity (obscurity, infinitesimality). / The most infinitesimal of infinitesimals is the gate of all *miao*-subtleties (secret essences) of the Dao."¹² The secret subtlety, the infinitesimal nature of Dao may be its self-enclosed inwardness or self-containment rather than its infinite expansiveness or openness outward – though both modes or moments are "unspeakable." This inwardness correlates with Dao's "vertical subjectivity" but also with its "weakness": "Reversal (反, *fan*) is the movement of Dao; / Weakness (弱, *ruo*) is the function of Dao. (弱 is the "pictograph of a fragile plant, or possibly a variation of a young bird's wings": Harbaugh 1998, 304).

Weakness suggests water – with its low position that finally overcomes everything by absorbing it – but also the *blindness* of a subjectivity that is concealed within – or perhaps "back behind" – the process that it is observing. Here we come back to systems theory. Luhmann's "operation of reference is included in what it indicates" yet "does not indicate itself as an operation" because the observer is outside the system yet pulled back inside it *via* the feedback loop. Katherine Hayles (1999) takes such reflexivity as a key insight of the second wave of cybernetics.¹³ We can see this observer-system relation as both a (vertical) environment-body duality or (horizontal) body-body duality. Thus Luhmann speaks of the "double contingency" of two self-enclosed systems (black boxes) that are trying to "see" each other. Each is "blind" insofar as it is "informationally closed": it gets all its information from its own feedback loops and thus has a radically limited perspective: "Each determines its

¹¹ "*Wu ming, tian di zhi shi*" is the line Spencer-Brown uses as epigraph to *Laws of Form*.

¹² This 妙 (*miao*)-"subtlety" has "woman" on the left and "small" on the right; 始 (*shih*)-"origin" has "woman" on the left, "embryo" on the right. Needham takes it as a female embryo, giving "origin" a sense both temporally (backwards and forwards) recursive – and again we have the possibility of an infinite regress of self-saying or perhaps *non-self-saying* – and organic (as "the woman in the woman").

¹³ "Reflexivity is the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates. ... Reflexivity entered cybernetics primarily through discussions about the observer. By and large, first-wave cybernetics [considered] observers to be outside the system they observe. Yet cybernetics also had implications that subverted this premise. The objectivist view sees information flowing from the system to the observers, but feedback can also loop through the observers, drawing them in to become part of the system being observed. The second wave ... grew out of attempts to incorporate reflexivity into the cybernetic paradigm at a fundamental level" (Hayles 1999, 8-9).

own behavior by complex self-referential operations within its own boundaries.”¹⁴ If this double contingency describes the horizontal model of two self-enclosed systems interacting within a larger environment, it also describes (if slightly differently) the vertical model of system-within-environment, a special case of which is the biological model of living-organism-within-environment.¹⁵

Although Laozi’s water-rock interaction suggests a horizontal interface or interaction, it obviously can also be taken as given priority to water as encompassing environment. Indeed a “systems-theory reading” of the *Daodejing* will more likely foreground the self-reversing vertical picture of *subject-infinitesimally-within/subject-infinitely-without* the system (Dao). Of course for Laozi, whose sage “experiences everything without having to leave his room,” the “frame” is ultimately metaphysical and as such is the largest imaginable one, a frame which itself disappears so that we are always breaking beyond order and thinkability into chaos and unthinkability: “The largest square has no corners, / The greatest vessel takes the longest to finish, / The Great Form is without shape. / For Tao is hidden and nameless. / Yet Tao alone supports all things and brings them to fulfillment.” (Chapter 41, Waley 193)

II. Mutual Arising and Self-Generation in Luhmann and Laozi

Luhmannian self-reference as the reabsorption-into-self of the self-other difference always serves the function of reconstituting, reordering, *regenerating* the (internal structure or form or operating system of the) self. However, this seems easiest to make sense of when we consider the more specific case of those systems known as living organisms. And to describe the dynamic, self-generating aspect of Dao, Laozi often uses the Chinese term 生, *sheng*, “life,” birth.” (生 pictures a plant rising from the ground.)

In Chapter 40 Laozi says that “Being *sheng* (gave birth to) the ten thousand things” and “Non-being *sheng* Being”; in Chapter 42 he says that “Dao *sheng* one, / One *sheng* two, / Two *sheng* three, / Three *sheng* the ten thousand things” (Waley 192, 195). Here we may recall that while “No name (Nothing names) heaven-earth’s

¹⁴ Here Luhmann continues: “They [observe each other] and learn self-referentially from their own observational perspective. They can try to influence what they observe by their own action and can learn further from the feedback. In this way an emergent order can arise that is conditioned by the complexity of the systems that make it possible but that does not depend on this complexity’s being calculated or controlled.” (1995, 109-110).

¹⁵ Hayles describes this organic cybernetic model: “[For Varela and Maturana] the world is a set of informationally closed systems. Organisms respond to their environment in ways determined by their internal self-organization. Their one and only goal is to continually produce and reproduce the organization that defines them as systems. Hence, they not only are self-organizing but also are autopoietic, of self-making.” (1999, 9-10)

origin” (Spencer-Brown’s epigraph to *Laws of Form*), “Named (Being names) the mother of the ten thousand things”: these myriad “things” are “nature” in the sense of “all animate life” (and perhaps they include inanimate things as well). We also may recall that in *Daodejing* 1 the origin/mother duality is echoed by the *dao ke dao/chang Dao* and *ming ke ming/chang Ming* dualities: thus Laozi can say (at the end of Chapter 1) that “These two (essentially *wu/you*, nothing/being) are the same in origin yet come out (are named) differently. Together they are called *xuan*-infinitesimality).” Chapter 2 gives us the mutual arising or mutual generation of *you* and *wu*: “Being (Named, Naming) and Non-being (Nameless, Not-naming) are mutually posited in their emergence (有無相生; *you wu hsiang sheng*).¹⁶

With this mutual arising (emergence, generation) of *you/wu* we seem at first to have a flat surface upon which two mutually-opposed or mutually-negating terms are distinguished; they negate one another yet as correlative opposites simultaneously depend upon one another for their meaning, as in Heraclitus’ “The way up is the way down”: here “up” could have no meaning without “down” and *vice-versa*. This *you*-being is also *you*-“having” as in “having this name” or “having this predicate” – “being good” means having the name/quality of “goodness” – and *wu*-nonbeing can also be read as “not-having” a particular predicate, quality or “name.”¹⁷ Thus the passage can be taken as a further reflection on the “*Ming ke ming, fei chang Ming*” in at least two senses: the name or quality of “goodness” or *chang*-“constancy” can easily *fan*-reverse to become that of “badness” (“not-goodness”) or “inconstancy.” But we also sense that this whole horizontal model of logical opposition might be too limited, we might need to get beyond or beneath this mere “naming of things” to that which is *really* nameless, that to which no name can even be temporarily given and then reversed, the *chang Ming/chang Dao*.

In other words, “being-nonbeing emerge together” cannot remain merely the “static” model of a logical surface, any more than it could in Luhmann. The two opposed terms can also be seen as dynamically interchanging back-and-forth: “A-is-not-B, B-is-not-A, A-is-not-B ...”; it then becomes an *ongoing* fluctuation or

¹⁶ Literally “Being nothing *together born*.” This is set in the context of other correlative oppositions: “beauty”/“ugliness”; “good”/“evil”; “difficult”/“easy”; “long”/“short”; the “mutual filling of high/low”; the “mutual harmony of tone/voice”; and the “mutual following of front/back” (Henricks 1989, PAGES?).

¹⁷ That is, this *you* and *wu* may refer back to the *you ming*, “having name” and *wu ming*, “having no name” of the “origin” and “mother” at the opening of *Daodejing* 1; thus this could also be translated: “Named and nameless arise together.” Apparently the closest equivalent in Chinese to the English “being” (German *Sein*, French *être*) is just this *you* (有), which really means “to have” (but also “to be” in the sense of “there is”). Therefore Graham speculates that the ancient Chinese metaphysical (ontological) worldview may involve a more “container”-like sense of “being” than that dominant in the ancient West (e.g. with the Greek *einai*, “to be”), a sense which, as it happens, seems quite appropriate to the discussion of a systems theory grounded in the autopoietic model of organism-within-environment. *You*/being as “having” also casts an interesting light on Spencer-Brown’s cryptic “Distinction is perfect continence,” where “continence” suggests “(self-) *containment*.” (See note 9.)

alternation (an “alternating current”). This is also the sense we get when we “extend” the purely logical-linguistic role of *fan-reversal* in *Daodejing* 78 – “Straight words are reversed,” “The truth is paradoxical” – to its more dynamic role in *Daodejing* 40: “Reversal is the movement of Dao.” With Luhmann it seems we can picture self-reference as reabsorption-of-difference in terms of either a horizontal interplay between two bodies (within a common environment) or a more vertical interplay between body-and-environment; yet perhaps even Luhmann needs the more explicitly vertical (more radically subjective) model to really explain or “ground” the horizontal one.

Laozi emphasizes the vertical dynamic by giving us “depth” in the form of a deeper *wu*-nothing as *shi*-origin, a *wu*-origin lying beneath the dialectical surface-interplay or fluctuation of *you* and (on another, more surface-level of meaning) *wu*. (“*Wu ming, tian-di zhi shi*”; “Nameless, heaven-earth’s origin.”) In spite of the forward- directionality of generation in Chapters 40 (“*you* originates from *wu*”) and 42 – “Dao (Nothing) to Being (One) to two to three to the 10,000 things” – the 10,000 things “carry the negative of *ying* (dark, female) and face the positive of *yang* (light, male)”; that is, all generated things (creatures) may potentially revert to the *wu*-origin. If a simple tree-model pictures the deeper *wu*-origin (*wu*-root) as giving rise to two above-ground “branches” (*you* and second-order *wu*) then now we have an ongoing horizontal fluctuation between these branches. Here the *negative form of difference*, of the *you-wu* distinction that is dynamically drawn or performed “up above,” is itself derived from (only possible because of) the negativity, negative nature or form of the *wu*-origin down beneath.

And perhaps there is after all an analogous sense in which Luhmann’s horizontal model itself depends on (or is grounded in) his vertical, single-system-within-larger-environment model. That is, perhaps also for Luhmann it is possible for the “self” to “reabsorb its difference from the other” only because of what is in effect a nothingness or emptiness at the origin. This negative form of Laozi’s observing self means that (for one thing) he stands behind or beneath the perceived world, he is “buried” and thus “blind,” which may be congruent with Luhmann’s stress on the limited perspective of an observer who is simultaneously inside-and-outside the system. And while Luhmann may not want to limit this notion of nothingness-at-the-(subjective)-origin to “nothingness” – he would tend to speak rather of contingency and chaos – in fact there is also ultimately no distinction in Laozi between nothingness and chaos or indeterminacy, between nothingness and the porous (inward or outward) boundary. “There was something formed out of chaos (有物混成, *you wu hun cheng*, ‘there was a thing confusedly formed’) / That was born before Heaven and Earth. / ...” (*Daodejing* 25).

In Laozi's water-rock interaction it is not ultimately clear whether rock is absorbing water and/or water is absorbing rock. Nor is it certain in any case that everything is being absorbed. Perhaps absorbing here really means *selecting from* or *filtering*: this may fit the Luhmannian notion of *selection* as a function of *absorbing the difference between X and Y* or *absorbing the betweenness of X - Y*. But in Chapter 43 Laozi also correlates this pervasively-immanent "action of inaction" (*wei wu wei*) of the Water-Dao with the operation of "teaching without words" (*wu yen zhi jiao*), perhaps "speaking by remaining silent" or "communicating by not communicating." There may not be a difference for Laozi between the praxis of (non-)communication and that of (non-)action, as in the Dao's absorption of its own self-difference, just as there may not ultimately be a difference between speaking and not-speaking, acting and not-acting, and this is because he is taking such a "broad" (*distant*) perspective on the world, one that may be indistinguishable from the world's *innermost* perspective.

But then what about Luhmann's theory (in *Social Systems*) that "meaning" on the level of society is expressed in/as "communication"? It seems that Luhmann is also taking a very "abstract" view of (or perspective on) communication, for although in information theory "meaningful" sounds or signals arise out of (chaotic) background noise they also always (potentially) pass back again into that noise.¹⁸ Is it possible then that Luhmann, like Laozi, is looking at the (social and/or metaphysical) "world" from very far "above," from an extremely abstract perspective which in its "noisiness" is somehow the *Gestalt*-switched inversion or reversal of the blindest, most inwardly-concealed perspective?

Are Luhmann and Laozi both perhaps *equating*, if in somewhat different ways, the purely contingent and in this sense "empty" force (or non-force) of all social interaction, all *human communication* with that of all other (physical, organic, human, social) "operations"? If so, such a "unifying" perspective is also in some sense a radically *limited* (and/or radically *unlimited*) perspective. *Daodejing* 25: "Something formed out of chaos/ . . . I do not yet know its name: I 'style' it 'Dao.'/ If forced to name it, I'd call it 'the Great' (大, *Da*)./ 'Great' means 'to depart';/ 'To depart' means 'to be far away';/ 'To be far away' means 'to return' (反)."

Conclusion: Spontaneity and Simultaneity

In a 1995 essay Luhmann speaks of the need to look (simultaneously) both forward and backward in time in order to get the "whole picture" in one shot (440).¹⁹

¹⁸ Thus the Daoist Zhuangzi wonders if finally we can distinguish (the "sound" of) all human speech (communication, communicated meaning) from (that of) the "wind" or the "peeps of baby birds."

¹⁹ This is because there must be an "orientation to *the unity of difference*, which we will call *distance*."

In “The Paradox of Form” (1999) he mentions the possibility of temporal reversibility, the paradoxical “sameness and difference of beginning and end” and the idea that “form is the simultaneity of sequentiality.”²⁰ If the horizontal, back-and-forth fluctuation or alternating current of *you-wu*, itself timeless as the *spatialization* of time, suggests a simultaneity that precedes temporal order, then the vertical emergence of both *you* and *wu* from a prior origin would seem necessary to any sense of “sequence” or “ordered time.” For on the horizontal-alternation model we cannot mark a beginning-point or ending-point, and thus cannot mark any possible temporal *order*. It seems the vertical dimension (or perspective) would be needed in order to mark the temporal “sequence” of what otherwise remains mere “simultaneity.”²¹ In this way Laozi’s dynamic of *you wu xiang sheng* could be taken as the paradoxical “simultaneity of sequentiality.”

The prehistoric carvings on animal bones mark time by short vertical lines that cut at right angles across a long horizontal line, the latter embodying the linear flow of time. But if time reverses upon itself it will be hard to mark it in this way, the sense of the vertical marks will be unclear—perhaps because we now find ourselves in the middle, at the center of the “circumference” where “the mark and the observer are not only interchangeable, but, in the form, identical” (Spencer-Brown).

“Perfect activity leaves no track behind it; / Perfect speech is like a jade-worker whose tool leaves no mark. / The perfect reckoner needs no [bamboo] counting-slips; / . . . The perfect knot needs neither rope nor twine, / Yet cannot be untied.”
(*Daodejing* 27, Waley 177).

In other words, systems gain distance from information (and possibly from themselves) if they make the distinctions that they use as differences accessible to themselves as a unity” (Luhmann 1995, 440).

²⁰ “Dissolving the paradox into the form of a command brings time into play. (...) The mark is repulsed and attracted by the paradox of the re-entry, as it were, and the world becomes ordered in this interplay of repulsion and attraction. Beginning and end are the same, and not the same; and in between (or: in the meantime) the world achieves its organized complexity. In retrospect it becomes clear that the initial paradox of form already contained a time paradox. The distinction is only a distinction if it provides both sides simultaneously, but the operations and especially the crossing of the boundary back and forth can only be performed sequentially. From a structural point of view, the two-sided form only exists in the temporal mode of simultaneity; operationally considered, however, the two-sided form can only be actualized in consecutive operations since operations that proceed from one side exclude operations that proceed from the other side. The form is the simultaneity of sequentiality.” (Luhmann 1999, 19)

²¹ Luhmann’s “mark” (see previous note) likely refers to Spencer-Brown’s passage in the last chapter of *Laws of Form* (75-76), which I cited near the opening of Section II above (and in note 8). Regarding “marks,” the ancient Chinese logician Kong-son Long says in his notoriously cryptic *Zhi Wu Lun*: “All things are marks (*zhi*, ‘pointings,’ ‘meanings,’ ‘universals’). But marks are not marks (for themselves). If there were no marks in the world, nothing could be called a thing. . . . Marks are what do not exist in the world, but things are what do exist in the world.” The traditional “Platonic realist” reading takes these as universals which, naming things in the world, themselves exist outside the world, unnamed and perhaps ungrounded. (Plato faces this same problem in the later dialogues.) On the other hand, Graham’s “nominalist” reading takes Kong-son Long’s central dilemma to be that when we try to point out the “world” (the totality of things) we can’t point out any “thing” at all and thus can’t point or “mean.” For a discussion of Graham’s interpretation, see Stevenson’s “Meaning Is Not Meaning.”

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