Discourse and perspective in Daoism: A linguistic interpretation of ziran

In Chinese philosophical literature, the term ziran is generally rendered as "spontaneity," "natural," or "self-so" by both Chinese and Western translators. I think that these translations not only miss the point being made in the texts, but actually serve to obscure it.

Herein I propose a different interpretation of ziran—a linguistic interpretation as a specifically Daoist term. Broadly speaking, this essay seeks to re-examine certain presuppositions that we have with respect to Chinese philosophy, particularly Daoism, combining recent philosophical insights with those made available by the sinological community. This essay argues that ziran serves as a basis for rational decisions for action that can be made within daoism. I do not venture to claim that daoism is a rational thought system; rather it contains elements of both rational and arational action. However, as traditional interpretations of Daoism have concentrated on its arational aspects (usually calling them irrational), this essay will focus on the possibilities for rational decision making and action.

My analysis is based on Chad Hansen's Daoist Theory of Language, beginning with his Contrast Theory of Language. The Contrast Theory of Language states that names are created in pairs as opposites. Examples of this are found in the second chapter of the Dao De Jing:

That the whole world knows the beautiful's being deemed "beautiful" is sufficient for "ugly". That the whole world knows the good's being deemed "good" is sufficient for "evil". Thus "having" and "lacking" produce each other. "Difficult" and "easy" complement each other. "Long" and "short" offset each other; "high" and "low" incline toward each other; "note" and "sound" harmonize each other; "before" and "after" follow each other.

The image is of a whole, the fundamental metaphor being that of the "un-carved block" which is divided by a "line" to distinguish between opposites, for example, beautiful and ugly. Such delineation, being, is the process of distinction and naming; when we distinguish and name one thing, we simultaneously distinguish and name its opposite.

Now let us put the Contrast Theory of Language into the more general scheme of the relation between language and reality as found in the Dao De Jing. This is a theory of prescriptive rather than descriptive language. In this theory, language is composed of names, and knowing (knowledge) is having the ability to manipulate and use these names towards a desired end. Thus, it is "know-how" rather than "know-that." According to this Contrast Theory, names come in pairs, and thus "knowing" is knowing the distinction between them. In making a distinction, we create desires and values which in turn lead to actions to fulfill them.

The Zhuang Zi is a source which in its own terms elaborates this Contrast

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Theory, stressing as it does linguistic relativity. This means that there is no fixed relation between the name and the object that it names. The distinctions out of which names grow are not fixed, but are always shifting—the line that divides the whole is not set. The “line” is shifting, according to the Zhuang Zi, because distinctions are always made from a perspective, and since every perspective is different, the distinctions differ with every perspective. The Zhuang Zi illustrates this in its use of indexicals:

What is “this” (shì) is also “that” (bié); what is “that” is also “this”. There they say “that’s it/that’s not” (shì/bié) from one point of view, here we say “that’s it/that’s not” from another point of view.4

Zhuang Zi uses shì/bié, “that’s it/that’s not,” to illustrate both how discriminations arise between opposites and how judgments are invariably made from a perspective. Čí/bǐš, “this here/that there,” is another pair of indexical opposites which operate analogously to shì/bié, and will be important in my theoretical considerations.

In this essay I want to regard the fact that ziran originates and occurs in the pre-Qin daoist canons as being of considerable significance.5 I will analyze the world view of daoism which developed in response to the views of the schools of Confucius, Mo Di, the Dialecticians, and so on. Daoism, as articulated in the Dao De Jing and the Zhuang Zi, rejects these several philosophies in favor of a new approach to the problems in Chinese philosophy. Ziran is part of this creation, for its first appearance as a compound in the corpus is in the Dao De Jing. Hence, ziran seems to be peculiar to daoism in its introduction and development in the classical period.

Daoism uses the linguistically derived notion of ziran as an alternative to the Realistic ways of Confucianism and Mohism, pitting its relativism against the rule-ordered rites and utility of these rival schools. Daoism presents a relativist world view which rejects the hierarchy inherent in institutions and conventions. In this theory I interpret ziran to be “action-discrimination from a particular perspective.” In this sense, it stands in contrast to the other schools’ “action-discrimination from convention (for example, rites, utility).” In daoism, each “part” distinguishes from its own perspective and acts on it, rather than submitting to the established customs of society, which can be artificial to it. Thus, with this theory, we do not just walk our dao; we are continually in the process of creating it.

The standard translations of ziran do not express this creativity, unfortunately suggesting a more quietistic, passive, and fatalistic interpretation. The most common reading of ziran is “spontaneous.” This interpretation might originate from Shen Dao’s proto-Daoism, which is anti-language and anti-knowledge. It postulates a single absolute metaphysical Dao, as opposed to the multiple daos found throughout Chinese classical thought.6 And, of course, it is the Dao so defined (sometimes “Heaven”) that inspires a rather
oxymoronic “determined spontaneity.” Spontaneity, in this view, is not a factor of the object itself, a problem that is implicitly demonstrated in alternative translations such as “natural.” Hence, in the traditional interpretation, humans are distanced from nature, whereas one of the central points of daoism surely is that humans are a part in the composite harmony of nature. This Shen Dao proto-Daoism is further appealed to by traditional scholars to understand classical daoism as a whole, without due cognizance of the development that took place within daoism itself, and within the greater Chinese philosophical tradition.

My theory of ziran offered here places daoism in the context of the classical Chinese philosophical dialectic and relates it to the contending schools of Confucianism, Mohism, and the Dialecticians and, further, entails a serious critique of all Realistic theories of Dao by suggesting a workable alternative to them.

Ziran is central to the daoist world view. In analyzing it theoretically, it should be noted that I am not a prescriptive grammarian of the classical Chinese language. I see relationships between terms in classical Chinese, but no incontrovertible principles of grammar that might define the language separate from the context of the text at hand. Thus, I draw on the etymology and grammar of the terms to suggest an interpretation, and then go to the texts to see if it is borne out philosophically.

To understand how ziran comes to mean “discrimination,” and further “discourse about actions from a perspective,” we must analyze the component characters of the expression.7

Zi first appears in classical Chinese texts as a preposition that is usually translated “from.” In the development of the language through the classical philosophical period, zi is extended as a reflexive adverb roughly analogous to “self” in English. Examining the etymology of the term is important, for it might enable us to discover a commonality among the several renderings of zi. According to the Shuo Wenj lexicon, the character zi means “nose” (bi), with the character being a pictograph representing a nose. The Qing-dynasty Duan Yucai commentary states that zi is rarely used as “nose.” From this I conclude that the “from” and “self” meanings of zi are metaphorical extensions of the literal meaning of “nose.”

The nose is a common metaphor in popular Chinese culture. It refers to one’s point of view—Chinese point to their nose, rather than their heart, in referring to their perspective. In traditional China, a common amputory punishment was the cutting off of a criminal’s nose, signifying that this person no longer had a human perspective, and thus was not entitled to its benefits. Both “from” and “self” have developed from this sense of “nose”—“from” in a wider sense of perspective, and “self” in a more defined sense.

Grammatically, zi as “from” requires an object following it; if it is the adverbial “self,” zi should be followed by a stative verb. As zi is followed by
the stative verb ran, the first choice in interpretation should be "self." But "self" is burdened in English. It tends to conjure up images of ego as residence for autonomous individuality as the primary focus of discourse. I choose to avoid these connotations, for such individuation and autonomy is problematical in the classical Chinese tradition.

According to Hansen's Mass Noun Hypothesis, classical Chinese is composed of mass nouns, such as "sand" or "water" in English, which carry with them no inherent individualization as do the count nouns of modern English. Mass nouns are more adequately described as representing a part/whole relation. In classical Chinese all things are "parts," and all things are composed of parts which extend in an unbounded way large and small, qualitatively and quantitatively. For example, the term ren, which stands for human, refers to all things that are human, ranging from the human population of the Earth, to the human society of China, to an individual human being, to a human toenail, to a molecule within that toenail, and so on.

To avoid the emphasis on individuals, particularly human individuals, I wish to focus on the reflexive meaning of zi. "Reflexive actions" are those which issue forth from the perspective and come back to the perspective, allowing it to make decisions in a circular process of self-creation. Following this, I designate zi as "from," keeping in mind that it is from a perspective—a perspective which is relative in terms of size and scope to the possibilities afforded by the situation in question.

Furthermore, there is an important change in zi when it is found in ziran. It makes the leap from zi in the directional sense of "from" and "self," to a cognitive zi of perspective which includes the whole history of the "viewer." And when we begin thinking and distinguishing in this way, we realize that everything has such a perspective. This brings out the relativity of language and action, and attests to the multiplicity of perspectives that combined make up our environment.

This is a departure from the view of many Chinese scholars, who invariably separate zi and ran, translating zi as zi ji, "oneself." The etymology of the second term, ran, is problematic. It originally meant "to burn" and has since been replaced by ran in this distinction. In the development of the language, the term acquired a quite different meaning which is very common in classical literature: ru ci, "like this." The term further appears to have developed into an affirmation, something like (it is so = ) "yes, it's like this." But for the time being we will stay with "like this," for it encompasses a greater scope, and thus is more simple and elegant.

When using the term ran, we already presuppose that there is a discourse and a process of distinction. For if there is "like this," then there must also be "like that." Hence ran represents the ability to distinguish and assign names and to act from them.

In pre-Qin literature, ran was used to distinguish between alternatives in
a way analogous to the use of shi/fei. The difference between ran and shi was expressed most clearly by the neo-Mohists. Whereas shi/fei distinguished between names, ran/buran distinguished between strings of names. Since strings of names contain “verbs,” ran distinguishes between actions (“ride horse/not ride horse”), while shi only designates things (“horse/nonhorse”). Hence ran represents the capability and act of distinguishing and assigning names to actions.

This ability to distinguish is further explicable by reference to the terms dao and de. I translate dao as “discourse” rather than by the traditional metaphysical interpretation of “The Way.” In so doing, I wish to underscore the verbal primacy of dao as a mode of action that entails communication among the parts constituting the event. I extend the meaning of discourse metaphorically beyond human speech to the interrelations more generally in nature, from simply human communication to a communion of all parts.

Discourse, or more particularly “prescriptive discourse,” is the act of “communicating,” which creates a mode, and it is also a mode that has been “communicated.” Further, in the act of communication and the deference it entails, it establishes dao as a model. “Discourse” is a useful translation in that it also connotes the multiplicity of dao, being consistent with the ethical notions of dao found in the other classical traditions.

De represents the unique particularity out of which a perspective comes. We appeal to de, rather than convention, when we are distinguishing from our perspective. The de grows out of a greater discourse, through a process of its own unique discourse. De starts from and uses existing historical discourse to extend discourse. Through this process of discourse from our de, we discriminate and thus create discourse.

It is when the zi is added to ran that the distinctions are judged. Thus, ziran means “from a perspective making distinctions among actions like this.” The part is involved in a “personal” discourse to make continuously action-distinctions, and then to choose an appropriate path based on the continually changing conditions that surround the part and the basic organic tendencies—the knowledge and desires—characteristic of the part.

Now we must step back and put this into the perspective of the Daoist Theory of Language. The term ziran comes in at the stage of distinguishing and then acting. If we distinguish from our own perspective, we will reflect our desires and propensities; if our distinction is mediated through society’s conventional perspectives, we will take on the desires and actions of society, which in some measure are foreign to us, and which to the daoists, consequently, are artificial and corrupt.

Using conventions to discriminate and relying on tradition to indicate the correct path is Confucian; distinguishing and acting according to our organic desires as found in each of our de is daoist. But the matter is not this simple. Ziran is in a polar relationship with “conventional action.” There is no abso-
lute ziran or “not-ziran,” only discriminations and actions which are more according to ziran or less according to ziran. Yet by realizing and thus utilizing the possibility of ziran, we continually deconstruct our socialization of institutional and conventional sets of distinction, and then recreate our organic desires and needs into a more “personal” set of distinctions according to our de.

The *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuang Zi* reflect this process of awakening and change. Ziran in them is involved in the shift in Chinese philosophy from its Heaven-based morality in the early part of the Warring States period (dominated by Confucius, Mo Di, Shen Dao, and Yang Zhu) to the second phase of classical Chinese philosophy in the latter half of the Warring States period which was more concerned with language and logic, as seen in the School of Names and the neo-Mohists. The *Dao De Jing*, given its fruitful ambiguity, is not clear on where it stands in this dialogue: it can and certainly has been interpreted as an absolutist metaphysical system. This essay stands as a corrective to these metaphysical interpretations, for throughout the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuang Zi*, ziran shows development as a linguistic term which is most radically found in the Zhuang Zi’s sophisticated nominal relativist outlook.

In the five occurrences of ziran in the *Dao De Jing*, as everywhere in classical Chinese, there are ambiguities in the grammar and terms which make interpretation and translation difficult. Here one point affects four out of the five chapters which include ziran. It is the question of the apparent missing subject of many of the passages. Since subjects can be understood from the context or the structure of classical Chinese, many passages do not explicitly mention them. Thus, we have to perform an act of interpretation to decide who or what Lao Zi is writing about. The specific problem that we encounter here is whether the passages should be taken as commands to a ruler, or as a description of a general situation having prescriptions directed at all. Both traditionally and in modern scholarship, interpreters have generally chosen to take the passages as prescriptions directed at a ruler. Angus Graham compares the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuang Zi* by stating that the *Dao De Jing* was directed primarily to a ruler, while the Zhuang Zi was for people more generally. This seems to hold true in the passages that we are dealing with, but if they are reexamined with the hypothesized meaning of ziran in mind, then in each of the passages an alternate interpretation more consistent with the “perspectival action-discrimination” hypothesis is just as felicitous.

There is a similar problem with the term dao which leads to parallel interpretations: dao has metaphysical implications as in traditional interpretations, and it also suggests discourse, as in the linguistic interpretation described above. Even though this essay is primarily a linguistic interpretation of the term ziran, I will initially present both interpretations where applicable,
because both the terms ziran and dao were still evolving in the Dao De Jing, and thus are attended in some places by metaphysical connotations.

The Dao De Jing is generally accepted to be a work edited long after it was written, and thus the order of the chapters does not necessarily represent an order of development. Here we will analyze chapter 25 first, since it is central to metaphysical notions of dao and ziran, and presents perhaps the greatest challenges to my notion of ziran.\textsuperscript{14}

There was something heterogeneously formed,
Predating Heaven and Earth in its birth.
Soundless, formless, it stands solitary and does not change.
It revolves without pause.
I do not know its name;
Constrained, I would designate it “dao/discourse,”
And if forced to assign it a name,
I would call it “Great”.
“Great” means “passing”,
“Passing” means “distance”,
And “distance” means “returning”.
Thus, the dao/discourse is Great;
Heaven-Nature is Great;
Earth is Great;
And humans are also Great.
In this universe, there are four “Greats”,
And humans occupy one of them.
Humans take Earth as their model;
Earth takes Heaven-Nature as its model;
Heaven-Nature takes dao/discourse as its method;
And the dao/discourse takes ziran as its method.\textsuperscript{15}

In chapter 25 we encounter the first problem in our interpretation of the term “dao.” Traditionally this chapter is taken to be an explanation of the origin and the force of the metaphysical Dao. But this Dao is not categorial as it otherwise appears, because it now follows something which has been distinguished from it, namely, ziran, or at least it uses ziran as its method. This can be taken as the borderline between the primitive metaphysical Dao reminiscent of Shen Dao, and a linguistic dao of discourse. This citation of ziran, in addition to challenging the absoluteness of the Dao, also begins a discourse from a perspective (although solely from the perspective of the Dao at this point), and opens the way for the myriad things to do the same, for they already “emulate” the Dao.

The traditional interpretations accept that ziran is a process, a method rather than an entity—yet dao is still entified. My alternative interpretation of chapter 25 sees both dao and ziran as methods that a composite whole of nature uses in its action and interaction. The “discourse” in this chapter is the greater communion of parts that constitute this composite whole of nature.

This interpretation of dao and ziran as method for the various parts which
make up a whole, is evident throughout this chapter. The first clause, “There was something heterogeneously formed” (a thing formed by many things), presupposes this distinction. The statement of returning (yuan yue fàn*) can be the notion of returning to our own perspective after being drowned in the exterior conventional perspectives of rulers and rites.

The final four clauses make the point most clearly. First the composite whole is realized: humanity looks to the broader context of Earth as a model, then Earth looks to the broader context of Nature (the cosmos) as a model. The composite whole of Nature emerges through a process. The discourse-dao, which is the communion of parts within Nature, is this process. This dao of communion interrelates each part by entailing action-discrimination from each part’s perspective as its method of interaction. Thus ziran is used as the method for a harmonious interrelation of parts within the cosmos.

Roger T. Ames and Rhett Y. W. Young translate chapter 17 in the following way:

The most excellent [ruler]—the people do not know that he exists;
The second most excellent—they love and praise him;
The next—they fear him;
And the worst—they look on him with contempt.
When the integrity [of the ruler] is inadequate, there will be those who do not trust him.
Relaxed, he [the ideal ruler] prizes his words.
When his accomplishments are complete and the affairs of state are in order, The common people all say, “We are naturally like this (ziran)”.

In this chapter it seems quite clear that these are instructions to a ruler who wishes to be “ideal.” If such a ruler sets up a system of government where he16 did not interfere (“the people do not know that he exists”) and does not issue commands (“he prizes his words”), then the common people would be unfettered and thus would be able to accomplish things through ziran, by making distinctions based on their own perspective and acting on them. As translated by Ames and Young, however, the notion of ziran is not given full force. The common people are still relying on a ruler to set up the system whereby they can act of their own accord. But the fact is that the chapter does not refer to a ruler in any explicit way, and can be interpreted without it:

The highest—is to not know you have it;
Next one—love and praise it;
Next one—fear it;
Next one—ridicule it;
When trust is insufficient in it,
There will be [those] who do not trust in it.
Relaxed, they treasure their words.
Accomplishments completed, affairs ordered,
The common people all say: “We have perspectival action-discrimination.”
With this translation the ambiguity of the chapter is maintained, thus leaving it much more open to interpretation. The antecedent of “it” in the above passages could be either ziran or discourse-dao. Again, there are no fetters to constrain the people; in this translation there is no hint of a ruler, government, or structure of any kind. The people live and prosper according to ziran.

Chapter 23 continues along the same theme as chapter 17, but also branches off, for it can accommodate both of the ambiguities mentioned above—of the indefinite subject and the different interpretations of the term dao. As Ames and Young translate:

Seldom issuing commands is in accordance with the natural [ziran].
Hence a whirlwind does not last for the duration of a morning,
And torrential rains do not persist for the duration of a day.
Who causes them to be like this?
Heaven and Earth [tiandi—the world].
If Heaven and Earth are unable [to express themselves] for long periods of time,
How much less is man able to!
Therefore, those who devote themselves to the dao
Are one with the dao;
Those who devote themselves to] de
Are one with de.
Those who lose them
Are one with the loss of them.
For those who become one with the dao,
The dao is pleased to accept them;
For those who become one with de;
The de is pleased to accept them;
For those who become one with the loss of them,
Loss is also pleased to accept them!
When the integrity [of the ruler] is inadequate,
There will be those who do not trust him.

The first question of interpretation appears in the first line—whether to translate yan as “commands” or as “words/speaking.”17 If it is interpreted as “issuing commands,” then it introduces the notion of ruler. When this ruler does not speak, then the particular's perspective can be realized without external coercion. Hence, the idea of “making distinctions based on a part's perspective” is possible and fitting here, but it is not complete, for it is still tempered by the presence of an overlord who potentially has veto power.

My alternative interpretation is as follows: the first two characters, xi yan, can be translated more literally as “seldom speaking” or “few words.” This, then, would be the consequence of ziran in that if everything is making its own distinctions from its own perspective, then words would not be necessary to the same degree, and actually would be potentially detrimental.

Through the rest of the chapter, the process of ziran is reconfirmed by appeal to examples of nonhuman discourse and discrimination, such as wind
and rain. Next are dao and de. If these are read as the metaphysical dao and de, they do not bring clarity to the situation. If we designate them “discourse” and “unique particularity” as stated in the theoretical section of this essay, then it is consistent with the interpretation of ziran as “the ability of each part to discriminate actions from its own perspective.”

This interpretation is consistent with the rest of the chapter in that the things or people that are devoting themselves to dao and de are the myriad things, not a ruler. And the last two lines, which, in the Ames and Young translation, refer again to the ruler, could be translated as in chapter 17: “When trust is insufficient in it [the world], there will be [those] who do not trust in it.” Whether we choose one interpretation or the other, the essential meaning of ziran is clear: the choice of interpretation only affects it in degree.

The force of this linguistic explanation of ziran is further borne out in chapter 51. I again take dao to stand for “discourse,” de “unique particularity,” and ziran “perspectival action-discrimination”:

Discourse engenders it [ziran];
Unique particularity nurtures it;
The physical world gives form to it,
Then the environment completes it.
Therefore of the myriad things none but venerate the discourse and honor their unique particularity.
Venerating the discourse and honoring their unique particularity,
Now none command them [myriad things],
They make perspectival action-discrimination [ziran] constant.
Therefore discourse engenders it,
Unique particularity cultivates it.
It is nourished and developed;
It is stabilized and pacified;
It is provided for and sheltered.
It is engendered, but not “owned”.
It is assisted, but not dependent.
It is nourished, but not directed (controlled).
This is called the abstruse power.

With this translation, chapter 51 outlines in a coherent way the origin, development and force of ziran. Actually, the terms themselves are “defined” here. Dao and de are combined to form ran, the act of distinction, which is then located in the physical world and the environment by adding the zi, or perspective, as the text says “completing” it. Dao and de do not command things. They cannot, for they themselves constitute the process in which there is an interdependence and mutuality among particulars. Once the perspectival action-discrimination has begun, it continues independently in a manner indicated in the remainder of the chapter. The process of ziran provides the part with care and what it otherwise requires, without placing it in an inferior position, for the part is in fact in control of its own situation. The last line brings us back to the origins. The capacity of each of us as part to distinguish ourselves is de; our de is our expression of dao. It is a mystery because it is the
bottom line; inquiry cannot carry us beyond the presencing of the particular de.

In chapter 64 there is a question of textual dislocation. Commentators seem to agree that the last thirty-three characters of the chapter are separate from those which precede them. These two sections discuss different aspects of daoism with no apparent transition, and since it is the latter section which contains ziran, we will confine our discussion to it.\(^{18}\)

\[
\ldots \text{the sages desire not to desire,} \\
\text{And do not value articles difficult to acquire.} \\
\text{They study not studying,} \\
\text{And restore that which the common people have passed over.} \\
\text{In order to assist the perspectival action-discrimination of the myriad things,} \\
\text{They dare not deem.}
\]

This passage is also consistent with the theory of ziran presented here. The sages mentioned are not Confucian sages, but daoist sages who evidence all of the daoist paradoxes of desiring not to desire, and studying not to study. What they are not desiring and not studying are things which were never theirs in the first place—the objects of conventional desires and conventional knowledge that attend the conventional perspective. It is their organic disposition—organic desires and knowledge the common people have passed over in embracing the social order advocated by the so-called sage kings which daoist sages work to restore. Daoist sages do not dare to “deem”\(^{19}\) the world into static names, because that would be imposing their perspective on other things. “Deeming” is taken in contrast to ziran, and thus would be contrary to assisting in the development of perspectival action-discrimination of the myriad things. Here I take the myriad things to be the full complement of all of the phenomena in the world, and thus this passage asserts a notion of relativity that is familiar to us from our reading of the Zhuang Zi. One could argue that the ziran of the myriad things is still under the guidance of the sage who could choose to disrupt it by his action, but this reference would seem to emphasize a particular sort of nonaction (noninterference) and mutuality, for the sage “dare not deem.”

These chapters from the Dao De Jing demonstrate a development of ziran which is also to be found in the Zhuang Zi. Ziran is mentioned seven times in the Zhuang Zi, starting with the passage below from chapter 5:

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\text{Zhuang Zi said, “Taking things as either right or wrong [shìfēi] is what I call zeal [qíng]. What I mean by being without zeal is that people do not inwardly wound their persons by preferences, but that they take as constant relying on ziran (perspectival action-discrimination), and are not concerned to overdo the process.”}^{20}
\]

In this passage Zhuang Zi is talking with Hui Shi, from the School of Names, about the distinction between nature and humanity. Humans, Zhuang Zi argues, are characterized by qíng—single-minded zeal—which
leads them to distinguish in an exclusive and therefore oppressive way: to choose a single right or wrong, forcing their own perspective. This inwardly wounds us in excluding other perspectives and the value judgments they produce. The Zhuang Zi, then, takes qing and the attendant imposition of shi/fei as the negative aspects of these two concepts. Specifically, Zhuang Zi does not wish to discard shi/fei itself, but the inclination to impose a single shi/fei and the culture and customs that grow out of this exclusivity. He is rejecting this shi/fei, which is characteristic of corrupt human society, and appealing to the fruitful multiplicity of shi/fei in the greater context of nature. This is demonstrated by Zhuang Zi's explicit rejection earlier in the story of society's imposed "virtues" of courtesy, duty, knowledge, good will, and honesty. With these "virtues," which become a part of us by our living in a conventional society, we again wound ourselves. Zhuang Zi leaves this behind and roams off, appealing to the greater context of Nature, where he "constants" (chang*) the following of ziran (using it as his method), liberating himself from the knowledge and desires which are the result of the conventional perspective. Zhuang Zi, conversely, generates knowledge and desires according to his perspective—in this case the perspective of Zhuang Zi the human. The character for "human" is not specifically mentioned in the text, implying that the liberation and development through ziran can be extrapolated to include all particulars.

Throughout the Inner Chapters, Zhuang Zi outwardly neglects the topic that was central in the Warring States period, and which even dominates the Dao De Jing: how best to govern the people. Instead, he is preoccupied with the appropriate disposition of the particular person. Perhaps this is due to his stress on relativity and the many-sidedness of choices in every situation—he might have felt that even asking how to govern well was in fact to beg the question. Indeed, we should not search for rules and rulers, and thus equate politics with government, but should concentrate on the politics of living out our lives as particular perspectives in community.

Chapter 7 is a compilation of the sparse references in the Inner Chapters to government. Below is a passage that contains ziran. It is in a story about how a person named "Heaven-rooted" (tian gen*) disturbs "No-named-person" (wu ming ren*), who is engaged in "ecstatic roaming," to ask about good government. The section that I quote is No-named-person's response, which he would only give after being pestered:

Where you let your heart-mind roam in the bland, blend your energies with the tranquil, and go along with the ziran of things without entertaining selfish motives with respect to them, the world will be properly ordered.

Here, No-named-person does not speak of governing, but of what politics is in its most basic sense—the relation and interrelation of people (or parts) in a social ecosystem which includes nature. He first talks of the "bland" and the
“tranquil” in contrast to heart-minds and energies that are full—full of conventional distinctions. Hence there is an emptying of heart-mind (see the Dao De Jing, chapter 3) that is preliminary to participation in the process of ziran, and which permits us in this process to appreciate the more organic flavors and activity constituting our environment. With the part/whole implications of ziran, even though each part (or “thing”—wu here) moves from its own perspective to constitute its own whole, the myriad perspectives are all interrelated and mutually entailing. Hence, selfishness has no reference in this system. And thus, with this interacting and cooperation, the world will be more organically ordered.

The next quotation is from chapter 14:

Perfect music must first respond to the needs of humans, and accord with the reason of Heaven, proceed by the Five Virtues, and blend with spontaneity [ziran].

Scholarly consensus has it that the thirty-five characters which constitute this passage, for reasons of style and textual redaction, are a commentary of Guo Xiang which was interpolated into the text. If I were to accept this passage as authentically in the Zhuang Zi, it would cause complications in the theory presented here. It is, however, consistent with what we know of the balance of Guo Xiang’s commentary on the Zhuang Zi, in that Guo Xiang was primarily a Confucian interpreting the text in an effort to form a synthesis of Confucianism and Daoism. The parallel construction of the passage equates ziran specifically with human affairs, the principles of Heaven, and the Five Virtues. The reference to the latter three terms is consistent with the story, for the Yellow Emperor is explaining how he first played his music in a “strict formal performance which inspired the Confucian virtues.” Ziran is not appropriate here, since the parallel terminologies refer to distinctions (human/Heaven) and customs (Five Virtues) which grow out of a lack of perspectival action-discrimination. Thus, in terms of an analysis of the place of the term ziran in the text of the Zhuang Zi, this instance of ziran should be disregarded.

The next citation of ziran is within the same anecdote as the last reference, but it is found in the text itself rather than in Guo Xiang’s commentary. It is important to note that Graham characterizes the chapter that contains this story as “Unrationalising the way,” for all the stories included appeal to mysticism, to the ineffable, and are thus concerned with the limits of language.

The story here involves the Yellow Emperor explaining his music to Cheng of the North Gate. The music is divided into three performances. The first one, as noted above, is formal in that it imposes itself on nature and is therefore artificial. The second performance is spontaneous and unordered, and thus confusing to the listener, who fails to understand it and finally gives up.
The problem is that the listener is still imposing his human perspective onto the notes, when the music in fact has a perspective of its own.

The last performance is a dialectical synthesis of the first two extremes, which "breaks out of the dichotomy of order and license." As the Yellow Emperor states:

I played it again with notes that had purpose, attuning them with the command of ziran (perspectival action-discrimination). This passage is a statement of how even the notes in a song all have their own perspectives: they are not subject to anything, neither an imposed nature nor the rebellion against that imposed nature—they represent discourse and discrimination from their own perspective. It is the attuning of these parts that composes the perfect performance. This point is reiterated in the poem that follows this passage, which attempts to describe the indescribable performance; for example:

It moves without direction,
Resides in mystery [dark and obscure]... It does not submit to any note as norm.

The performance moves without any imposed direction, or the sole direction of any one note ("part") within it. The direction that the performance has is the emergent coordination of the participating directions. It resides in mystery because, looking at it from any one perspective, we cannot predict where it will go. It is a mystery to us, and it is a mystery to itself (or better, "itelves") because the discourse and discrimination are constantly being negotiated. This, then, is the relativity of Zhuang Zi.

The fifth quotation of ziran in the Zhuang Zi occurs in a story called "Menders of Nature," which is considered a statement of daoist anarchism. In the story, the sage first describes the things necessary for an ideal society, then goes on to describe the ideal society of old. This ideal society was harmonious and prosperous. The following passage for analysis suggests the reason for this state of affairs:

Even if humans have knowledge, they will not have any use for it. It is this that is called utmost oneness. During this era nobody interfered with things, and they took as constant perspectival action-discrimination.

The society has "un-developed" to such a point that knowledge is no longer necessary, for knowledge in this case denotes the imposed knowledge of a conventional perspective. Nobody interfered with things because they did not have the artificial knowledge which promotes artificial desires, and which ultimately leads to unnatural actions.

All of this is avoided, for they "constant" the process of ziran, which then results in knowledge, desires, and actions which are organic to them as integral to their own perspective.
This quotation is followed by the story of the decline of society into "civilization" and its ills, expressed in the linguistically related terms "perception" (making a distinction) and "knowing" (knowing a distinction). Thus, the world fell into violent disorder precipitated by the contention which attends conventional distinctions.

Ziran next appears in chapter 17, but I do not take it to be a compound term, and hence it does not concern us here.33

The last instance of ziran appears in chapter 31, the story of the "Old Fisherman," as a quote from him:

The rites are what the custom of the times has established. The genuine [zhen\(^\text{a}\)] is the means by which we draw upon nature; this is perspectival action-discrimination, and it is irreplaceable. Therefore, sages taking nature as their model value the genuine, and are untramelled by custom. Fools do the opposite; incapable of taking nature as their model they fret about humans, ignorant of how to value the genuine, they timidly let themselves be altered by custom, and so are unsatisfied.34

Here, the Old Fisherman is explaining to Confucius the nature of zhen, the genuine. As we see above, the genuine stands in contrast to the rites. The rites are contrived conventions that discipline each generation, whereas the genuine is within us, like de, and though its changes are continuous, we cannot perceive them. We take the genuine to be characteristic of the organic knowledge and desire that exist before knowledge and desire based on conventional discriminations. (There are numerous examples of the genuine in the text which suggest this.) The genuine is an expression of nature rather than human civilization; nature is not separate from us, for as "parts" we not only compose nature, but we are nature. The only way to be genuine is through the process of perspectival action-discrimination. Without ziran, we are forced back into the conventional perspective and the embellishments that it produces.

The sages take nature as their model, as an expression of their extending beyond human civilization, recognizing that as humans they are also parts of nature. Thus, they value the genuine, for it comes from within themselves, and are not restrained by customs which are a function of someone or something else's perspective. The fools cannot separate themselves from convention, and, hence, are unable to know the genuine.

Thus, this passage distinguishes between the artificial and the genuine, conventional discrimination and ziran.

My interpretation of ziran in terms of the Daoist Theory of Language leads to both historical and political conclusions. In the traditional history of Chinese philosophy and language, the term ziran has been used to designate and describe metaphysical forces. When something is distinguished as ziran, with ziran interpreted as "spontaneous," "natural," or even "self-so," that object is removed from discourse. We cannot analyze and otherwise consider
entities which are "spontaneous" or "natural," for these terms designate things that are beyond our control to influence and change; they are axiomatic. This traditional interpretation of the term leads directly to ziran's modern Chinese meaning of "physical nature" in addition to what things "naturally" are.

Yet, as I have shown, ziran comes from a different branch of the Chinese philosophical tradition. It is part of the latter half of the Warring States period, where thinkers were concerned with developing logic and language. The linguistic interpretation of ziran places it within our world and designates it as an ability that all of us use. Rather than being "natural" and "spontaneous," our discriminations and actions are "organic." As opposed to "natural," which suggests static states, "organic" denotes a process of growth and decay, of life and death, in which there is continual negotiation to maintain and develop our unique particularity. This interpretation shifts the import of daoism away from the metaphysical and certain "quietistic" assumptions towards an active critique of the society and a positing of a different way, or ways.

In examining what the daoists were arguing for rather than arguing against, we can see that the consequences of this interpretation of ziran and daoism are indeed political: there can be order without an orderer, a ruler. Each part has its own unique basis of judgment and action, yet this does not lead to chaos. It leads to a form of anarchism in which there is human-human and human-nature interrelation, not atomization and separation: all the parts coexist and cooperate within the gradations of composite wholes. This is not politics in the colloquial sense of elections and laws, but politics in the more basic sense of harmonious interrelation and interdependence of parts in human society as well as in the larger compound of nature.

Ziran as presented in this interpretation establishes a distinction between the artificial and the genuine in judgment and suggests a method whereby we can disengage from the societal conventions that are inherently restricting, and thus liberate ourselves to create our lives with discourse expressive of the genuine de within us, to live out our days in satisfaction.

NOTES

1. Please note the juxtaposition here of an upper-case "D" and a lower-case "d." This shuffling of cases contradicts stylistic convention in English, where proper nouns such as "Daoism" are capitalized. With ziran as explained in this essay, style is a philosophical concern; we are urged to question conventions, and reevaluate them according to our perspective, using those conventions which accord with our de, and discarding those which do not. This act of interpretation is particularly vital in reading a Chinese text which itself does not rely on such conventions as capitalization to set one term out from another—importance and centrality come from interpretation of the content and style of the surrounding text. Here I make distinctions from the
perspective of this essay by writing relativist "daoism" in English with a lower-case "d" and absolute "Daoism" with an upper-case "D": Daoism is more of a singular system, a "privileged discourse" (as are Confucianism and Mohism), and thus it is appropriate to mark this exclusive distinction with an upper-case "D."

2. The following section about the Daoist Theory of Language is based on the theory presented primarily in chapter 3 of Chad Hansen's *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983). I am greatly indebted to Professor Hansen for answering my many questions, and commenting on this essay in various stages of its development. The interpretation and use of his theory is my own, and I, of course, take full responsibility for it.

3. Ibid., p. 70.


5. The only other places in which it is used in the pre-Qin philosophical corpus are in later works: the *Xun Zi* and the *Han Fei Zi*, beginning in the *Han Fei Zi* with references to the *Dao De Jing*. I consulted the Harvard-Yenching Concordance Series to verify this, with the exception of Han Fei and Shen Dao, for which I used: Han Fei, *Han Fei Zi suoyin*, Zhou Zhongling*, and others, eds. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Publishers, 1982); P. M. Thompson, *The Shen Tzu Fragments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

6. This is the traditional interpretation of Shen Dao, which is based on the "Tianxia" chapter (33) of the *Zhuang Zi*. Paul Thompson argues this interpretation, specifically as found in Feng Youlan's [Fung Yu-lan] *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, which relies so heavily on the *Tianxia* chapter to the exclusion of the *Shen Tzu Fragments* (Thompson, *Shen Tzu*, pp. 3–7). Hence, perhaps Shen Dao has been historically misinterpreted as well. But that is not the issue here; I am using the traditional interpretation of Shen Dao to bring out the traditional interpretation of Daoism and *ziran*.

7. I would like to thank Angus Graham for his comments, which prompted a reworking of this theoretical section.


9. Chen, *Zhuang Zi*; Chen Guying, *Lao Zi zhuyi ji pingjiea*, rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Publishers, 1984); Jin Rongwo, *Lao Zi "ziran" zhuxuezhong "wuwei" zhi gongneng* (Taipei: n.p., 1975), p. 109. Jin Rongwo translates *ziran* into *ziji ruci* (ibid., p. 112), which is essentially the standard translation "self-so" in English. Perhaps Jin is working to separate the classical distinction from the modern one of "physical nature," for he stresses the point that *ziran* is not a substance *shiti* (ibid., p. 108). I, as well as most Western commentators, have taken this for granted.


14. In the *Ciyuan* entry for *ziran*, it specifically lists the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Dao De Jing* as the first historical citation even though it is also written in chapters 17 and 23.

15. Ch'en Ku-ying [Chen Guying], *Lao Tzu: Text, Notes, and Comments*, trans. and adapted by Rhett Y. W. Young and Roger T. Ames (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1977), p. 142 (my retranslation). All subsequent citations from the *Dao De Jing* are from this edition; I will hereafter only cite the chapter number. Unless otherwise stated, I have revised the translations.

16. I use the masculine pronouns not in the generic sense, but in recognition that classical Chinese philosophy was written exclusively by men. It should be noted, however, that I only need to use the gender-specific pronouns when I talk of singular action, which is characteristic of the absolute metaphysical interpretations which I critique. In my interpretations it is more appropriate to speak in plural forms, which in English are not gender specific.

The words of Confucius are *tian he yan zai* (Shisan jing zhushu, Yuan Jiaoke, ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Publishers, 1980), p. 2526) or "How can Heaven then speak?" (my translation). Professor Chan seems to be relating the two very different terms *tian* and *ziran*.

18. Ch'en, *Lao Tzu*, p. 272; Professor Ch'en quotes Yan Lingfeng, who argues that these thirty-three characters should be separate.

19. "Deem" is a translation for "wei*an*." Wei is usually translated "to act" or "to make." Wei is here considered linguistically as a naming and judging—actions which set the terms of discourse from without—interfering: the opposite of *ziran*. Deem represents this notion of *wei* well; according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* it means "to judge" or "to advocate"—both of which are actions. These actions interfere because they require ceding our decision making, our judging, to someone else—these verbs require an object, and we are that object. The secondary definitions of deem as "to rule," "to administer," and "to judge or think (in a specified way) of a person or thing" reinforce the position that deem is an action imposed from without in interference.


21. Ibid., p. 81; A. C. Graham, *Chuang-tzu: Textual Notes* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1981), pp. 20–22; Graham feels that this section of the *Zhuang Zi* has suffered severe textual dislocation, and thus has proposed a radical reconstruction using both the *Zhuang Zi* and the *Lie Zi*.

22. Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, p. 95 (20/7/10–11).


24. Chen, *Zhuang Zi*, p. 368; Chen quotes from four other commentators who state that these characters are a commentary from Guo Xiang on the basis that there are editions as important as the *Dao Zanga* which do not include this passage. This passage also in many important ways mirrors the passage that precedes it in the text (Graham, *Chuang-tzu Notes*, p. 44; Graham also leaves out these characters on the basis of Chen's annotation).

25. Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Derk Bodde, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 173; Fung states that both Wang Bi and Guo Xiang honored Confucius as the greatest sage. He also states that they were "critics of them [Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi] and modifiers of their ideas" (ibid., p. 175). I have since conducted research on the *Zhuang Zi Commentaries* of Guo Xiang, research that calls this traditional interpretation into question based on textual and philosophical inconsistencies and the problem of authorship. I hypothesize that Guo actually had two parallel and contradictory philosophies: one which is a development of daoism and the other which is like Confucianism. Here I would say that this passage comes from the Confucian strand of Guo's commentary. But until I work out all of the bugs in this interpretation, I must rely on the traditional interpretation of Guo Xiang's *Zhuang Zi Commentaries*. The passage in question is an inimitable rational argument of Zhuang Zi's concept of relativity and perspective, arguing, among other things, against an absolute point of view of "noble or base, small and great" (Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, p. 146), and specifically in the quotation, against absolute "right" and "wrong":
Examining them in terms of inclinations, if assuming a standpoint from which it is right you see it as right, not one of the myriad things is not right; if assuming a standpoint from which it is wrong you see it as wrong, not one of the myriad things is not wrong. When you know that [sage] Yao and [tyrant] Jie each thought himself right [ziran] and the other wrong, the commitments behind the inclinations will be perceived. (Ibid., p. 147) (43/17/33-34)

Ziran comes in the conclusion of this passage, which uses historical figures very familiar to Confucians in a way that would horrify these same Confucians, for the “sage” Yao and the “tyrant” Jie are equated.

Chen Guying argues that in this passage, shi, “that’s it” or “right,” should be substituted for ran (Chen, Zhuang Zi, p. 421), and upon examining the surrounding text, we see the parallelism of ran with fei, rather than the usual shi/fei pair. Hence, I do not take ziran to be a compound term, but as zi, “reflexive,” and ran (shi) as “right,” following Graham’s rendering of “each thought himself right.”