

DOI: 10.14394/eidos.jpc.2022.0019

Kevin C. Taylor
Department of Philosophy
University of Memphis, USA
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3262-4956>
kctylor3@memphis.edu

The Way of Thought and Practice

Review: Poul Andersen,
The Paradox of Being: Truth, Identity, and Images in Daoism
(Leiden, The Netherlands: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), 362 pages.

Philosophy tends to approach Daoism in degrees. One may be introduced to the *Dao de Jing of Laozi* and appreciate the poetic structure and appreciate the virtues of non-coercive action. When one next encounters the writings of Zhuangzi, one is struck by the difference in style, the humor, and often the difficulty in penetrating the meaning of many passages. This is frequently contrasted with Confucian philosophy. The vocabulary, upon first examination appears similar but upon further reading one discovers that not only do these traditions use shared terminology in different way but that their views of reality is stark. This is much more so with the French existentialists and yet Poul Andersen finds sympathetic understanding between Daoism and “philosophies of existence” with regards to the concept of being. Those familiar with the *Dao de Jing* can probably cite passages that Andersen will address as it is unmistakable in Daoism that being is said to come from and depend on non-being. The existentialist tradition has meditated on questions of being and so Andersen’s aim is to undertake an exploration of being in Daoism informed by existentialist methodology.

This review seeks to emphasize the case studies Andersen utilizes in his research. While his methodological approach is informed by existentialist philosophers, his decades of research in Chinese religions provides much of the substance throughout. The book chapters often begin and conclude with reference to a large host of philosophical theories with Badiou often being cited as a major influence on Andersen’s thinking. To reduce such densely sophisticated works to sections results in an unevenness to the individual chapters, but the “case

studies” in Daoist rituals, imagery, philosophy, and secret manuals present a wide selection of how the subject and the subject’s relationship to truth, reality, and being constitute an understanding of being as paradoxical. This ambitious study of Daoist religious practice is particularly welcome in philosophy which rarely goes beyond the two cornerstone texts and less often delves into the religious studies associated with Daoism. Andersen is particularly keen to present Daoism as *both* a philosophy *and* a religion: a “way of thought and practice” (PB, 1). Given the syncretic tradition of East Asia, this book has much to say of Confucian and Buddhist traditions so it is worthy of attention.

In the introduction of the book, Andersen makes clear that his approach to Daoism is focused on ontology (chapters 1–3) and phenomenology (chapters 1–4). The first half of the book sets the framework for his exploration of ontologies in Daoist notions of truth, self, and subject as well as the Daoist concept of *zhen*: “true and real.” To frame the discussion, Andersen employs “European philosophers of existence,” and especially French philosophers Lacan, Deleuze, and Alain Badiou to name a few. Regarding method, Andersen’s approach utilizes “diagonalization,” coined by Georg Cantor (1845–1918) and developed by Badiou. This comparative method promises to explore concepts across different cultures “so that one finds oneself neither on this side nor the other” (PB, 2). It is thus a cross-cultural methodology which, in the case of this book, is characterized by French and Chinese traditions. This cross-cultural approach stands in marked contrast to Roger Ames who is quoted as arguing that American Pragmatism is better than existential perspectives that “often advertise an individualistic stance that does not resonate with the Chinese sensibility” (PB, 14).¹ Leaving aside which author is more convincing, Andersen’s existential approach to Daoism is enticing. It is only natural then that the second half of the book engages with a phenomenological study of Daoist rituals practices, images, and iconography.

In chapter 1, “Truth and Subjectivation,” Andersen begins the chapter by outlining his proposed analysis of Daoist texts and imagery. He begins early in the chapter noting that truth is a concept not in the Confucian *Analects*, but rather in Daoist texts, and even then mostly in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*. Truth and reality, he writes, are words in Chinese that share the same Chinese character (*zhen*) and he asserts that the division of these two words is a result of Western philosophical traditions. As this book will attempt to understand truth in Daoism through a dialogue with Western philosophers of existence, Andersen identifies a commonality in the focus on the subject as the proper vehicle for truth (PB, 13). Here, Andersen is careful to distinguish the self from the subject (the former being descriptive and the latter normative). It is worth noting that Andersen finds inspiration in Kierkegaard for the title of his book, “the paradox of being,” in the duality of self and subject, the finite preexisting self and the new absolute self which is chosen in freedom. Daoism, Andersen informs us, begins with the “ordinary self” (*fanshen*) and has the ultimate goal of a “true and real self” (*zhenshen*). The remainder of this chapter narrows the methodological focus from cross-cultural philosophy: “Chinese thought is best understood in a dialogue with Western ideas” (PB, 14). In this passage and elsewhere, Andersen seeks to set his work apart from David Hall and Roger Ames who, in a 1998 book, dismissed existential philosophies in favor of American Pragmatism as their basis for comparison. Andersen picks up this challenge and seeks to compare Daoist philosophy and religion (as opposed to Confucianism or “Chinese thought”) insisting that “philosophers of existence” offer quite fruitful insights for the understanding of the concepts of truth, the self, and the subject. While the *Inner Chapters of Zhuangzi* deal with the concept of truth (*zhen*) most directly, Andersen’s intent is to cast a wide net by analyzing these concepts in both thought and practice. His arguments are therefore informed by the long history of Daoist writings on the one hand and Daoist religious practices on the other. Any careful reader may be rightly cautious of an ambitious research project that draws on “all

1) Here Andersen cites David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames from their book *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998).

historical periods”² and personal experience. Nevertheless, it is indeed refreshing to read an analysis of Daoism that goes beyond the primary philosophical texts, that takes seriously the practices of religious Daoism, and attempts to bring the reader into dialogue with less commonly taught Daoist practices.

In chapter 2, “Truth and Knowledge,” Andersen explores the Daoist pursuit of truth as anchored in the subject. That is, Andersen asserts that truth is not discovered externally but through internal contemplation, visualization, and evocation of divine beings discussed in later chapters. In this early chapter, Andersen sets the methodological groundwork for Daoist views on truth and knowledge through textual analysis and linguistic usage. Andersen aggregates the writings of Foucault, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Lacan, and Badiou to help explain what he means by truth as a type of being. Andersen rushes through these accounts only to emphasize the ethical notion of truth is represented by the term *cheng*, meaning to be sincere, which is a shared term in Confucianism and is equally important in Daoism, especially with Zhuangzi. This is particularly important in chapter 6. The difference, Andersen explains, is that Confucianism and Mohism emphasized verified truth about empirical reality, but a Daoist pursuit of true and real knowledge is knowledge about true reality manifest in true being. The religious pursuit of the Daoist adept discovers truth through discovery of one’s true self in ritual practice and manifestation of liturgical symbols. Here the true is not to be distinguished from the false but rather the true that Daoism refers to is inseparable from the real. Being anchored in the subject, it is personal and beyond the scope of language and briefly apprehended through the insight experienced in divination with something like an encounter with the divine.

In chapter 3, “The Concept of Zhen: True and Real,” Andersen turns his attention to the concept of “*zhen*” translated as true and real keeping in mind that he sees a similarity with what Kierkegaard calls the “Absolute.” The concept of *zhen* is first traced in the idea of the true self; the goal of Daoism inevitably is that of immortality. Andersen notes that in Daoist rituals, the self undergoes transformation through the visualization of deities in rituals that imply reliance on the substance of the three breaths (*sanqi*) as well as the presence of the Most High Lord Lao. The result is an emergent other power and transformative religious experience that is dualistically internal and external, created and transformed, discovered, and disclosed. Such is the paradox Andersen refers to time and time again. In discussing the concept of substance in Daoism, Andersen contrasts the concept of *zhen* with the concept of “breath” (*qi*) “which is thought to constitute the basic substance of everything and to animate all living beings” (PB, 76). Andersen presents a handful of examples spanning the fourth century BCE through the twenty-first century CE that demonstrate how the concept of *zhen* as “in the world but not of the world.” *Zhen*, he writes, seems to hold a privileged position to *qi* but the distinction he is making is between two aspects of reality with the Way as ontology and the One as phenomenology.

In chapter 4, “Liturgical Symbols and Images,” Andersen “sketches a phenomenology of Daoist ritual, grounded in the ontology of the Dao as absent” (PB, 113). That is to say, he established that Daoism grounds being in absence (the virtue of absence or emptiness as allowing for the transformation or emergence of the ten thousand things of chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing*), (PB, 133)³ within Daoist ritual experience by participants and observers of said rituals. Andersen explores this directly in pages 129–37, and while his assertion that ontology here is grounded absence is itself not disputed among Daoist scholars, his employment of existential philosophy to make his argument is most pertinent when he writes, “the fundamental truth of Daoism is in this gap, that is, in the Way and its manifestation as true and real (*zhen*)” (PB, 130). It is the paradox of being that being arises from nonbeing where existential philosophy shines.

2) “In addition to extensive readings of Daoist texts from all historical periods, the present book relies on several years of observation of, and participation in, Daoist religious practice” (PB, 17).

3) He cites chapter 5 of the *Dao De Jing* as one example.

The remainder of this chapter includes a hefty section exploring ritual images and symbols, their conceptions, visualizations, and phenomenology of religion/religious experience which will inform the later chapters. These areas all demonstrate the, I think, correct justification for comparative philosophy between Daoism and existential philosophy. These sections of chapter four further serve as a helpful guideline to philosophy of religion with Andersen's phenomenological methodology. One of the strengths of his writing is his careful attention to the history concepts in religious studies. Andersen often cites the numerous intellectual giants who inform his work which will be helpful for non-specialists.

That is not to say these sections will be immediately comprehended by most scholars. With regards to the practice of *bugang*, Andersen writes "I shall not provide here a detailed overview of the basic structure and content of this liturgy. For the non-specialist reader, there is convenient access to such knowledge in works by Kristofer Schipper, John Lagerwey, Kenneth Dean, and myself" (PB, 227). Andersen does in fact give a welcome introductory account of Daoist ritual but he is clear that his book is geared toward specialists. Not merely Daoist specialists but also philosophical specialists. Andersen's research utilizes the broad field of French existential philosophy but especially Badiou whom Andersen refers to primarily in the concept of event. Here Andersen tells us that Badiou's concept of event may not be pertinent to the rituals to be described throughout the chapter, only then to proceed and justify that it is indeed pertinent "as something that occurs outside the realm of ordinary knowledge and time" (PB, 122). Andersen raises the objection and dismisses it within two pages; not for the non-specialist indeed.

In chapter 5, "Unity and Identity," Andersen continues his ontological and phenomenological exploration of identity through the concepts of unity and oneness. This chapter utilizes the example of two Daoist gods: Taiyi and Puhua. Historically, these deities found their origins in other religious traditions and have emerged as distinctly Daoist figures of great importance.

The "one source paradigm" is introduced as an original critique offered by Andersen to counter scholars who suggest that some gods find their original source in one and only one source. By way of example, he explains Taiyi's origins in Guayin. Andersen does not dispute this specific charge but the more specific assertion that this influence is a one-to-one ratio. Certainly Andersen is correct that one deity may be inspired by another religion and that inspiration may draw on multiple sources of inspiration. What I find missing in this critique is evidence of scholarship suggesting such a narrow claim. I believe Andersen is correct that multiple confluences would likely be at work, but he does not offer a single name of one scholar who argues for what seems to be a straw man.⁴

A refreshing interstitial history of the Daoist deities Taiyi and Puhua gives the reader some much needed material support for Andersen's thesis. The accounts of these deities are intended to demonstrate the fluid nature of divine identities and their anti-essentialist nature: "indeed, it seems clear that divine identity is constructed in any given context through the oneness or unification of features attributed to a god in that context" (PB, 194). If there is a dichotomy to be had in Daoism, Andersen continues, it is not to be found in yin and yang but rather in *ti* and *yong* as form and function. "the distinction between *ti* and *yong* accounts for an overall dichotomy in the Daoist pantheon" (PB, 202). A similarly dichotomy is also found in the distinction between inner cultivation of the Way and external use of the powers generated (PB, 202–203).

The gods Taiyi and Puhua serve as visualizations for Daoist practitioners to aid them in the path to immortality, join with the Way, and unite with true reality. For instance, one identifies with the god Puhua Tianzun, transcending the distinction between self and other, thereby achieving the state of oneness described as a process of forgetting that reconnects with the writings of Zhuangzi. This process of deification is neither limited to one practitioner nor to one god but is available to those who seek absolute reality with sincerity.

4) Although I would believe that such arguments may exist, I find Andersen's lack of examples conspicuous.

Andersen closes out this chapter with a return to Western philosophical traditions' treatment of images, quickly oscillating from Plotinus to Leibniz and finally landing back on his base of Derrida, Nancy, and Badiou. He weaves a narrative of European traditions and their analyses of images concluding that "the discourse of contemporary European philosophy ... clearly concurs on viewing the real as fundamentally paradoxical" (PB, 228). Daoist ontology is found between being and non-being; the *Dao de Jing* makes this much clear. The imagery of Daoist gods as visual aids for priests and Daoist texts that describe different angles of reality simultaneously exist and cause reality to come into existence. This is the paradox of being manifest throughout Andersen's textual exegesis.

In chapter 6, "Sincerity and Ascent to Heaven," Andersen's case study is on the Daoist ritual known as "The Ascent to Heaven." It is described by Andersen in some detail and involves the priest lying for ten minutes in a trance-like state. Herein, the priest is said to go on a spiritual journey and presents a document, and prayers, to the high gods in heaven. The ontological interpretation of this being that the cosmos is visualized within one's body. This is again the inner/outer (essence and function) distinction that can also be understood as true reality correlating within the body of the priest.

The social identity of Daoist priests is explored through ritual text and secret manuals to interpret the social status of priests within a Daoist community. Andersen finds that ambiguous and contradictory statements are made within these texts and hypothesizes that this may be intentional to allow for individual communities to construct their own hierarchy. Further, the attainment of a high rank may at times be interpreted as unimportant to the priest who receives high rank based on documents showing continued use of lower titles. Andersen does not speculate that this may be a humble performance on the part of the priest but rather a reluctance to pay the fees incurred for rank promotions (a phenomenon I have observed to be true in my own research).

These priest titles designate the rank of the priest on the one hand and "the general status of the priest within the overall hierarchy of priests and divine beings" (PB, 262) on the other. These registers, Andersen explains, list deities attached to the body, a king of a stable of spirits conferred through abilities of talisman creation and visualization of said deities. Andersen adopts an identity-spirit interpretation that serves as a sort of parallel passive presence affiliated with the body of the adept. The imagery of these deities is frequently described as helpful ritual tools with relative importance, since priority is given to the ability of the adept to visualize and evoke the gods; "they seem to be there to mark the presence of the gods, not to become the very reality of the gods" (PB, 272).

This brings Andersen back to the ontological and phenomenological distinction repeated throughout his work. The being of the gods and their appearance (whether textual descriptions of evocation or images of worship for those lacking the adept's ability to properly visualize divine beings) persist as a paradoxical relationship. The gods cannot be represented as images nor seen in the everyday sense of being seen. And yet we are directed to act as if they can be (a theme Andersen highlights throughout his work). Returning to the *Dao de Jing*, Andersen reminds us that being is anchored in non-being: "It stands alone but does not change, ... it moves everywhere without being endangered" (PB, 277).

Andersen's closing remarks directly reject a conclusion as well as summarizing. He speculates on a wide range of positive and negative responses to his work, but he is confident in the facts as he has presented them. Andersen's confidence in his research is evident through the entirety of the book with his excessive use of words like "clearly" and "obviously" which appear throughout all chapters. Andersen clearly thinks he has made a strong case and has let the texts speak for themselves. This is not the case although I do not doubt that Andersen is correct in his scholarship. What he presents is clear to him and perhaps to the niche field of Daoist existential philosophers, but I am skeptical that most readers will agree that what is presented is clear and obvious.

In closing, Andersen returns to again take a swipe at American Pragmatists for asserting that humans are irreducibly social. He does so because of the Daoist dismissal of the social, that pursuit of immortality is fully internal and, of course, an existential pursuit complementary to Kierkegaard. This is where I speculate Andersen will receive the most criticism: his methodological approach of using existential thinkers to the outright rejection of American Pragmatism. This animosity seems rooted in very limited sources and neglects the American pragmatist traditions that embrace existentialism as informed by the works of William James and John McDermott, to name a few. By failing to fully engage in whether pragmatism or existentialism is better for engaging Chinese religion, Andersen seems to be harboring an unknown grudge. This is disappointing for when this animosity crops up, it disrupts a truly interesting historical account of many often under explored characteristics of Daoist rituals and traditions.

The syncretic traditions of east Asia are often dominated by Confucian or Buddhist voices. As such, this book is a welcome contribution. During the course of his work, Andersen likewise sheds light on the interchange of ideas between Buddhism and Daoism, whether through imagery of deities or ritual practices. The existential methodology certainly resonates with the Daoist themes of being and non-being. That said, this book will not be for everyone. Andersen writes from a dual specialization and frequently assumes as much from his audience. The lineage of existential philosophers is simply asserted and the reader is left to largely fend for herself. While he does eventually give necessary context for the Daoist rituals, texts, and divinities, these come later in the text making the book a bit of an uphill battle.

I recommend this book with caveats. A China scholar will find this book very informative whereas a non-specialist will be adrift in Andersen's dynasty hopping. Many China scholars tend to limit their approach to a single dynasty or take care to make clear the problems of comparing texts hundreds of years removed from another. The ambitious goal to cover all historical periods is problematic and yet it is testament to Andersen's prestigious career that he is able and comfortable taking up the onerous task of analyzing works from all time periods. In the end, Andersen's execution is imperfect but admirable.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.