

Dao, I – Thou, Boundaries and Quantum physics.

Finding the right language and images for existential experience.

Dmitri Ometsinsky

Abstract (Inglese)

In the lecture, the author shares his experiences of encountering different cultures and spiritual traditions, particularly Daoism, which practices concepts of the Self, personality, and boundaries that differ from Western culture and academic psychology.

The lecture explores the phenomena of emergent collective consciousness and thinking, as well as the attunement and synchronization of people within groups. It draws parallels between the Daoist tradition, Martin Buber's "I — Thou" language, Carl Jung's ideas on synchronicity, and imagery from quantum mechanics.

The author demonstrates how concepts from different cultures and imagery from physics assist him in psychotherapeutic practice.

Abstract (Italiano)

Nella lezione, l'autore racconta la sua esperienza d'incontro con diverse culture e tradizioni spirituali, in particolare quella taoista, in cui si praticano concezioni dell'io, della personalità e dei confini diverse da quelle della cultura occidentale e della psicologia accademica.

Vengono esaminati i fenomeni dell'emergere della coscienza e del pensiero collettivi, della sintonizzazione e della sincronizzazione delle persone all'interno dei gruppi. Si mette in luce il parallelismo tra la tradizione taoista, il linguaggio "Io — Tu" di Martin Buber, le idee di Jung sulla sincronicità e le immagini tratte dalla meccanica quantistica.

L'autore mostra come le concezioni provenienti da diverse culture e le immagini della fisica lo aiutino nella sua pratica psicoterapeutica.

Abstract (Russo)

В лекции автор рассказывает о своем опыте встречи с разными культурами и духовными традициями, в частности, даосской, в которой практикуются представления о Я, личности и границах, отличные от Западной культуры и академической психологии.

Рассматриваются явления появления коллективного сознания и мышления, сонстройки и синхронизации людей в группах. Раскрывается параллель между даосской традицией, языком «Я — Ты» Мартина Бубера, представлениями Юнга о синхронистичности и образами из квантовой механики.

Автор показывает, как представления из разных культур и образы из физики помогают ему в психотерапевтической практике.

My first education was in physics. I studied at the leading university of the USSR — Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (MIPT). My master thesis and postgraduate advisor was the outstanding popularizer of science and member of the Club of Rome, Professor S. P. Kapitsa; I was his assistant for five years. Ever since school, physics for me was nonclassical — it included the theory of relativity, quantum theory and synergetics.

What are the peculiarities of my worldview as a physicist?

1. I constantly try to verify any concepts and theoretical constructions against real phenomena.
2. For me any concepts, equations, theories are merely mental constructs, models of reality, devoid of ontological status. Even seemingly natural things like space, time, particles, waves — are no more than our models, which can easily be replaced by others. And if our models have certain properties, that does not mean the world is exactly like that.
3. Every theory has its limits of applicability.
4. For describing the same things one can simultaneously use completely different concepts and systems of representation. For example, Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity allows one to consider the electron as both a particle and a wave. Quantum mechanics allows for many interpretations, behind which lie different worldviews.
5. Relativity of the frame of reference. For a physicist, the question of whether the Earth revolves around the Sun or vice versa is meaningless. Everything depends on the frame of reference. The choice of frame of reference depends on the specific problem.
6. Inseparability of the observer from the world. In quantum mechanics it is meaningless to speak of an object that exists independently of the observer. The object, as well as the observer themselves, arises only at the moment of observation. The very act of observation implies interaction between different parts of the world, which we ourselves distinguish, one of which we consider the observer — the subject, the other — the object. In any observation both the state of the observer and the object change simultaneously. Subject and object are conditional parts of a single system with a common wave function.

From a philosophical point of view, my physical worldview was a kind of mixture of neo-Kantian and positivist ideas.

Parallel to the development of my scientific worldview, a spiritual worldview was taking shape.

Since school I had a huge interest in spiritual phenomena, meditation, yoga, Daoist practice and qigong.

I traveled a lot and tried to immerse myself in different cultures of the world, and I was especially interested in spiritual and psychic phenomena.

I tried not to be an external observer studying another culture. I tried to immerse myself in the world of the culture I wanted to know and understand, to become part of it.

In Burma and Thailand, I practiced vipassana and meditation in Buddhist monasteries.

In China and Japan, I interacted and practiced with masters of the Chan — Zen tradition.

In a remote village in the upper Amazon in Peru I participated in therapeutic practices of a local shaman.

Several times I went to India, attended teachings of the Dalai Lama, met the famous Tibetan doctor Yeshe Dhonden, lamas and physicians, learning about their practices of spiritual healing.

I spent many months communicating with Franciscan monks in southern Italy.

Several times I went to China and for many years practiced the Daoist tradition of inner work under the guidance of a teacher.

I am closely familiar with the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition; as a pilgrim I went to Mount Athos, where I witnessed the spiritual life of the monks and personally had a very important spiritual experience.

What I encountered in the process of acquainting myself with religious traditions and spiritual practices, both in the West and in the East, often did not fit into the usual natural-scientific picture of the world and the concepts of academic psychology. In particular, this concerns ideas about the Self, personality, and boundaries.

In psychology, and in modern Western culture in general, the "Self" is the "Self" of the separate individual. Each "Self" is separate from another, it has boundaries. Individuals interact with one another verbally and otherwise, but this is interaction between distinct individuals.

And things like consciousness and thinking are considered primarily as properties of an individual person. That is, fundamentally, consciousness and thinking are inherent in an individual, while concepts such as collective thinking or collective consciousness are a superstructure, the next level of organization — phenomena arising from interpersonal interaction.

This is quite logical, given that in modern scientific Western culture the subject is separated from the world, the "I" is separated from the world and separated from the Thou.

But in the process of immersing myself in different spiritual cultures and traditions, I encountered that consciousness, thinking, and experiences can be originally group-based, collective, not reducible to a superposition or interaction of separate personalities.

The emergence of group consciousness and a group "I" is also familiar to participants in existential therapeutic groups at the International Institute of Existential Consultancy (MIEK). When I shared my reflections with colleagues at the European congress on existential therapy in Istanbul, many confirmed that they had experienced a similar phenomenon. The patriarch

of existential therapy in the post-Soviet space, Alexander Efimovich Alekseichik, calls this the emergence of the group's common "We."

Something similar many people experience during a cappella choral singing — mutual tuning-in occurs, a common vibration arises.

Even in my student years I observed and took part in the emergence of collective thinking during group scientific discussions. A new quality emerges in thinking, and it happens synchronously and as if between people, not in the head of an individual. Ideas, thoughts are originally common, not personal.

It seems to me that this is close to what Buber speaks about in "I and Thou", and to what Jung tried to express when speaking of synchronicity.

When my Chinese teacher, Professor Li Jisheng, taught me qigong, we would spend whole days together, cooking food, eating, resting, practicing qigong and taijiquan. And in the process of practice this very attunement, synchronicity, shared perception and consciousness arose, not only with the teacher but with the world.

In the Daoist practice of inner work, the boundaries of the "I" are not fundamental. Boundaries are merely a focus of attention. The "I" can include the "We", and even the whole world.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the German theologian Richard Wilhelm went to China and spent 25 years there. He learned the language, tried to penetrate Chinese spiritual traditions, and translated many Chinese texts into German. The value of his translations is that he did not simply translate a dead text, but lived in contact with hereditary masters of the traditions and himself participated in the tradition.

After returning to Germany, a community of people interested in Eastern culture and spiritual practices formed around Richard Wilhelm. Among them were Martin Buber, Carl Gustav Jung and Hermann Hesse. They were all roughly of the same generation and became friends. They began to hold regular meetings and seminars in Berlin, Frankfurt, and Switzerland. After Wilhelm's death, this community became the core of a unique cultural phenomenon — the annual Eranos meetings in Ascona.

Even before writing his philosophical poem "I and Thou", Buber had read Daoist texts in English translation and even translated Zhuangzi into German. For me Buber's poem resonates with my Daoist experience and is very consonant with Zhuangzi. For example, when Buber describes the "I — Thou" with a tree, that was close to what we practiced with my teacher in Beijing.

In "I — Thou" there is no separate "I" and "Thou" — it is originally one whole; there are no boundaries. Buber's "I — Thou" is not a separation of the "I" from the world, but dwelling within it.

Interestingly, Heidegger in one of his lectures quoted Zhuangzi's parable "The Joy of Fish" in Buber's translation to illustrate Dasein.

Jung recalled that in the course of communicating with Richard Wilhelm and getting acquainted with the Daoist text "The Secret of the Golden Flower", he encountered a phenomenon in his life that went beyond causal connections and led to the concepts of synchronicity. Jung's reflections on the collective psychic phenomena he encountered led him to the idea of the collective unconscious.

My experience as a physicist, particularly the images of quantum mechanics, helped me understand the phenomena I encountered and those pondered by Wilhelm, Buber, and Jung.

Synchronicity, in the language of quantum mechanics, can be interpreted as quantum entanglement, and the collective unconscious — as the common wave function of a system. Interestingly, Jung published his work "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle" in a joint book with one of the founders of quantum mechanics — Wolfgang Pauli.

Quantum entanglement is when several particles, without interacting with each other, jointly change their state. They can be regarded as a single object that exists in several places at once. In quantum physics, the same object, for example an electron, depending on the situation, can be localized in space or occupy the entire universe. That is, the boundaries of an object are not its properties per se, but arise through connections with other objects within a certain quantum-mechanical system.

My experience of encountering different cultures and spiritual practices, ideas from various philosophical traditions, and images from physics, particularly quantum mechanics, help me in my practice as a psychotherapist.

When working with couples, the sphere of relationships, contact, and clients with overly rigid or, conversely, overly blurred boundaries, I draw on images from Zhuangzi, Buber, Heidegger, and quantum physics, as well as my experience of encountering different cultures.

It can be helpful for clients to understand that separating oneself from the world, building boundaries between I and the world, between I and Thou, is merely a mental construct, and the boundaries themselves are conventional — they can be shifted, crossed, they can change over time, be fuzzy and permeable.

Such ideas, as well as the personal experience of contact and attunement that sometimes arises in the process of therapy, do not remove boundaries, but rather open up a new dimension in which synchronicity is realized and boundaries are conditional.