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The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue, by Sarah Allan (Book Review)

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The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue. By SARAH ALLAN. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. Albany: STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, 1997. Pp. xiv + 181 + illus. $53.50 (cloth); $17.95 (paper).

Sarah Allan, in *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue,* explores the premise that linguistic concepts are rooted in culturally specific imagery. Allan argues that in the process of translation the target language inevitably grafts its own imagery onto the concepts of the original language. Therefore the translation process fails to capture the range of meaning and the structural relations between terms in the original language. Allan's work elaborates this point via an analysis of the metaphors related to water and plants in early Chinese philosophical thought.

Allen's thesis is that "in the absence of a transcendental concept, the ancient Chinese turned directly to the natural world" to explicate their ideas (p. xii). The frame of the book mimics her thesis that water and plants are the formative metaphors of early Chinese thought. Allan argues first that water images, in various forms, predominantly serve to describe the cosmos. Next, she explores how plants serve to illustrate the specifically human aspect of the cosmos. Within this framework Allan proceeds "from the concrete to the abstract"—first presenting the range of meaning of the metaphors, then offering an interpretation of their use by individual thinkers, focusing on the *Mencius* and the *Laozi*.

Allan's work on imagery sheds light on obscure passages in early Chinese texts. For example, pointing out that the *xin* (heart/mind) resembles a pool of water (p. 82), Allan illuminates Mencius' analogy in 7A.24 between the way of water and the way a gentleman's mind does not "penetrate." Similarly, noting that *qi* (energy/matter) is vaporized water, Allan uses terms from descriptions of how Yu controlled the great flood to explain Xunzi's treatment of *qi* in "Yue Lun" (p. 92). With regard to plant imagery, Allan makes the interesting general point that in early China people belonged to a category that included both plants and animals (*wanwu*), rather than a category including animals but distinct from plants.

Because her book is a structural analysis of shared features of early Chinese thought, Allan's approach tends to highlight similarities. However, she also distinguishes distinctive uses of imagery in the work of different thinkers. For example, she notes that the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* use the "*qi*=water" metaphor differently. She writes: "Rather than concentrating one's mind/heart and clarifying the *qi*, as in the *Laozi*, or directing the *qi* in channels, the *Zhuangzi* advocates free movement" (p. 92).

Although her arguments are generally sound, some of Allan's interpretations might benefit from further explanation. She seems, for instance, to take any reference to "flowing" (*liu* 流) as a reference to water, as if other things, such as breezes, can only count as "flowing" insofar as they resemble water. In her comment on the *Laozi* 61, which reads, "A large state is the lower reaches [*xia liu*]," she supplies "[of a river]," which begs the question of whether the reference is to water. In discussing the same phrase for "lower reaches" (*xia liu*) that appears in the *Analects* 19.20, she again interprets the phrase in terms of water imagery, and translates the reference to "returning" (*gui*) in the passage as "flow" (p. 47). In some cases when Allan sees "clear" water metaphors, the reader needs more explanation to be persuaded. Where the *Laozi* says, "I do nothing and yet the people are transformed of themselves, I am fond of stillness and the people correct themselves," she provides only the comment, "here the water metaphor is particularly clear" (p. 117).

On the same lines, sometimes Allan's metaphorical analyses lead to claims that seem inaccurate without further elaboration. For example, she claims that *de* "is something peculiar to people, an aspect of their hearts that other living things do not have" (p. 101). If she means by this that other living things cannot be said to have *de*, then she needs to account for *Analects* 14.33 which says "A good horse is praised for its *de*." In another case, Allan takes the *xin* (heart/mind) to be a container organ, rather than a locus for the performance of a certain function (p. 85). Allan interprets the character for *xin* as a picture of the heart/mind as an organ. Based on a bronze inscription that speaks of "clarifying the mind/heart and revealing the *de*," she concludes that the *xin* itself is not only an organ, but a receptacle for *de*. But even if the *character* for *xin* is in fact a picture of an organ, there is little evidence that early Chinese thinkers viewed the *xin* as a receptacle. Containers are not the only things that, when clarified, reveal something. Water metaphors for the *xin* emphasize water's ability to reflect, rather than the pool containing the water. Moreover, as it stands, Allan's use of the heart/mind as "organ-containing-*de*" metaphor is not a convincing explanation of the claim in *Zhuangzi* 5/42–45 that *de* fails to shape a hideous person's body. The reference in the *Zhuangzi* is to *de* failing to shape the form, not failing to shape the heart/mind.

Allan's contention that water and plant metaphors signify the passage of time is one of the more controversial aspects of the book. She convincingly notes that in *Analects* 9.17 the passage of water (*shi* 逝) implies what we mean by the passage of time. However, extending that connection between water and time to a connection between *dao* and time in the *Zhuangzi* seems unjustified. Allan contends that in the *Zhuangzi*, "the *dao* clearly comes to incorporate that amorphous ungraspable aspect of life: what we call time" (p. 78). To make her point, she suggests that in the *Zhuangzi* people are "in" the *dao*, that it is shapeless and invisible, and that it is humanity's natural habitat, as water is to fish (pp. 77–79). From these descriptions, one might just as well conclude that the *dao* (or *daos*) in the *Zhuangzi* are spatial rather than temporal metaphors. Aside from the reference to *dao* as humanity's habitat (which implies that the *dao* is something other than water, since we are not fish), the argument seems strangely disconnected from the root metaphors that ground Allan's more successful claims elsewhere in the text.

By focusing discussion on the claim that we think in metaphor, Allan re-opens a significant philosophical discussion to which sinologists rarely attend. Following A. C. Graham, Allan takes the position that languages (or their "conceptual schemes") are never completely commensurable: "We can . . . never entirely comprehend another conceptual scheme" (p. 18). Such a position implies that truth is relative to different languages, insofar as it allows the possibility that a proposition, true in one language, can be false in another. But Allan attempts to avoid such relativistic conclusions, by claiming a proposition's truth can only be affirmed or denied in its own language. She uses Graham's sample sentence, "*cao qing ye*" and notes that it does not entail the truth or falsity of the English equivalent translation "grass is green." But such an argument does not thereby evade the specter of relativism lurking behind any claim that languages are truly incommensurable. The argument that these two sentences are true or false only with respect to their own language capitalizes on the breadth or vagueness of the Chinese terms. "*Cao*" could be straw, plants, or herbs. "*Qing*" could be dark, cool, or wet. Thus the argument can draw the conclusion that "*cao qing ye*" may be true or false without entailing that "grass is green" be likewise. But just as "*cao qing ye*" is too broad to map precisely onto "grass is green," so too "grass is green" is itself too broad to be affirmed or denied. (Grass is not always green.) To constitute a genuine contribution to the debate about linguistic incommensurability, the argument requires a more specific proposition—"*this* grass is green," for instance—where the referent is clearly identifiable to the language-users. That is, to raise the problem of whether or not languages are incommensurable in any philosophically significant way, one needs to find a case where the language users agree upon a specific "fact" to which the proposition refers, in light of which the language users can affirm or deny the proposition. (Donald Davidson's sample sentence, "it's raining," illustrates this.) Allan is to be credited for discussing these questions, but comparing vague sentences does not refute the argument that the notion of incommensurable conceptual schemes leads to the relativity of truth claims.

By investigating the extent to which metaphor-analysis is necessary for philosophical understanding, Allan's work opens the question of how the early Chinese themselves viewed language's functioning. She notes that Chinese characters do not generally represent "objects or ideas," but that in their origin many characters "reflect . . . ideas" (pp. 32–33). However, since her ensuing discussion frequently mentions characters that are "pictographs" in her terms, it would be helpful to hear why she does not think such characters reflect "objects," and what count as "objects" and "ideas," both in her terms and in those of the early Chinese.

While the author's individual analyses are not always convincing, this book succeeds in clarifying the significance of a vast range of water and plant symbolism in early Chinese thought. More importantly, it succeeds in demonstrating the need for such a method in comparing philosophies.

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