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Comparing Daoist and Navajo Explanations for the Animation of the Body

Explanations have existed for centuries on how to explain the animation of the body. Many religions and some ancient explanations relate this explanation to the afterlife. Popular conceptions of Christianity portray the body as being animated by a nonphysical soul which persists after death. In this paper, I'm going to attempt to explore and compare Daoist and Navajo Native American religious and metaphysical conceptions of the body and the world. Some similarities that I intend to demonstrate are similarities in the presence of a metaphysical force animating the body (in Daoist *qi* and Navajo "wind"). Some differences I intend to note are the differences between the Daoist *qi* and the physical aspect of Navajo metaphysical forces such as wind (and the degree to which such forces can be called metaphysical). In addition, I will be exploring ways in which these beliefs correlate intuitively to facts about the body and using this as a better way of understanding the beliefs of these religions.

Animating Forces of the Two Traditions

Daoist *qi* is, as multiple sources understand it, the energy of the universe. According to some sources, the presence of this force is physically observable and relates to certain substances that move through the body. Edwin Hui writes:

In the context of traditional Chinese medicine, *qi* is an objective reality which is accessible to human senses; for example, practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine

believe that the movements of *qi* can be detected by feeling or even by visual observation. *Qi* is derived from and connected to visible physical matter, and every physical object in the universe is believed to have its own particular *qi*. The cosmos has its own *qi*, which is manifested in and detectable through the various meteorological changes such as cold, heat, humidity, wind, rain, dryness, etc. A human person has more than one kind of *qi* because of the different visceral organs... traditional Chinese medicine identifies twelve main vessels in the human body which essentially are channels through which the different *qi* move (Hui 36).

Hui's work here is in the context of medicine; therefore, *qi* here is presented primarily in its physical observation. The complicating question is whether these physical manifestations are indicative of *qi* or they are *qi* in and of themselves. The key verbage Hui uses here is that *qi* is "derived from and connected to" its correspondent physical matter. From this description, the physical matter would be representative of the *qi* but not the *qi* in itself. This understanding appears to be supported by Angela Sumegi, who quotes David Palmer as describing the process of retaining bodily fluids in order to suffuse the body with *qi*. The passage Sumegi quotes is as follows:

The first stage involves techniques for ending seminal emissions (for men) and menstrual flows (for women), thereby preventing the dissipation of vital essence. Through meditation [and breathing] techniques, the essence is circulated and transformed into vital energy (*qi*). The next stage involves, through other procedures, turning *qi* into spirit, and from thence, from the realm of the spirit, to return to the void. The process is thus one of transmuting the essential substance of the body, turning it into something increasingly ethereal, until it can no longer be affected by the processes of decay and death. Indeed, it

is said to reverse the process of aging, returning to a state of infancy and even beyond, to a state of pure energy that has not yet condensed itself into the physical form of the human body (Sumegi 243 quoting Palmer 92).

The passage Sumegi quotes seems to support the hypothesis that *qi* is something different than the physical substances that represent it in a particular way. As the passage describes, retaining certain fluids retains essence, and when the essence is retained, it "transforms" into *qi*. However, there are some complicating implications in this passage: one, the passage differentiates *qi* from "spirit," and the passage describes the process as being able to suffuse the body with so much *qi* it becomes pure energy that hasn't condensed into physicality, seeming to imply that *qi* is what condenses into physicality. What follows from these two premises is that *qi* is physical, and if it is metaphysical, it is distinct from spirit. Yet, *qi* seems intimately related to what author Louis Komjathy calls Daoist cosmogony (Komjathy 102). Komjathy describes the Daoist account of the creation of the universe as "spontaneous transformation that led from primordial nondifferentiation to differentiation" (Komjathy 102). *Qi*'s role in this process is described in a passage Komjathy quotes from the *Daode jing*:

The Dao generated (or generates) the One;

The One generated the two;

The two generated the three;

The three generated the myriad beings.

The myriad beings carry yin and embrace yang,

And it is empty *qi* [or, "infusing *qi*"] (*chongqi*) that harmonizes these.

(*Daode jing*, Chapter 42; see also Zhuangzi, Chapter 4) (Komjathy 102).

A few possibilities can be garnered from this passage. One, that *qi* is physical, and so is all of the

universe, but there are different kinds of physical. Komjathy's description of the creation account ("cosmological process") seems to fit this description (Komjathy 102). Another possibility is that *qi* is both physical and nonphysical, a substance whose breadth spans these different modes of existence. This would relate its ability to transmute into spirit as demonstrated by Palmer, its physicality as demonstrated by Hui, and the originating role it plays in the creation account of the *Daode jing* as quoted by Komjathy. One qualifying component has yet to be addressed: the language barrier. In this section, distinctions have been made between physical and metaphysical; and among representative, indicative, and constitutive. The language of Daoism is one that is very different from English; furthermore, the nature and history of Daoism is embedded with the bridging of distinctions. The distinctions made to ascertain the nature of *qi* may be insufficient, and speaking of its function in the universe may be the only effective way of talking about it. Distinguishing between talking about function and substance may also be fruitless.

Nonetheless, from this survey of the literature, *qi* may be called the animating force that underlies the objects in the universe, physical and nonphysical, earthly and divine for the purposes of this project. It is infused into certain substances of the body that are connected to the propagation and perpetuation of life, including semen, menstrual fluids, and breath (Sumegi 243). *Qi* animates the body and contributes to the organization of the universe.

The trouble with working through a Navajo conception of metaphysics is that the beliefs about a "soul" or persistent metaphysical element are unclear. David Brugge writes about different Navajo conceptions of death thusly:

There were considerable differences of opinion among the Navajos themselves regarding what it is that is lost to the body when life ends. There seemed to be no doubt that a ghost

separated from the corpse and that, at least for a time, it retained individuality. There was also a concept of a soul shared by some, though not all, Navajos that was equated with the breath of "wind" (hayol) and which might enjoy an afterlife in the underworld or become a part of the cosmos. A third concept, "that standing within one," may or may not have had elements of the soul concept associated with it (Brugge 312).

The passage seems to place "wind" in competition with other conceptions of the afterlife. Why are we to assume, then, that the "wind" concept is an accurate representation of the Navajo belief system? Some terminological debate exists over whether a belief system is the phrase we should use when describing Navajo religious practices, but other sources substantiate the "wind" theory in other contexts. On this subject, Gerry Cox writes the following, "The Navajo believe that life begins when the wind enters the body through the orifices and particularly the ears. Death occurs when the wind leaves the body through the fingers" (Cox 169). While some debate exists about "wind" as the metaphysical animation of a person, that it is the determining factor of life and death seems certain. If it cannot be said that "wind" is a corresponding Navajo "soul," it may be called the physical animating force of the body. However, also as noted by Cox, "The dead are thought to be the source of all sickness and disease whether physical or mental" (Cox 171). Many Navajo rituals center around staving off ghosts, and their mortuary practices often involve warding off ghosts at every turn: burying the tools used to bury, not whistling at night, and evading the ghost of the deceased after a funeral (Cox 169-171).

Therefore, some element of spirit relating to the dead persists, though whether or not this can be called "wind" is unclear. It seems, however, that in order to account for a persistent spirit, either a new substance must be introduced to the life of a human, or it's related to wind. There are multiple possible explanations: a ghost is generated by "wind," the "wind" of a dead person is

their ghost, a spirit is attached to the person that is released when a person dies (when "wind" leaves the body), or some other substance accounts for the existence of a ghost. At this juncture, one is hard pressed to provide an easy means of providing coherence to these beliefs without imposing a particular view of the beliefs upon them. In an attempt to make logical sense of the concept of "wind" as it relates to death and dying, "wind" as a vital and spiritual force seems consistent with the beliefs we've encountered thus far. If ghost sickness is the source of all disease and death, then it seems to make sense that the spirit follows the wind after death, and this explains the pervasiveness of ghost sickness. Cox writes that "homes of the dead are haunted," which is likely where the last "wind" left the dead person's body (Cox 171). Burial rituals often involve removing one's clothes and bathing, which prevent smelling like the dead, which is a product of "wind" (Cox 170). On the alternative, sweat houses are often always considered holy even if someone died in them (Brugge 314). Again, life and death are related to the movement and manipulation of air and steam. Even whistling after dark is a process that involves wind and is associated with attracting ghosts and, therefore, sickness (admittedly, however, also auditory sensation) (Cox 170).

As can be seen, this is interpretive work. No sources seem to attempt to make this connection and certainly for good reason. Some sources, like Mary Shepardson, posit that there is some inconsistency in some accounts of the afterlife; for Shepardson, some accounts of the afterlife involving uniting with the natural world are inconsistent with the belief in ghosts. She writes, "Navajos do not dwell on the concept of the afterlife. I think that the belief that there are two afterworlds, one for good people and one for bad, like our Heaven and Hell, is an intrusion from Christianity" (Shepardson 384). This passage broaches another complicating factor: the role that Christian involvement has played in the evolution of Navajo beliefs about death. Cox

addresses this reality as well, "In recent years, the Navajo have dropped many of their traditional ways of dealing with the dead. Today, the burial of the dead is surrendered to white people whenever possible. The Navajo allow missionaries to bury their dead whenever possible" (Cox 171). Ultimately, in understanding Navajo beliefs about life and death, a number of interfering factors impede the analysis such that engaging with Navajo beliefs pre-Christian involvement are difficult for reasons that do and do not involve Christianity. The aforementioned understanding of life, death, and afterlife relating to "wind" in Navajo tradition is interpretive, but it may be useful in understanding their beliefs and a reasonable possibility, however.

Finally, the physical or metaphysical nature of "wind" is not clear. None of the evidence thus far seems to be able to point to an answer to this question. A few possibilities exist: that "wind" and the ghost are physical, that the ghost is nonphysical but wind is physical, the wind is nonphysical but the ghost is physical, both are nonphysical, or both are physical and nonphysical. Some answers may be found in Cox's work with Navajo medicine, "Like the Apache, their approach to illness has a spiritual basis. The Navajo believe that the Great Spirit would never put an illness on the earth without making a remedy available... Illness and disease are caused by a person breaking a taboo, an attack of a witch, offending ghost, or failing to live one's life in balance" (Cox 168). Cox also outlines a few different medicinal practices for the Navajo, including chanters singing. Determining the causes of illnesses can include star gazing and sand paintings (Cox 169). If illnesses are connected to ghosts, ghosts are connected to death, and life and death is connected to wind, it may be the case that wind has a spiritual component if medicine involves these spiritual elements. None of this necessitates nonphysical, but only that the physical contains a spiritual nature.

That being said, what can be said about "wind" has already been summarized by Cox,

that it marks the beginning and the end of life. The prior interpretive work seems to imply that it is also an important element of Navajo health and medicine, as evidenced by the steam houses, but this is the result of interpretive work. Some conceptions believe that the person dissolves into nature upon death, as evidenced by Shepardson's work. Whether "wind" truly animates the body or is merely indicative of animation and life is not entirely clear. We also know that the Navajo have traditionally believed in ghosts that can return to haunt the living if certain precautions are not observed. Whether "wind" is physical or nonphysical is uncertain, and whether ghosts are related to wind is not certain but a possibility.

Comparison

Daoist *qi* and Navajo "wind" share the characteristic of being indicative of animation and life in the body. *Qi*, as identified by Hui and Sumegi, is indicated by resources in the body including breath, blood, and semen, and the exchange of different fluids and resources between vital organs is also evidence of *qi*. The presence of "wind" through the body is the marker of life and death and is said to enter the body through the ears and leave through the fingers. Both of these beliefs relate explicitly to certain functions and interactions with the body. *Qi* has played a longstanding role in Chinese medicine according to Hui. Whether "wind" plays a particularly important role in Navajo medicine is unclear, although some Cox writes that some Native American tribes use steam baths to heal; whether this includes Navajo is also unclear (Cox 178). However, our speaker on the Navajo, Pesantubbee, affirmed that "wind" was also related to dancing and speaking, both markers of health. Dancing and singing in particular may be related to cultural rituals. From this, one can ascertain that both substances are at least partially physical in nature and at least mark if not cause the animation of the body.

Qi appears to play both physical and nonphysical roles but, from the sources, could be a metaphysical substance that is involved in physical processes. The physical versus nonphysical nature of "wind" is difficult to ascertain, though if it is related to dancing, singing, and speaking, as it is according to Pesantubbee, it would seem to be a physical substance. What could define "wind" as not a metaphysical substance is that it, unlike *qi*, does not solely constitute other elements of the universe. However, if one is to take the physical versus metaphysical distinction seriously, then a third example should be considered: some ancient Greek, pre-Socratic metaphysical theories include that the primary substance that comprises the universe is water. The Greeks likely would have known that it is a physical substance, but not only is it discussed as a metaphysical substance, but such examples define what we call metaphysics in the West. The water theory from Thales of Miletus is the embodiment and one of the originators of metaphysics in the West. Yet, water is a decidedly physical substance. Therefore, *qi* ought to conclusively be included as both a physical yet metaphysical substance, and so should "wind," if it is to be interpreted as the animating force of human life. Up until now, the words metaphysical and nonphysical have been used interchangeably, but this raises the following possibility: that *qi* and "wind" are physical and metaphysical but not nonphysical. Being a metaphysical substance may be a question of function (whether it's a substance that underlies the makeup of the universe), but a nonphysical substance is a question of, well, substance. The sources may be exhausted on this point, however; from the review of the literature, *qi* appears to be both a physical, metaphysical, and possibly a nonphysical substance, and "wind" is at least a physical and metaphysical substance. The most striking similarity between the concepts includes that *qi* includes breath as an animating element, and "wind" is also supposed to address the importance of breath to the body.

Discussion

What explains the similarities in these two concepts? What explains belief in them to begin with? An intuitive historical analysis of these beliefs may be plausible, but historicizing these beliefs ought to be cautioned against. Such an analysis would look something like this:

Belief in Navajo "wind" and other beliefs about the afterlife and illness can be explained by their history as a religiously animistic people primarily concerned with their own survival. The focus on their well being produces beliefs that are not far from or divorced from observable physical substances; therefore, religious figures and beliefs include physical things like wind and animals like the Coyote representing spirits that are more than human. This stems from a lack of knowledge of the biological realities of the human body and the geographical realities about the world. As a consequence, the beliefs are rooted in the lack of more substantive explanations for events beyond cause and effect.

Belief in Daoist *qi* is derived from China's history as a large, wealthy state with leisure time to posit complex metaphysical theories of reality, but the lack of an understanding of physics produces beliefs in substances and forces that do not have a physical basis. Much like the Medieval Four Humors theory of medicine, Daoist *qi* is rooted in substances that do exist in the body, but a proper examination of the functions of these substances was not available, and so they were connected to prevailing beliefs about metaphysical forces that animate and underlie the universe.

The historical analysis presented here is somewhat uncharitable to the approach and based in widely believed facts about history rather than a rigorous investigation. This analysis also emphasizes the importance of Western science in understanding the realities of the body and world. As poor as this example might be, the important claim is that presenting any of the following explanations together or apart as exhaustive explanations for the belief in these theories is reductionist: a lack of access to the methods or findings of modern science, the historical situation of the culture, and how much leisure time (how "civilized") each civilization was.

The obvious problem with these explanations is that they prioritize modern, Western understandings of the world over others. To a certain degree, however, that any or all of these reasons

contributed meaningfully to the phenomena of *qi* or "wind" is not unreasonable; what isn't truly reasonable is attempting to *exhaustively* explain the belief in these concepts in these terms. The problem lies in that no one would ever explain why anyone believes anything in these terms in any other context. No one can sufficiently explain why someone decided to kill someone else by referring to their history and situation in life, their access to moral facts, or how comfortably economically they were. These may be contributing factors and causes, but not sufficient explanations for the decision. Similarly, religious beliefs are a decision; they are composed deliberately because they are believed to represent reality and such is the basis for their study. The important question is this: what would make someone believe that these beliefs accurately represent the world? The solution I posit to this question is that the beliefs represent intuitive realities about the world.

Qi and "wind" may be a compelling understanding of the world because good reasons exist for the motivation of things to move and grow. Western philosophy is filled with these teleological explanations, particularly from Aristotle and from theologians like Aquinas. Our modern, scientifically informed world has grown accustomed to describing the world as obeying laws the way that one would stop at a traffic light. This is not to say this account is unreasonable or not correct. However, it can be easy to forget how compelling it may seem even now to look at the motion of objects and growth of living things and not believe that it is motivated by a force. Rocks hold and compose because of something about them; trees grow because a force moves them.

Furthermore, an examination of the human body, at first glance, does seem to hold oxygen at a high priority. An enormous cavity and several caverns allow the flow of air despite the rest of the body being jammed together for space among other organs, bones, muscles, and fluids. Oxygen allows the muscles to move, for people to speak, and for the body to grow. In this way, "wind" actually *does* animate the body; the empirical question is whether it animates the body the same way that leaves are animated in the gust.

These explanations truly do not require much work in order to arrive at them. However, the pivotal benefit in interpreting this way is not just logical but also charity-driven. A complete philosophy

of religion will not be able to grow without means of arriving at charitable and compelling reasons why a person adopts certain religious beliefs. It is likely that plenty of religions and spiritual creeds don't have good reasons to believe them; philosophy of religion, however, usually doesn't study those.

In conclusion, evaluating these beliefs does not seem like a beneficial endeavor. This is why panels of comparative religion don't often feature debates; people with different religions will obviously disagree, and they will likely disagree along extremely predictable lines. Since most people hold religious beliefs of some kind (even ones, like mine, that hold that no nonphysical substances exist), the endeavor will only amount to restating the obvious: whose religious beliefs are whose. Present both a case and a joke: A Catholic and a Protestant get into an argument over their religious differences. What do they learn? That one of them is Catholic and the other is Protestant. Therefore, I refrain from evaluating the beliefs of *qi* and "wind" here and present these findings as a means of learning something about the beliefs in order to make informed conclusions that involve them and to learn something about explaining our own beliefs and the beliefs of others.