

Thinking Analogically About Dialogic Organization Development: A Cross-Cultural Exercise

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jab**Robert J Marshak**¹ 

Abstract

This article presents the process and results of the author using classical Chinese philosophy (Confucianism and Taoism) to stimulate new ideas and insights about the theory and practice of Dialogic Organization Development (OD). Key aspects of a *Tao*-based world-view that rejects such concepts as individuality, universal truths, objectivity, and scientific reasoning are identified along with implications for how social and organizational situations are conceptualized and addressed. New insights and ideas stimulated by this reflective process include the existence of important premises that are similar in classical Chinese philosophy and Dialogic OD, but differ from those in Diagnostic OD. Potentially generative ways to think about chaos, leadership, and the client–consultant relationship are also discussed. The discussion concludes with some thoughts about the current state of OD.

Keywords

organization development, dialogic OD, taoism, confucianism, philosophy, cross-cultural thinking, social constructionism

This discussion was stimulated by a provocative cross-cultural thesis and is intended to expand thinking about organizational systems and Dialogic Organization Development (OD). It also more fully integrates different streams of my thinking over the past 30 plus years (Marshak, 2015) including how language and metaphors shape mindsets and action (Marshak, 1993a, 1998, 2002, 2020), how Confucian and Taoist philosophy

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suggest fundamentally different concepts about change from classical OD principles (Marshak, 1993b, 1994, 2004) and the conceptualization with Gervase Bushe of Dialogic OD (Bushe and Marshak, 2009, 2014, 2015; Marshak, 2010).

The discussion is in four parts. First an articulation of the thesis proposed by the cross-cultural philosophers Hall and Ames (1987, 1995, 1998) about the reasons why and how aspects of classical Chinese and Western thinking are different in fundamental ways. Secondly, how analogic thinking based on classical Chinese philosophy suggests additional ways to conceptualize organizational systems. Thirdly, reflections about some possible implications of a *Tao*-based understanding of organizational systems for the theory and practice of Dialogic OD. Finally, some thoughts about the state of contemporary OD resulting from this exercise.

Two Ways of Thinking: Rational and Analogical

To begin let me describe what I consider to be key ideas from the Hall and Ames thesis for how and why aspects of Western and Chinese thinking are different in fundamental ways. I am not personally invested in whether or not their thesis is sound or has significant flaws. I have been, however, interested in how study of their thesis about alternative ways of thinking has stimulated and expanded my thinking about organizational systems and Dialogic OD.

The essence of the Hall and Ames comparative analysis of the philosophical foundations of Western and Chinese cultures is that both may have had origins in analogical ways of thinking (understanding by analogy one thing in relationship to, or in terms of, another, for example, “the universe is like a giant clock”). However, Western philosophy developed concepts that led to privileging scientific thinking (objective, logical analysis to discover universal principles, laws, rules, etc.), whereas foundational Chinese philosophy did not advance these concepts and remained primarily analogical in nature. Their thesis also suggests both forms of thinking exist in both cultures to some degree with one form being historically dominant and the other secondary or recessive. Rational thinking being dominant in Western cultures since the Enlightenment and analogic thinking in classical Chinese culture since antiquity. An additional nuance to their analysis is that what they describe as rational thinking is characterized today as “Modernism” or “Modernity” and the aspects of classical Chinese analogic thinking that reject modernist assumptions of individuality, universal truths, objectivity, scientific reasoning, and the like as akin to aspects of “Postmodernism.”

Foundations of Western Rational Thinking

The Hall and Ames thesis asserts the foundational premises of Western rational thinking were established by the fifth century CE through the convergence of premises advanced by Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian philosophers through to St. Augustine (354–430 CE). For purposes of this discussion a few of the key premises that help distinguish this way of thinking from classical Chinese-based analogical thinking include:

- The universe had a beginning and is composed of separate entities.
- In the beginning the universe as we know it emerged from a state of chaos when a transcendent force or entity outside of the chaos, such as God, imposed order on it. Such an entity or God would logically have created only the one best possible universe.
- Permanence and stability are preferred to chaos and change (e.g., Plato's Ideal Forms). Plato and Aristotle also equated change with motion and asserted that motion/change must have a cause. In both cases their ideas prevailed over the earlier views of Heraclitus who claimed that the world is an "everlasting fire" in a state of continual change.
- Western culture evolved in the context of diverse peoples and societies with different languages, histories, myths, values, religions, and so on, contributing to its development while competing for ascendancy.
- Because of these differences, creating social order required going outside of the particulars of a situation/setting/system to find objective and transcendent rules, principles, laws, truths, etc. that when applied would bring rational order to the situation at issue. Individual persons would then be expected to interact in the ways assigned to them by the external rule(r) to achieve the desired social order and outcome(s).
- A key challenge was how to find or create applicable transcendent order(s) when confronted with the inherent disorder of a multiplicity of contending cultural narratives, ambitions, values, and objectives.
- Rational order, based on objectivity, logical reasoning, cause-effect thinking, scientific methods, and so on, to find and apply transcendent rules, laws, principles, "truths," etc., was advanced as the privileged method for establishing and maintaining social order.

In combination these premises support conceptualizing and thinking about systems and change based on important but often unexamined assumptions. In terms of OD, for example, a problematic or difficult situation might lead to proposals that leadership commission some type of data-based action research to identify and propose "the objectively right" goals, roles, relationships, strategies, procedures, action steps, etc., that if implemented, will bring about the desired order and outcomes to the system. These are then submitted to the leader/leadership who decides what to officially sanction and implement in the system.

Foundations of Chinese Analogical Thinking

Hall and Ames assert the main foundational premises of Chinese culture were established during the *Han* Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) based on thinking mainly advanced by Confucian and Taoist philosophers. For purposes of this discussion my simplification of a few of the key premises that help distinguish analogical thinking from Western-based rational thinking, include:

- Everything is. There was no beginning. There will be no end. There is nothing outside of, separate from, or beyond what is (the *Tao*).
- Everything is interrelated and mutually implicated (e.g., *yin* defines and is defined by *yang* and together are the *Great Ultimate*).
- Things continually change of themselves.
- Social order is enacted through the interactions of people and events which are all interrelated, mutually implicated, and continually changing.
- The ideal is communal harmony which requires individuals to be continually aware of context and their roles and interrelationships with everyone and everything else.
- The absence of transcendent order is not chaos. Instead, absence allows space for limitless immanent possibilities to emerge.
- Individuals should act in ways that align with the natural flow of things (the *Tao*) and not seek to impose willful or contrary actions. In short, to practice *wu-wei* (no imposed action contrary to the natural flow of things).
- How to behave to seek communal harmony is guided and supported by suggestive analogies and correlations and not by definitive laws, formulas, logical proofs, rules, and the like.
- Communication via analogy and imagery invites individuals to think about what to do rather than prescribing (ordering) what to do. This allows for new possibilities to emerge. Communication modalities include talk, text, song, dance, music, art, rituals, etc., intended to evoke thinking, feelings, and personal experiences.

In combination these premises suggest contrasting emphases to traditional Western rationality in how to think about and behave regarding systems and change. For example, social order based on immanence, relationships, and communal harmony rather than transcendence, rationally derived “rules,” and individual and system accomplishment become central. Furthermore, they are not part of some “off to the side” moral and/or spiritual practices, but formed the dominant conceptual orthodoxy for Chinese civilization for millennia.

An Alternative Way to Conceptualize Organizational Systems

While a comparative analysis of these two classical philosophies would be worthy of in-depth articulation, that is not the intended focus of this discussion. Instead, the focus is using the premises associated with classical Chinese philosophy to create an alternative culturally based way to think about organizational systems and Dialogic OD. The discussion will be organized around six clusters of premises: world-view, immanence, relationships, harmony, enculturation, and communications.

A Tao-Based World-View

For people enculturated in Western rationality the premises undergirding the classical Chinese world-view are likely experienced as mystical and difficult to fully understand or take seriously. They certainly were for me when I first started in-depth readings about them more than 30 years ago triggered by experiences I had presenting OD and change theories and practices in East Asia. I mention this in case anyone has similar reactions and because they are worthy of serious engagement.

Most fundamental to this way of thinking is the concept and premises associated with the *Tao*, often referred to metaphorically as “the Way.” The existence and manifestations of the *Tao* are given in the earliest Taoist and Confucian philosophies as well as in the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) which both philosophical systems embraced and dates to antiquity. Discussing the *Tao* is difficult because it is considered to be beyond human understanding and cannot even be named because to name it would limit understanding of it in some way and it has no limits. Here are the opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao Tzu (Laozi), one of the founding documents of Taoism:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth. The named is the mother of ten thousand things. (Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, I.1, 1963)

Both Taoist and Confucian philosophers do not try to make definitive statements about what the *Tao* is (or is not). To attempt to define it in any way implies that it is confined to that scope and definition no matter how encompassing. Instead, they suggest implications about it through analogies and metaphors, such as “The Tao is like water, because...” (Feng, 2022).

Given that background and for purposes of the intent of this discussion let me suggest some of the aspects and implications of a world-view that is importantly shaped by the concept of the *Tao*. What follows will be presented as if I am briefly explaining my world-view to you.

The world simply is. It had no beginning and will have no end. There is nothing that exists outside of or beyond what is. Everything is interrelated, mutually implicated, and continually changing. There is nothing that exists separate from or independent of anything else. What I do impacts everything else and everything else impacts me. I act in relationship with others and we seek attunement and harmony with the Tao, the “whole” of everything. The totality of the world and how things manifest themselves is unknowable.

Needless to say, there are many important implications of this world-view. One is the overarching framing that change is inherent and continuous; not causal as in start-stop models of change that require some alteration in force(s) to cause something to change. Other implications that are relevant to this endeavor will be briefly discussed in the following sections on immanence, relationships, harmony, enculturation, and communications.

Immanence

Given a *Tao*-based world-view where there is nothing “outside” of what is, there are only situations where people in interdependent and mutually implicated relationships draw on their knowledge and experiences, consider the context, traditions, and set of interdependencies, and then seek actions that will maintain harmony with the *Tao* and the particulars of the social situation. What to do therefore is determined immanently from among those involved and not from application of some set of ideas and forms of order coming from outside the immediacy of the situation.

Immanence, then, is situational, particularistic and draws on the knowledge, experiences, and emotions of the people involved. This is especially contrasted with transcendent approaches which look outside of the immediate situation for more objective, rationally determined and assumed to be “the right” principles, theories, laws, goals, etc. to determine meanings, actions, and outcomes.

When everything is interdependent and in a continuing state of flux those involved with the specifics of the immediate situation are likely to be in the best position to determine how to proceed in that moment knowing that the specifics will be different in the future. Given that context, a continuing series of more immediate, locally determined actions might make more sense than seeking comprehensive, objective assessments, and plans for lasting one-time changes developed primarily by people, principles, and practices outside of the situation and potentially out of sync with the continually changing circumstances.

It might also be reasonable to assume that social order determined and maintained by people based on their traditions, particular knowledge, lived experiences, relationships, and emotions might also engender greater “ownership,” depth of understanding, and commitment than if established by “outsider” people and ideas.

There is, however, the major concern that local decisional processes absent transcendent “rules” and more objectively determined “facts” will be biased by the self-interests and differential power of those involved, resulting in win-lose dynamics and suboptimal communal outcomes.

Relationships

Relationships is meant to convey a cluster of important ways of thinking and acting. These include an understanding that everyone and everything is inherently in mutually implicated interdependent relationships. Further, that it is people acting in relationship and with relational understandings that determine all thinking, acting, and outcomes. In the classical Chinese world-view there is no separate, independent *you* nor independent *me* rather a mutually interdependent *me* and *you* and *WE* where we each contribute our part of a continually changing whole. For example, *yin* defines *yang* and *yang* defines *yin*. They are complimentary rather than competing aspects and together contribute to the whole, The Great Ultimate (*T'ai Chi*).

Thinking in terms of autonomous individuals behaving (or misbehaving) in self-oriented ways and therefore requiring externally imposed rules in the form of laws,

principles, authoritative directives, operating procedures, etc. to establish and maintain social order is not part of the classic Chinese world-view. Instead, people are assumed to exist as contributing participants in interdependent relationships and are guided by relational thinking and relational processes. Establishing, nurturing, maintaining, and knowing one's part (role) in relationships becomes the primary consideration. When reciprocal relationships are properly carried out harmony results and there will be a just, productive and peaceful society. Consequently, immanent relationships are more important than transcendent rules.

A good example of the difference between relationship and rule driven behavior is provided by the many anecdotes about Westerners trying to enforce the "rules" specified in formal or legal documents while Chinese counterparts expect to "negotiate" what should be done based on the trusted relationship that had been or was being developed between themselves and their counterparts.

Harmony

Harmony is meant to convey alignment, attunement, and the like, with everyone and all things, but not agreement. Agreement results in sameness; whereas harmony is a melding or melody of differences. Acting in harmony with the *Tao*, the natural flow of the world, is an overarching theme, but it also includes behaving in ways to promote harmonious relationships, immanent interactions, and communal outcomes. Acting contrary to the *Tao* disrupts the natural harmony of all things and invites undesirable outcomes. One should behave harmoniously and in accordance with *wu-wei* (no forced action). The ideal is communal harmony which requires individuals to be continually aware of context and their interrelationships with everyone and everything else and thereby contribute their part to the harmony of the whole.

This also means individuals must understand the different roles they might play in different contexts and relationships, for example in one context someone might be a parent or like a parent interacting with their child, while in another the same person might be a child or like a child interacting with their parent. People must also learn the social skills necessary to establish and sustain harmony in the various roles and relationships that define and impact their lives. Skills in deference and accommodation will be especially valued and cultivated. Skills that promote individuality and therefore threaten relational and community harmony would be less valued or discouraged, for example skills in debate, argumentation, self-promotion, "winning out" over another, and the like. Learning the skills needed to both "lead" and "follow" in a mutual dance might be a short hand example.

Enculturation

How do people come to understand the ways in which they are supposed to engage and interact in the world? For example, to understand that relationships are more important than rules? According to the Hall and Ames thesis this is principally accomplished through enculturation.

Enculturation is the process where-in individuals are taught and experientially learn the culturally accepted (and rejected) ways of thinking and acting that allow a person to be a valued and fully contributing member of their native social context. Following the Hall and Ames thesis people raised in Western societies will tend to be enculturated with rational thinking and those raised in (historical) Chinese societies with analogical thinking. This does not mean that no other ways of thinking are possible. Mainly it means that important aspects of the communal culture one belongs to will explicitly and implicitly reinforce one way of thinking over the other.

Hall and Ames posit that the Western cultural preference for rational thinking emerged and was reinforced by a heterogeneous context of diverse peoples and societies with different languages, histories, myths, values, religions, and so on, competing for ascendancy, and needing ways to transcend the differences. This is contrasted with a Chinese cultural experience considered to be more homogeneous (but not without important cultural challenges) and for a much longer period of time.

In the Chinese context greater homogeneity began with the First Emperor's political unification of China and establishment of the *Qin* Dynasty that ended the centuries long Warring States period (475–221 BCE). The main tenants of different streams of Confucian philosophy became central to the cultural unification of China during the following *Han* Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Confucianism was modified from time to time to respond to different philosophical challenges and Chu Hsi's (1130–1200 CE) Neo-Confucian reformation incorporating aspects of Taoism and Buddhism was officially endorsed during the *Song* Dynasty (960–1279 CE) and used by all the subsequent imperial dynasties to maintain order whether led by conquering Mongols (*Yuan* Dynasty, 1279–1368 CE) or Manchurians (*Qing* Dynasty, 1644–1912 CE) until the end of the Imperial period at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Important tenants of Confucianism that were officially endorsed and reinforced included emphasis on communal harmony based on establishing and maintaining interdependent relationships. Those tenants included: the importance of family, relationships, balance, and harmony in all aspects of life; understanding and enacting the reciprocal responsibilities that adhere to all relationships; knowing and performing the proper rituals; following a set of guiding virtues; and accepting responsibility for self-cultivation to become an exemplary person to guide one's own and others' actions.

Although principally based on both Taoist and Confucian philosophies, this cultural world-view and desired behaviors were attributed to antiquity as if they had always existed and had no origin from outside of what always was. For example, Confucius never claimed to be the originator of the ideas and principles he espoused. Instead, he claimed them to be a cultural heritage from an early and idealized period of the *Zhou* dynasty. "The Master said, I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity" (Confucius, *Lun yü*, The Analects, 7.1, 1979).

Communication

The great sages of Confucianism and Taoism imparted their wisdom analogically through such means as metaphors, paradoxes, parables, and historical role

models and not through abstract laws, formulas, logical proofs, rules, and the like. The analogies were suggestive of how one might begin to think about a situation, but avoided narrowly defining and prescribing exactly what to do thereby allowing for new possibilities to emerge. What to do became something to be determined after reflection based on the suggestive analogy. This mode of communication would also invite consideration of people's lived experiences and emotions related to the suggestive analogy, for example one's experiences in their own family if the family metaphor was used to suggest how emperors, ministers, and common people should behave toward each other. As a result, what to do would have been shaped, but not prescribed by an analogical process that intentionally invoked lived experiences, emotions, interdependent relationships, and ideas.

Communication Modalities. Communication modalities included the extensive use of metaphors and other analogies in the form of sayings and explanations. Two examples using water as a metaphor include: Lao Tzu explaining "The highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way" (*Tao Te Ching*, VIII.21) and "While standing by a river, the Master said, what passes away is, perhaps, like this. Day and night it never lets up" (*Lun yü*, The Analects of Confucius, 9.17). Favored metaphors, in addition to water, included how something was like some aspect of: Paths, Wood, Family, Cultivation.

Communication modalities also included use of song, dance, and art as expressive ways in addition to talk and text to convey themes, emotions, and symbolic understandings. For example, traditional Chinese painting symbolically conveys through the use of clouds, water, mist, and open areas that empty space is needed for the generative transformations of *yin* and *yang* (see Cheng, 1994).

Rituals. Knowing and properly enacting rituals associated with all aspects of life and attributed to past more enlightened times was understood to be an important way to inculcate the meanings, values, feelings, and relationships underlying the ritual behavior. For example, how to interact in ways that would elicit coordinated feelings and interactions rather than contention and conflict could be learned and reinforced each time a related ritual was practiced correctly.

Role Models. Responsibility to develop oneself (self-cultivation) to become an exemplary person who would act in alignment with the *Tao* and advance communal harmony was an explicit cultural value used to guide one's own and others' actions.

In Confucianism, this was done by following the Way (the *Tao*) and adhering to the five virtues of benevolence (*Ren*), righteousness (*Yi*), propriety (*Li*), trustworthiness (*Xin*), and wisdom (*Zhi*). One studied and learned in order to become an exemplary person (*Junzi* or *Chün Tzu*), or more rarely a sage (*Sheng jen*), who could serve as a role model of ways of being and doing for others to emulate.

How well one became centered in virtue and could serve as a moral compass promoting values and behaviors contributing to communal harmony was the primary consideration.

Serving as a moral beacon had as much to do with ways of being as doing. Persons in positions of authority were admonished to manifest their virtue and not act in ways contrary to the natural flow of the *Tao*. In Taoism and Confucianism the concept of *wu-wei* advanced the importance of “not doing” (Slingerland, 2003). Two examples from the *Lun yü* (Analects of Confucius) are: “The Master said, The rule of virtue can be compared to the North Star which commands the homage of the multitude of stars without leaving its place” (2.1) and “The Master said, If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action (*wu-wei*) it was, perhaps, Shun. There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south” (15.5).

(Note: In Imperial China the seat of the emperor faced due south).

Several things stand out from this discussion of communication methods. One is the range of ways underlying beliefs, values, and behaviors were explicitly and implicitly communicated to inculcate people with the importance of interdependence, reciprocal relationships, communal harmony, etc. as culturally paramount considerations.

Something else that stands out is the idea that suggestive analogies, rather than well-defined issue or problem statements, will create enough focus and boundaries while inviting discussants to include their own experiences, feelings, and understandings of the local context in developing new possibilities and courses of action.

Finally, the importance of people and especially leaders developing themselves to be role models of core values promoting communal harmony, and to practice *wu-wei*, stands in contrast to leaders developing themselves to take decisive actions that advance their interests and impact others.

A Few Caveats to Keep in Mind

As we transition now from a summary review of some defining aspects of classical Chinese philosophy, it's important to keep in mind that it was developed with the intention of using it as a way to stimulate analogic thinking about Dialogic OD. It is not a complete and authoritative account. It should also not be considered a description of present-day Chinese thinking. I do hope it is fair to say that it provides some insights into traditional aspects of present-day Chinese culture.

Also, given the historic centrality of Confucian philosophy in China and East Asia for thousands of years it's important to clearly state that it was rejected as a guiding philosophy by China and other countries in East Asia at the beginning of the last century. Criticisms of it included that it valued tradition over change, advocated authoritarian and paternalistic leadership, was sexist, and limited thinking about and responding to the encroachment of Western powers into East Asia and China itself.

Some aspects of its value system and social morality have had a revival in recent years especially values around education, societal harmony, the importance of family and relationships, and deference to authority.

Implications for Dialogic OD

The discussion that follows presents some of the insights and ideas that emerged from my thinking analogically about the theory and practice of Dialogic OD using a world-view based on classical Chinese philosophy. The process to do this involved thinking through and summarizing important aspects of a complex philosophical system that was significantly different from my ingrained ways of thinking and reasoning, including the thinking and reasoning that went into my contributions to the original conceptualization of Dialogic OD. The classical Chinese philosophy world-view was used because of the Hall and Ames thesis and because I had some foundation in this way of thinking from my experiences and research in the early 1990s (e.g., 1993). Important aspects of Dialogic OD were then considered from this alternative world-view. This was not a strictly linear process. Ideas and insights emerged during the development and explication of the *Tao*-based world-view and then after the summarization was completed.

Many insights and tentative implications emerged for me from this generative process and a select few, intended to stimulate further thinking by myself and others, are presented here thematically organized as Philosophical Observations and Evocative Questions.

Philosophical Observations

The most obvious observation is how profoundly foundational philosophies impact everything, and in this exercise, dramatically so. The relative absence of discussions in the Western professional literature about the historical philosophical groundings, choices, and biases of OD theories and practices stands out. It should also be noted that some of the recent forms of OD have helpfully included discussions of their philosophical challenges to one or more aspect of earlier forms, for example social reality (social constructionism) versus objective reality (positivism) in Appreciative Inquiry.

Philosophy and Defining Dialogic OD. During the early stages of our conceptualization efforts Gervase Bushe and I tried labeling what is now known as Diagnostic and Dialogic OD in terms of “Modern and Postmodern OD” (Bushe & Marshak, 2007, 2008). We quickly found out, however, that that labeling confounded our intentions and led to misunderstandings or purist debates about what was postmodernism. In fact, the original submission of what became our seminal article (Bushe & Marshak, 2009) was rejected in great part because of using the “Postmodern OD” label. When we resubmitted with revisions centered around the new labels: “Diagnostic OD” and “Dialogic OD” the article was accepted, published, and quickly influenced discussions in both academic and practitioner circles (Oswick & Li, 2023).

I mention this now because of the continuing discussions and debates about what makes something diagnostic or dialogic. This exercise invited analogic thinking about Diagnostic and Dialogic OD in terms of modern (Western) and postmodern (aspects of classical Chinese) philosophies and suggests it might be timely or helpful to re-introduce those philosophical concepts into discussions of what is diagnostic and what is dialogic in Organization Development. Two topic areas worthy of further reflection and speculation in this regard include the following.

First, thinking about OD approaches in terms of the mixture of modern and postmodern premises shaping their practices. The more an approach incorporates postmodern-based premises the more it might be considered a form of “Dialogic OD.” So, for example, we have asserted that Dialogic OD incorporates postmodern premises about social constructionism and the complexity sciences in contrast to Diagnostic OD which we assert is based more on such modernity premises as scientific positivism (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). I would also add that all OD approaches likely have some mix of modern and postmodern premises and/or practices with the degree and impact of the mix perhaps suggesting how the approach might be categorized for analytic purposes.

Secondly, thinking more deeply about the challenges involved when asking leaders who might have been organizationally, professionally and societally enculturated in rational, scientific premises to agree to organizational change approaches based on postmodern assumptions. Furthermore, to adopt leadership roles and behaviors consistent with those assumptions, for example moving away from heroic leadership behaviors and toward more supportive and enabling approaches. One way to dramatize the challenge is to imagine a contracting meeting between a leader enculturated into a classical Chinese world-view and a consultant enculturated into a Western rational world-view. The difficulties would begin just by calling it a “contracting” meeting since that would imply working together on the basis of agreed upon “rules” rather than developing a deeper, trusting relationship.

Both of these topics would require a much greater investment by leadership and change scholars and practitioners in developing the needed ideas, materials, learning experiences, and so on, than is presently the case.

Similarities Between Classical Chinese Philosophy and Dialogic OD Premises. One of the things that surprised me from this exercise is the number of premises or processes in classical Chinese philosophy that are similar to important premises and processes in Dialogic OD. These include the following:

Change is Continuous. There are two aspects of the continuous change premise in classical Chinese philosophy that suggest some possible implications for leader behavior in contemporary organizations confronted with volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) challenges. One is that change and emergence are inherent and continuous processes and will lead to harmonious outcomes when leaders are in attunement with the *Tao*. If a leader is fully attuned and one with the natural ongoing changes no action is needed and actions contrary to the *Tao* will produce unfortunate outcomes.

Another aspect of the premise is that continuous change is occurring in a context where everything is interdependent, mutually implicated, and there are no objective answers outside of the situation and those involved. Given that context, more immediate, locally determined actions make more sense than seeking comprehensive, objective assessments and plans for lasting changes developed primarily by people, principles, and practices outside of the immediacy of the situation and potentially out of sync with the continually changing circumstances.

No Objective Reality Exists Independent of Human Interactions and Meaning Making. The two foundational sets of theories that help define Dialogic OD and distinguish it from Diagnostic OD are: (1) ideas about emergence, self-organization, and continual change drawn from the complexity sciences (Holman, 2015) and (2) ideas about social reality advanced by postmodern social constructionist theories. Social constructionist theories in turn challenge two fundamental premises of modernist rational thinking and behavior. One modernist premise is that an objective reality independent of human interactions and experience exists. In reply, however, “Social constructionism asserts there is no meaningful reality independent of social interactions and agreements” (Barrett, 2015, p. 67). Likewise, in classical Chinese philosophy there is nothing outside of the *Tao* nor independent of the immediacy of the situation and those involved. In brief, there is no objective reality to be found or discovered that exists independent of human experience, interactions, and meaning making.

Consequently, although based in different eras and world-views, both classical Chinese philosophy and social constructionism directly challenge the premise of the independent existence of an objective reality of ideal principles, laws, “truths,” commandments, and so on, that can be discovered through reason and scientific methods. Both, in that regard, challenge one of the fundamental premises underlying Diagnostic OD and are mutually supportive of Dialogic OD.

Relationships and Relational Being. The second fundamental premise, challenged especially by Ken Gergen’s work, is the concept that human beings are separate selves capable of independent thinking and acting. “...Gergen (2009) emphasizes the relational nature of being. Instead of being independent, autonomous beings, who we are and what we know of the world results from relationships; it is impossible to know what anything is outside of the context of a community of beings” (Barrett, 2015, pp 67–68).

Barrett’s quote about Gergen’s work on relational being could equally be applied to classical Chinese philosophy which emphasizes interdependence and relationships. Human beings are not considered to be separate individuals acting independently to advance their own needs and interests. Rather they are understood to be interrelated in interdependent relationships with everyone and everything else and expected to act in ways to promote communal harmony.

Again, although separated by several thousand years, both classical Chinese philosophy and postmodern relational theories of social constructionism directly challenge the premise of autonomous individuals capable of independent thought

and actions to advance their own needs and interests. In a *Tao*-based world-view nothing is independent of anything else. Everything and everyone are interrelated and interdependent.

A Few Evocative Questions

What follows are a few suggestive speculations and questions about different aspects of Dialogic OD with particular emphasis on leadership and consulting in the context of today's VUCA world of continuing complex change.

What if Chaos is Not Chaotic? Presently, highly complex, turbulent, problematic situations with unclear cause and effect relationships, and where no known planning, managing, or scientific methods exist to aid in determining the right course(s) of action are labeled as chaotic where chaos is defined negatively as complete disorder and confusion. In chaotic situations, identifying the objectively correct actions to pursue is not possible because the rapidly changing, complex, and confusing dynamics prevent determination of the causal relationships or identifiable patterns of interactions needing to be addressed and managed (e.g., see Snowden & Boone, 2007).

In a related stream of thinking Heifetz (1998) asserted there are mainly two problematic situations leaders are called upon to address: (1) technical problems, where there is enough clarity to identify the issues and resolve them through known methods, remedies and expertise, and increasingly; (2) adaptive challenges involving chaotic contexts of rapidly changing, highly complex, confusing dynamics and where it can be difficult to even agree on the issues and who all and what all are impacted.

In terms of premises and practices some have suggested Dialogic OD may be better suited than Diagnostic OD in helping leaders deal with chaotic contexts and adaptive challenges (e.g., see Holman, 2015). Prior to this exercise, I mainly agreed with that reasoning. Now I find myself challenged to rethink my thinking. The source of the challenge at its core is the concept of chaos.

If one believes that: (1) an ordered world is preferable to a world of disorder; (2) an independent objective reality discoverable through scientific methods exists; that (3) discovery and application of the right objective principles, laws, theories, and so forth can provide ways to address and resolve highly complex, confusing, and conflictual situations; then (4) diagnostic searching for ways to understand and bring order out of the chaos of adaptive challenges makes sense.

Alternatively, if one believes that: (1) The *Tao* is all; there is nothing that is in or out of "order," only the manifestations of the *Tao*; (2) everything and everyone are interdependent and mutually implicated; and (3) attuning to the *Tao* leads to harmony; then (4) "chaos" in the Western sense does not exist as a concept or separate state of being. There is only the at times more laminar (smooth) or more turbulent flow of an interdependent world that one seeks to harmonize with. One would not seek to "adapt" an organization or oneself to a rapidly changing environment since adaptation implies a degree of separation and independence between organization or self and environment

rather than complete interdependence and mutual implication. Instead, you would join with and play your part in unfolding events by attuning and harmonizing with the *Tao*. Rather than dealing with “chaotic” contexts and “adaptive challenges” what if leaders were asked to become one with the *Tao* and attune themselves and their organizations with unfolding events?

Reframing Chaos as Empty Space. As noted, highly complex, problematic situations with no known planning, managing, or scientific methods to aid in establishing order are presently labeled as chaotic or prone to chaos. What if, however, such situations were labeled differently?

One way of labeling them differently would be to think in terms of *yin* and *yang* the mutually implicated polar aspects of everything that are continually in the process of becoming each other (think the tide comes in and when it has completely come in it will start to go out and when completely out will start to come in). Instead of labeling and thinking about situations without ordering mechanisms as being chaotic a *yin-yang* orientation might think in terms of how a situation is empty or full of effective ordering mechanisms. So, for example considering more orderly situations to be “full,” to some degree, of effective rules and less orderly situations to be relatively “empty” of effective rules. Over time, in *yin-yang* cyclical fashion, empty situations might become full of new ideas and full situations empty of needed innovations. Thinking in terms of empty or full might activate consideration of the ways an organization’s existing plans, structures, policies, budgets, norms, culture, etc. may be blocking needed innovative thinking and would have to be modified or discarded to create enough empty space (or Open Space, see Owen, 1992) for new possibilities to emerge.

In brief then, the absence of order is not in itself chaos, but instead open or empty space available to be filled immanently from limitless possibilities. Furthermore, the current set of “rules” (strategies, structures, systems, policies, practices, priorities, etc.) that fill up how people think may include ones that are outdated and will need to be emptied to create room for new possibilities to emerge.

Leadership Doing and Being. Two aspects of leadership emphasized in classical Chinese philosophy are: (1) the importance of leaders being attuned with and following the Way and (2) leaders who by their personal development (self-cultivation) serve as role models of moral virtue. Both of these aspects emphasize being as much or more so as doing. The elusive Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, often translated as “not doing,” might better be taken to mean “not doing anything contrary to or out of alignment with the *Tao*.” Put another way, “not forcing action.” At the same time, leaders are admonished to develop their moral and virtuous selves to serve as role models for others to emulate. In that sense becoming and being an exemplary person who practices *wu-wei* might be a form of leadership that aligns better with Dialogic OD than the heroic leader model.

Is More Emphasis on Relationship Needed in the Client–Consultant Relationship?. In the scientific rationalism model the role of the OD consultant is to collaborate with the

client in developing and applying participative processes of inquiry and implementation. The consultant and client establish a partnership relationship with clear roles and responsibilities while the consultant maintains a stance of professional objectivity. The dilemma is that the model is presently not working as advertised. Satisfactory answers to the highly complex and rapidly changing challenges confronting contemporary organizations are not being discovered and applied in a timely enough way, if at all (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2020).

If we substitute the premises of a *Tao*-based world-view we experience a different situation. Whatever the context and conditions, whether more smooth or turbulent or anything else, everything is a manifestation of the *Tao* and one seeks to align and harmonize oneself and others with the continually fluctuating flow of all things. People experience themselves as being in interdependent roles with others and with responsibility to establish and maintain communal harmony. Consequently, attention to immanent relationships is more important than trying to discover transcendent “rules” in the form of principles, laws, commandments, directives, etc.

In that model the role of the OD consultant would likely be to contribute to communal harmony by supporting ongoing alignments with the *Tao* rather than seeking comprehensive, objective, diagnostic assessments, and plans for lasting one-time changes that promise to keep everything smooth running. Actions might include special attention to the “being” and “doing” of the “client” and other leaders; being oneself, and coaching others to become, an exemplary role model; and advancing processes that would build local competencies to quickly assess changing interdependencies and initiate responsive harmonizing and re-aligning actions, especially in times of turbulence.

Importantly, the nature of the client–consultant relationship would be influenced by an understanding that the client and consultant might have separate skills and responsibilities but are not two independent actors. Rather they form one interdependent, mutually implicated, relationship that acts in concert to advance communal harmony. The consultant and client would need to establish a relationship of mutual openness and trust with an emphasis on thinking, acting, and being relational from the perspectives of their separate roles and joint responsibilities. Because a stance of “professional objectivity” would be distancing as well as more “rule” than relationship based it likely would be de-empathized in favor of more emphasis on developing a closer, more interdependent relationship.

Interestingly, the decreased effectiveness of the scientific rationalism model to effectively deal with messy, highly complex adaptive challenges has led some to call for shifts in emphases in the client–consultant relationship. For example, in one of his last contributions, Ed Schein (2016) re-visited what he thought was needed in the client–consultant relationship in today’s complex world. He concluded that “... the complex messy problems of today and the future require a new model of helping, coaching and consultation” (p. xv).

The new model he then advocates is based on a need for greater personalization in the client–consultant relationship. This is to be achieved by the consultant moving from maintaining what Schein calls a “Level One type” professional relationship marked by a stance of objectivity and professional distance from a “client” to a

more like “Level Two” type relationship where the client is seen as a unique person(s) with whom you can have a more personal relationship.

According to Schein, this shift enables the quicker establishment of the very high levels of openness and trust needed to determine the best adaptive moves in a context of high uncertainty and complexity. “Though the boundaries between these levels may be quite fuzzy, the principle is that (the new consultation model) requires a Level Two relationship. Professional Level One relationships do not solve or ameliorate complex human problems...” (p. 43).

Schein not only asserts that consultants need to behave in ways to establish deeper, more trusting, more authentic, more vulnerable, and more personal (but not too personal) relationships but that this behavior needs to be exhibited at the very first encounter.

As a final word, Shani et al. (2023), in an article about how and why “collaborative inquiry” is needed in today’s OD, quote Schein as saying in a personal communication to one of the authors:

I am increasingly of the mind that we need to analyze everything in terms of human relationships rather than human beings, that society and organizations are sets of relationships, so a deeper analysis of levels of relationships becomes a crucial conceptual issue. (p. 545)

These then are some of the initial insights, ideas and curiosities that emerged for me from the process of first developing a deeper understanding of a *Tao*-based world-view that emphasizes interdependence not independence, immanence not transcendence, relationships not rules, and social harmony not self-interest; and then re-thinking my understanding of Dialogic OD from that world-view.

At this point none of them are ready for prime time. All require further thought, development, and reality testing. I am reporting them here as a sampling of the type of results that emerged from my cross-cultural generative exercise. Some I will be thinking about and developing or applying further. Some will deservedly be tossed quickly. Some I hope might encourage further development by others.

Closing Reflections on the Current State of Organization Development

One byproduct of studying the interrelated aspects and implications of a *Tao*-based world-view was that it started me thinking in a more focused way about whether or not contemporary organization development has some form of unifying world-view and interrelated premises, principles, and practices. My current thinking is that OD by the end of its foundational period (1940s–1970s) may have had implicit understandings and de facto agreements about many aspects of such a unifying philosophical system, but it seems mostly absent in practice in contemporary OD. Furthermore, the absence of even a

loosely agreed upon world-view may now be one of, if not the most, important factors contributing to the increasingly differentiated assertions of what is or should be considered to be effective OD. Let me briefly explain my thinking.

Foundational OD

Previously, I have argued that a more or less “foundational” form of a planned change approach called organization development had emerged by the early 1970s (e.g., Marshak, 2005, 2014; Bushe & Marshak, 2009). Inspired by the 1930s to 1940s social change theories and applied innovations of Kurt Lewin and his associates, the cornerstones of this approach were added in the 1950s to 1960s. These included: the difference between expert and process consultation; the multistep action research consulting model; team building as a critical component of change; contingency theories of organizations as open systems; data-based diagnostic models of leadership and organizations; and even the name “organization development” itself. By the early 1970s most OD-oriented books, training workshops, certificate and graduate degree programs, and professional associations had coalesced around a more or less common understanding or informal “orthodoxy” about what constituted the basics of organization development theory and practice (see e.g., French & Bell, 1973). For many, then and now, that formulation with some modifications informally constitutes “Foundational OD.”

Challenges to Foundational OD

Challenges to that informal orthodoxy began even as it was being formulated and by the 1980s had accumulated enough to bring into question important parts of the early foundational version of OD. Those challenges and developments included:

1. Greater diffusion of theories, practices, and developments in philosophy and the social and physical sciences which brought into question many of the assumptions of foundational OD.
2. Needs to more quickly and directly impact larger numbers of more diverse, geographically distanced, and interrelated people and organizations.
3. VUCA environments and an expanding list of social, political, and environmental issues and concerns demanding attention.

Ways for OD at the time to respond to the changing organizational needs and challenges were limited or lacking, but new ideas and innovations that differed in important ways from Foundational OD tenants were not immediately embraced. In the practitioner world such important and impactful 1980s innovations as Future Search (Weisbord, 1984; Weisbord & Janoff, 2010), Open Space Technology (Owen, 1992), and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). were initially considered by many, including important OD gatekeepers, to not be OD because they included heterodox challenges to such core foundational premises as the importance

of objective data collection and diagnosis before action; the Lewinian focus on small groups (teams) versus large groups (the whole system); and including whether or not there is an objective reality amenable to scientific discovery and intervention. They and their practitioners remained mostly “Not fully OD” into the 1990s. At that time, perhaps through some combination of their success with dealing with some of the recent developments and challenges, the introduction of the new concept of large group interventions by Bunker and Alban (1992), and values about inclusiveness of colleagues, they were reassimilated and became accepted members of the OD family of small and large group interventions. The heterodox assumptions and practices remained but in the main were downplayed or ignored in favor of more pragmatic considerations of the best ways to do them.

Over the past 20 to 30 years, the *de facto* inclusion of these and other innovations and practices, some of which also include heterodox assumptions and/or practices, countered by assertions of the continuing importance of the orthodox main tenants of Foundational OD (e.g., Worley & Good, 2021), and absent the boundaries and rationale a generally accepted organizing philosophical system could provide about what is and is not OD all seem to now be contributing to a time when almost any premise, practice, or principle in almost any relationship can be claimed by well-meaning advocates to be part of OD.

At issue is not that a wide array of theories and practices are now included or contending to be part of OD. That in itself is a potential source of creative richness to draw upon in responding to contemporary and future organizational needs and challenges. What is of concern is the absence of an updated and renewed understanding of what is or is not organization development that conveys to potential users some consistency about what to expect from OD and also demands well informed choices of theories, interventions and consulting practices by practitioners. And, to be very clear, I don't mean another word-smithed definition statement.

What is Holding Contemporary OD Together?

In the absence of such an organizing philosophical system, what then holds the OD enterprise of practitioners, clients, academics, and other users and providers of its services together and attracts or repels people to/from it? Increasingly I think it's a generally accepted, but loosely defined value system that is expressly humanistic and increasingly concerned with addressing socioecological issues in addition to (or instead of) competitive success measured in terms of economic and financial outcomes (see e.g., Yoon et al., 2021). The mix or emphasis on specific values, however, remains open to contention. For example, Barrett and Duns (2023) recently argued,

(T)he field of OD needs to move beyond its traditional humanistic values and widen its scope to look outside the enterprise, to come to terms with nature as an intrinsic value and what it means to shape organizations in which business can excel, nature can flourish and people can thrive. (p. 263)

A Closing Question

To close this long discussion of insights and curiosities resulting from my cross-cultural exercise and having now arrived at the conjecture that contemporary OD is held together more by a loosely defined value system than anything else, let me pose a question that keeps coming up for me, “Should we consider contemporary Organization Development as a whole with all of its different participants, premises, principles, and practices to be a Field, and if not a Field, then what is it?”

Personally, I now find myself reluctant to call OD a “Field” if what mainly holds it together are shared values. Given the importance of shared values, however, I have wondered if I should think of it more like a movement, the “Organization Development Movement,” but am uncertain if there is enough shared agreement on purpose(s); a movement to do what?

So, I am now thinking of it more like a “Community” whose shared values draw people together and create feelings of belonging, understanding, and possibilities of mutual support and alliance regardless of differences in specific issues, theories, methods, skill sets, and knowledge bases. My current answer, then, is the “Organization Development Community.” How would you or do you answer the question?

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