

Kleist's "On the Puppet Theater": Wisdom from a Taoist Perspective

MARTIN WASSERMAN

Heinrich von Kleist, the nineteenth-century German writer, is best known for his plays, such as *Robert Guiscard* and *The Prince of Homburg*, and his short stories, like *Michael Kohlhaas* and *The Earthquake in Chile*. However, Kleist's plays and short stories do not provide a definitive statement of his philosophical point of view. It is only when one reads Kleist's essay, "On the Puppet Theater," which Thomas Mann has described as "a brilliant piece of philosophical discourse," that a clearer view of Kleist's philosophy begins to emerge.¹ Speaking of this work, which was written in 1810, the noted writer, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, boasted that "no one...has produced so pretty a piece of philosophy, so sparkling with intelligence and charm, as Kleist's essay on marionettes."²

A recent analysis of "On the Puppet Theater" claimed that the essay fell squarely "within the context of Occidental philosophical thought."³ Although I do not deny that Kleist's philosophical perspective shares a good deal in common with classic Western thought, it is my contention that one can find even more elements from the Eastern philosophical tradition in "On the Puppet Theater." I believe that Kleist's essay is replete with ideas which can be found readily in Taoist philosophy, but not in the intellectual heritage of the West. My goal, then, is to demonstrate that the unique viewpoint conveyed by Taoist works, such as the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Chuang Tzu*, and the *Lieh Tzu*, is the same as that articulated by Kleist in "On the Puppet Theater".

In the Kleist essay, a conversation takes place between two persons – Mr. C., a dancer, and Kleist himself.⁴ At first, Kleist is confused and skeptical when Mr. C. favourably compares the physical skill of a marionette controlled by mechanical crank to that of a professional dancer. However, as the dialogue progresses, Kleist soon arrives at the same point of view as Mr. C. Their shared conviction is that dancers are inferior to marionettes because humans possess self-consciousness and vanity which are barriers to both physical grace and spiritual harmony.

For Kleist and Mr. C., every involuntary movement is beautiful, while any action involving reflection or reason is distorted. Since only a human is capable of reflective thought, they believe a dancer can never be the equal of a puppet. Thus Kleist, in his essay, regards spontaneity as being of supreme importance.

Taoism holds the same view as Kleist on the great importance of spontaneity. For the Taoist, one must always reflect things like a mirror, and react to them like an echo,

without resorting to any intermediate thought. In both the *Chuang Tzu* and the *Lieh Tzu*, the flawless performance is said to occur only when one, similar to the puppet, has done something without really knowing how it has been done.⁵

Mr. C. manages to convince Kleist in their dialogue that the puppet's spontaneity saves it from affectation which all professional dancers possess. By affection, Mr. C. means being concerned about the effect which one's performance has on others. He argues that affectation leads to a type of gracelessness which makes it possible for professional dancers to hurt themselves. Giving a specific examples, Mr. C. mentions a calculated ballet maneuver by Madame P. where the performer's "soul settles in the vertebrae of the small of her back; she bends over as though about to break in two."⁶

Taoism also believes that it is affectation which brings about bodily harm. For the Taoist, when one starts thinking about the effect produced upon others, it is only then that one acts without self-assurance and harm can come one's way. Commenting on human perfection, the *Chuang Tzu* states that it is acting "like a mirror, going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing."⁷ By doing so, it makes it possible for one to be like the puppet and "win out over all things," yet not hurt oneself.⁸

In adopting Mr. C.'s philosophical position, Kleist declares that the only time human beings can achieve the high physical grace of a mechanically controlled puppet is when they find themselves in a state of innocence or naivete. On this issue, Kleist tells Mr. C. of a youth he had known who, on his first attempt, was able to assume the exact same pose as the "famous statue called the Spinario, the youth removing a thorn from his foot."⁹ However, on successive tries, the adolescent was not able to duplicate his initial pose since he had become self-conscious of his every movement.

For the Taoist, a great emphasis is also placed upon naivete as a way to achieve perfection. On this matter, the *Tao Te Ching* asserts:

In non-action nothing remains not done.
The realm can only be attained
if one remains free of busy-ness.
The busy are not fit
To attain the realm.¹⁰

By non-action, the Taoist does not have in mind idleness or inertia, but a total receptiveness to the fundamental laws of the universe. This total receptiveness comes naturally to the naïve, for, like the marionette, they possess a "consciousness on which no impression has been notched."¹¹

Kleist's "On the Puppet Theater," by extolling the qualities of spontaneity and naivete, was certainly not rebelling against Western Philosophical tradition. After all, Rousseau had made similar claims in his writings. What distinguished Kleist from other Western thinkers, however, was that perhaps he alone supported the notion that a mechanically controlled marionette, being both spontaneous and naïve, deserved to be put on a higher

physical plane than a human being. One simply does not find this notion in pre nineteenth-century Western philosophical writing.

On the other hand, there does exist in Taoist writing the idea that a machine is of a higher cosmic order than an ordinary human being. As stated previously, the Taoist believes that there ought not to be a sense of self-consciousness which prevents our actions from achieving perfection. It therefore follows that a marionette run by a mindless machine will fit this guideline exactly, since it makes all of its movements without a concomitant sense of self-awareness. Indeed, the *Lieh Tzu* supports this very notion when it says:

The highest man at rest is as though dead, in movement is like a machine. He knows neither why he is at rest nor why he is not, why he is in movement nor why he is not. He neither changes his feelings and expression because ordinary people are watching nor fails to change them because ordinary people are not watching.¹²

Near the end of "On the Puppet Theater," Mr. C. summarizes the philosophical position held by Kleist and himself. He declares, "Grace ... appears most purely in that bodily form that has either no consciousness at all or an infinite one, which is to say either in a puppet or a god."¹³

The view that a thing, like a puppet, could be elevated to the same spiritual level as a god was absolutely alien to pre nineteenth-century Western thinkers. Immanuel Kant, whom many people consider to be the greatest of modern philosophers, typified the Western attitude when he said of such a notion that it was "monstrous," and that it represented "misbehaviour" because "nothingness, truly conceived, is a concept which annihilates all understanding and in which thought itself arrives at its end."¹⁴

It was only in Kleist's "On the Puppet Theater" and in the philosophy of Taoism that the "not-being" endowed with religious sanctity, could reach such a godly stature. By this I mean the Taoist, similar to Kleist, argues that while an ordinary human being is a mechanism without a spirit inside of it; a thing, because it achieves the perfection of the Divine, must necessarily have an internal spirit controlling it. Commenting on the inherent godliness of things, the Taoist sage, Chuang Chan (4th century A.D.), declared:

The achievements of Creation are extremely subtle, so that all the myriad varieties of things are developed, and their activities are boundless.... How can it mean that a thing does not have a spirit controlling it? This is very much mistaken.¹⁵

Hopefully, I have now demonstrated the strong overlap that has existed – but at the same time has been ignored – between the Kleistian philosophy of "On the Puppet Theater" and the philosophical writings of Taoism.¹⁶ In comparing these two viewpoints, I believe appropriate evidence has been provided to support my thesis that Kleist's conception of things really falls more within the context of Eastern philosophy than within the Occidental framework.

Notes

¹ Thomas Mann, "Kleist and his Stories," in *The Marquise of O – and Other Stories*, trans. and ed., Martin Greenberg (New York: New American Library, 1962), p.x.

² Joachim Maass, *Kleist: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), p. 227.

³ Rudiger Bubner, "Philosophisches "uber Marionetten," *Kleist-Jahrbuch* (1980), PP. 73-85.

⁴ Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Puppet Theater" in *An Abyss Deep Enough*, trans. and ed., Phillip B. Miller (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1982), pp. 211-216. Kleist first published this article, as "Uber das Marionettentheater", in the newspaper, *Berliner Abendblätter*, from December 12 to 15, 1810.

⁵ Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 204-206; and A.C. Graham, trans., *The Book of Lieh Tzu* (London: John Murray, 1960), pp. 43-44.

⁶ Kleist, p. 213.

⁷ Watson, p. 97.

⁸ Watson, p. 97

⁹ Kleist, p.215

¹⁰ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans., Richard Wilhelm and H.G. Ostwald (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 48.

¹¹ Arthur Waley, *The Way and its Power* (New ork ; Grove press, 1958), p.55,

¹² Graham, p. 130

¹³ Kleist, p. 216.

¹⁴ Richard Kroner, *Kant's Weltanschauung*, trans., John E. Smith (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 16. This quote of Kant's originally appeared in "Das Ende aller Dinge," (1794). Kant, of course, never read Kleist's essay, since he died six years before it was published. He was merely commenting on the foolishness of Eastern religious systems which equated nothingness with goodness.

¹⁵ Graham, pp. 111-112.

¹⁶ The missionaries' translations of Taoist works would have been available to Kleist, as they were to Kant before him (see Julia Ching, "Chinese Ethics and Kant, *Philosophy East and West*, XXVIII (1978), p. 168). However, Kleist does not give any indication in his letters that he was directly influenced by Taoist thought. Unfortunately, Kleist burned most of his autobiographical material just before he committed suicide on November 21, 1811, at the age of thirty-five.

Prof. of Psychology and Anthropology,
Adirondack Community College,
State University of New York,
Glens Falls, New York 12801 U.S.A.