

# Irony and salvation: A possible conversation between Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi

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This article endeavours to provide a cross-cultural juxtaposition between Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi, two thinkers of significant stature in the history of Eastern and Western philosophy, to unveil a profound congruity between Christian and Daoist thoughts. Specifically, by examining the works of Kierkegaard, particularly his concept of irony and 'transparent self', and exploring the similar key themes present in Zhuangzi's writings, we endeavour to highlight the similarities between Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi. Both of the intellectuals enter the discussion on the process of individual spiritual practice through 'irony' and set their goals on 'salvation', emphasising the importance of the process of spiritual practice, which provides possibilities for dialogues between Christian and Daoist thoughts.

**Contribution:** Previous research frequently underscores the profound differences between Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi. Based on the discussion of certain concepts, this article argues that, analysing the consistency between the two at the level of spiritual practice can help us understand the possibility of dialogue between Christian and Daoist thoughts.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard; Zhuangzi; spiritual practice; irony; salvation.

## Introduction

Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi, two prominent figures in the intellectual histories of the West and East, respectively, persistently elicit profound reflection. However, the discourse regarding points of convergence and divergence in their perspectives remains relatively underdeveloped.

Previous research frequently underscores the superficial parallels and the profound differences between Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi. For instance, Carr and Ivanhoe (2000) highlight the analogous problem consciousness of Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi while accentuating the 'natural theology' characteristics of Zhuangzi's theory and their divergence from the foundational Christianity of Kierkegaard. This precludes us from discerning harmony between Christianity and Daoism within the sphere of comparative religious studies. As elucidated by Chinese Kierkegaard scholar Wang Qi (2006:78), it is difficult for us to draw out the universal phenomenon of religion from the 'non-theistic' Daoism and 'theistic' Christianity. Furthermore, certain conceptual methodologies employed by Carr and Ivanhoe have been subjected to critique. Moeller and Stan (2003) posited that Carr and Ivanhoe inappropriately grafted the Christian concept of 'Salvation' into their analysis of Daoist philosophy without rigorous differentiation, thereby misconstruing the essence of Daoist spiritual practices.

Various scholars (Carr & Ivanhoe 2000; Goicoechea 2003; Moeller & Stan 2003) have asserted that, from Kierkegaard's perspective, the Daoism thoughts of Zhuangzi cannot be juxtaposed with Christianity. Zhuangzi's Daoism thoughts, at most, attain the phase of 'Religion A' ('Ethical-Religion') delineated in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and there persists a decisive chasm between it and Christianity, which is perceived as a 'paradoxical religion'. Commencing from this conclusion, we are compelled to underscore the profound differentiation between Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard.

In contrast to previous research, this article aims to propose that from the perspective of spiritual practice, the philosophical methodologies of Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard share profound congruity. Both of them start from an 'ironic' approach, establishing a certain subject within the process of spiritual practice and then, through a negation of this subject, evoke the ultimate aim of spiritual practice, which is 'salvation'.

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This article first analyses the theoretical approach of Kierkegaard, it primarily necessitates an analysis of the analogy between the 'Socratic irony' underpinning 'Religion A' and the 'paradoxical religion', indicating that 'Socratic irony' serves as the inception of the spiritual practice method and is also an approach to the 'paradoxical religion' in an analogical sense. Subsequently, endeavouring to transcend the distinction of 'Religion A' and 'paradoxical religion' in *Postscript*, this article, predicated on the depiction of the 'self' in the spiritual practice hierarchy delineated in *The Sickness Unto Death*, explores how Kierkegaard argues that the 'transparent Self' is the ultimate stage of spiritual practice (ladder of self-consciousness).

On this foundation, the second part of this article explores Zhuangzi's language strategy and spiritual practice methodology. It seeks to demonstrate that Zhuangzi not only employs ironic linguistic strategies akin to Kierkegaard, but his spiritual practice methodologies of 'equating things' and 'sitting in forgetfulness' are also intimately aligned with Kierkegaard's requisition for a 'transparent Self'. Consequently, if we do not presuppose the specific 'Christian attributes' of the concept of 'salvation', then the philosophical schemes from both Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi share common characteristics that encompass commencing with an ironic linguistic strategy, engaging in spiritual practice, progressively repudiating the established objective reality and the encapsulated, autonomous 'self', seeking spiritual salvation in the 'transparent Self'.

Establishing the unique position of the self about the objective world through 'irony', then negating the self that is isolated from the objective world and acknowledging that an individual cannot genuinely establish such a self, are common trajectories towards 'salvation' for both Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi. This article will elaborate on this in the third part. Commencing with these conclusions, we do not need to differentiate between 'naturalism' and 'revealed religions' in terms of their things of faith, rather, we can construct universal phenomena from the spiritual practices that span across Eastern and Western religious practices.

## Kierkegaard's irony and salvation

### Irony as an analogue of Christian faith

Etymologically, the term 'irony' in all contemporary European languages can be traced back to the ancient Greek word 'εἰρωνεία', which fundamentally signifies 'to conceal or disguise'. However, rather than focussing solely on how Kierkegaard uses irony as a writing technique, it is more crucial to explore how Kierkegaard believes one should live ironically.

In the early stages of his writing career, Kierkegaard devoted himself to the discussion of 'Socratic irony'. In Kierkegaard's perspective, Socrates is the greatest ironist in Western intellectual history. Socratic irony unveils 'ignorance' or 'negation', aiming to lay bare the individual's active pursuit

of truth conflicting with the established external reality. This negation-oriented expression method can assist Socrates in exploring concepts that are challenging for the individual to acknowledge directly. Starting from an analysis of the historical image of Socrates, Kierkegaard (1997:98) distils the 'historical Socrates', attributing the dialogical method leading to 'irony' to Socrates' methodology. The Socratic irony, which commences with 'ignorance' (*Intet vidste*), inevitably culminates in 'fundamental human ignorance' (*Menneskene overhovedet Intet vidste*), which is distinctly different from Plato's emphasis on the unity of thought and existence (*Tænken og Væren*).

Drawing on historical phenomena, Kierkegaard concludes that Socratic irony should be comprehended as a continued 'suspension' or 'negation'. The endpoint of dialogue in Socratic irony is invariably irony, almost always leading to a 'contradiction' or 'aporia'. The negation that irony reaches is invariably a 'negative', characterised by and dwelling upon said 'negation'. The irony, originating from phenomena, has to be returned to phenomena and cannot directly achieve the pure concept. Therefore, Kierkegaard does not consider Socrates to have understood irony as a method for extracting original philosophy or 'concepts' and has not considered 'ignorance' as a higher level of knowledge. For Kierkegaard, discussing the concept of 'irony' necessitates focussing on the individuality of the practitioner of irony. The life of Socrates must be viewed as irony, rather than a realised concept (Kierkegaard 1997:244). Kierkegaard endeavours to comprehend irony as the fundamental mode of Socrates' existence, striving to grasp the essence of this irony: 'Isolation' (Söderquist 2013). Because there is no direct unity between phenomena and the concept, it is impossible to elevate phenomena directly to the concept or to represent existence directly as a concept. However, conversely, existence can be represented through an 'indirect' method.

According to Kierkegaard, the operation of radical irony facilitates the individual's futile attempt to establish and affirm absolute autonomy, preventing the 'self' from truly attaining absolute truth in both inner and outer realms, thus exacerbating the existential predicament. Therefore, this establishment and affirmation can only be conducted by an absolute entity external to oneself, which establishes and creates the 'self'. This led to the necessity to introduce Christian thoughts (Gräb-Schmidt 2009). Even though Socratic irony cannot directly guide the individual to eternal truth, it does sustain itself at the level of existence, making individuals consciously aware of their divergence from 'eternal truth', thereby circumventing the self-affirmation of romantic irony. Therefore, a 'negative analogy' exists between Socratic irony and the truth of the Christian faith. Kierkegaard (1997:65) expressed this as 'the similarity between Socrates and Jesus lies in their dissimilarity'. The role of irony thus lies in returning the individual to oneself through negational activities, recognising their incapacity to resolve or eliminate the gap between individual thought and reality and instead acknowledging this gap. Only indirectly,

by acknowledging one's powerlessness, the individual may finally achieve ironic 'moderation' and ultimately accept divine grace from God as salvation (Frelse) to gain the possibility of realising 'eternal truth'.

Kierkegaard further elucidates the importance of irony for the Christian faith in his *Postscript*. Here, Christian faith is defined as the 'highest passion of subjectivity'. Kierkegaard understands the constitution of 'subjectivity' as a generative process, with irony being a pivotal component, its ultimate aim is to achieve 'eternal happiness' or 'Salvation'. Initially, in the primary stage of the individual's existence, that is the aesthetic stage, one can perceive the existence of 'suffering', which signifies the real connection between the living being and the ultimate goal. Individuals in the aesthetic stage often interpret it as external, incidental misfortune, seeking to evade this suffering through various means (such as aesthetic activities like poetry), without comprehending the profound connection between suffering, 'self' and 'inwardness' ('Inderlighed'), thereby losing 'inwardness' while avoiding 'suffering' (Kierkegaard 2002:402–404).

Irony catalyses an individual's transition from the aesthetic stage. As previously mentioned, the act of irony persistently negates fixed elements in individual existence, dissociating the self as an active subject from the directly given life situation. However, the actions of an individual have boundaries. In the 'ethical stage', the individual perceives their boundaries with the universally acknowledged 'absolute paradox' yet fails to realise the absolute difference between oneself and the 'absolute paradox'. In the terms of Kierkegaard, this is a lack of 'guilt-consciousness', a profound expression of the relationship between the individual and 'the God' (Kierkegaard 2002:504). Only when the individual faces the 'absolute paradox' with an all-encompassing 'self-consciousness' connected to eternal happiness, does the so-called 'religious stage' and the final religious stage appear. However, until then, the method to establish a relationship with 'eternal happiness' still stems from cultivating the 'guilt-consciousness' within the individual. Kierkegaard (2002:487) refers to this as the 'eternal recollection' of 'guilt-consciousness', which essentially remains an internal factor. In 'guilt-consciousness', the same subject essentially becomes sinful by associating sin with the relationship to eternal happiness. This identity of the subject means that sin does not make the subject someone else, which constitutes a rupture.

Guilt-consciousness that still lies essentially in immanence is different from the consciousness of sin. In guilt-consciousness, it is the same subject, who by holding the guilt together with the relation to an eternal happiness becomes essentially guilty, but the identity of the subject is such that the guilt does not make the subject into someone else, which is the expression for a break. (Kierkegaard 2002:484)

Therefore, the negation of the externally established reality through irony and maintaining the individual's 'ignorance' does not establish a genuine connection between the

individual and 'eternal happiness'. The individual in irony is incapable of negating oneself but cannot transcend the boundaries of 'ignorance'. Consequently, within the context of irony, the individual is far from the pinnacle stage of subjective development, that is, embracing the 'paradoxical' characteristic of 'paradoxical religion' (Christianity), accepting the paradoxical grace of God contained therein and consequently attaining salvation.

Based on this conclusion, there is an insurmountable qualitative leap between the ethical-religious ('Religion A') path led by irony and the 'paradoxical religion' ('Religion B', Christianity). However, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard unveils the dialectics behind this vast difference, further validating why the 'difference' itself becomes the crux of the analogy between Socratic irony and Christian salvation.

### The transparent self and the salvation of self-awareness in despair

Contrary to the 'non-Christian' perspective presupposed in *Postscript*, *The Sickness Unto Death* unfolds from the viewpoint of an 'exceptional Christian'. Although Kierkegaard, in *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Postscript*, similarly perceives the Christian faith as the ultimate stage of individual spiritual practice, offering the conditions for achieving salvation, *The Sickness Unto Death* explores the question of 'how one can have faith' from a different viewpoint. In *Postscript*, the formation of the Christian faith is accomplished through an incessant fortification of 'subjectivity', a process that is supplanted in *The Sickness Unto Death* by the intensification of 'self-consciousness'.

According to Kierkegaard, the first level of 'self-consciousness' concerns the ignorance of 'having an eternal self', followed by an understanding of 'having a self in which there is something eternal'. Kierkegaard (2006) describes the climax of the above-mentioned level as 'despairingly wanting to be oneself', defining this state's 'self' as an 'enclosed self'. Compared to the paradoxical shift from ethics-religion (subjectivity equals truth) to 'paradoxical religion' (subjectivity equals non-truth) in *Postscript*, the gradient change in self-awareness in *The Sickness Unto Death* no longer contains such paradoxical contradictions.

For Kierkegaard, the highest stage in the gradations of self-awareness involves the 'self' transitioning from being 'enclosed' towards 'transparently reliant on the power that constitutes it'. In this context, the 'self' initially manifests as a 'synthetic relationship', associating the direct 'I' with the reflective 'self' or 'me'. However, it can also be perceived as a 'third element' that connects two opposing elements (Larsen 2015; Sousa 2012). Its essence lies not in self-reflection, but in negating the self-reflective 'self', preventing it from being an enclosed, independent subject. This shift from 'enclosed' to 'transparent' imparts dual theoretical implications. Firstly, the 'transparency' of the self signifies the negation of an independent, eternally seeking subject; secondly, while the

independent, self-governing subject is negated, the self also presents itself as open to others, existing within the relationship between itself and 'the power beyond the self'. Therefore, the 'self' as a conscious subject is both invalidated and re-established. Considering the process of establishing a relationship between the 'self' and God, a dual negation is required for the 'self'. Compared to the infinite negation constructed on the language level by irony, there is a greater need for the negation of an enclosed 'me' in the process of establishing a relationship. This more profound negation opens up the possibility for salvation.

According to Kierkegaard, the transition from 'enclosed' to 'transparent' does not necessitate a positive explanation of the Christian concept of God. Alternatively, one does not need to persistently adhere to the paradoxical nature of God's grace as fixed content. In Kierkegaard's (2006:205) view:

No one considers that what the world, confused simply by too much knowledge, needs is a Socrates ... So it could very well be that our age needs an ironic-ethical correction such as this – this may actually be the only thing it needs – for obviously it is the last thing it thinks of. Instead of going beyond Socrates, it is extremely urgent that we come back to this Socratic principle – to understand and to understand are two things – not as a conclusion that ultimately assists men in their deepest misery.

In Kierkegaard's perspective, compared to speculative philosophy, 'a bit of Socratic unreason' could more effectively help us maintain the absolute distinction between knowledge and ignorance. Based on this, individuals can more accurately recognise that sin must be positively earmarked as something that speculative philosophy cannot negate. Socratic self-awareness can guide us towards the boundary of this definition. However, it is only in the dimension of 'facing God' that the actual presentation of 'sin' and its counterpart, faith, becomes evident. Therefore, Socratic indirect communication makes expressions of sin and salvation possible. Dialectical variance underpins the relationship of 'Religion A' guided by Socratic irony and 'paradoxical religion'. As 'paradoxical religion' cannot be directly conveyed through language, the individual must articulate the discrepancy between their understanding of eternity in ethical religiosity and their actual eternal well-being.

In summary, 'Socratic irony' insists on a crucial method: maintaining an absolute distinction between knowledge and ignorance. Not only does it negate established objective knowledge, but it also subtly denies the ability to form any objective knowledge about 'ignorance' itself. Facing 'ignorance' inevitably leads to a state of 'ignorance about ignorance' or the negation of 'ignorance', compelling the individual to acknowledge that an enclosed, independent, self-referential self should likewise be negated. The 'transparent self' formed through this negation represents the final stage of individual self-awareness development, which leads to 'salvation'. Therefore, Socratic irony has a concrete connection with the process of spiritual practice. This connection manifests in two ways. Firstly, Socratic irony allows the subject to return to its 'self'. Secondly, it enables

the 'self' to recognise its deficiencies as 'self', thereby opening itself to 'salvation' through its actions. Accordingly, if 'irony' is the path that initiates spiritual practice, then 'salvation' serves as the goal of this path.

Based on the above analysis, the highest stage of individual spiritual practice is not a positive elucidation of a 'power beyond oneself', but an indirect conveyance of awareness of 'power beyond oneself' through the dual negation of objective reality and subjective selfhood. In conclusion, the 'self' in the context of 'paradoxical religion' is led by irony through a double negation to become the 'transparent self', which is the ultimate aim of spiritual practice. The essential step to achieving this aim is to recognise and embrace the 'power beyond self'. Kierkegaard understands salvation in this sense and closely associates it with the 'self' led by irony. 'paradoxical religion', Socratic irony and the ensuing 'ethics-religion', despite their key differences, can be seen as varying stages in the gradation of self-awareness, embodying common methodologies of spiritual practice.

## Zhuangzi's irony and salvation

### Language strategy and its philosophical significance in Zhuangzi

In Zhuangzi's perspective, the life of human beings needs to be rescued (or we can say, needs salvation), attributed to the fact that individual existence strays from the 'Dao' (道) in daily life, thus distancing from its authentic existence. The process of individual spiritual practice is a quest for salvation, a quest to identify the true relationship between the individual and the 'Dao'. This process too initiates with an ironic-style negation and experiences a more profound dual negation.

Zhuangzi's contemplation of life diverges from other pre-Qin philosophers who start from and base their thinking on 'human nature'. Instead, Zhuangzi begins with and grounds his ideas on the 'predicaments' of personal existence, seeking ways to transcend these difficulties (Cui Dahua 1992:142). In this sense, Zhuangzi confronts issues similar to Kierkegaard's, neither attempting to provide a systemic explanation of transcendent existence, but rather exploring how an individual might discuss it. From this perspective, it is understandable why Zhuangzi (2013) highly emphasises language limits:

The Dao has its reality and its signs but is without action or form. You can hand it down, but you cannot receive it; you can get it, but you cannot see it. (Zhuangzi 2013:45)

'So [I say,] those who divide fail to divide; those who discriminate fail to discriminate ... The Great Way is not named; Great Discriminations are not spoken ... If the Dao is made clear, it is not the Way. If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice. (Zhuangzi 2013:13–14)

Following this logic, human language inherently has a definitive negating function. Any attempt to express the 'Dao' through language ultimately cannot succeed.

Yet, Zhuangzi still uses language to articulate his viewpoints, attributing a dual function to language. He criticises the use of daily language to explain the 'Dao', yet paradoxically, the confusion in the conception of the 'Dao' by language must be clarified by language itself. Thus, language should acquire a theoretical significance different from everyday language. In Zhuangzi's philosophy, the articulation of 'Dao' assumes a role similar to Kierkegaard's irony:

Not to understand is profound; to understand is shallow. Not to understand is to be on the inside; to understand is to be on the outside ... The Dao cannot be heard; heard, it is not the Dao. The Dao cannot be seen; seen, it is not the Dao. The Dao cannot be described; described, it is not the Dao. That which gives form to the formed is itself formless. (Zhuangzi 2013:184)

Based on the above analysis, we can at least summarise the four limitations of the use of language: the boundaries of the cognising subject, the variability of the relationship between the object and the cognising subject, the diversity of cognitive criteria and the constraints of language itself. For Zhuangzi, cognisance and speech, subject to these four limitations, fail to deliver a true articulation of ultimate existence (Dao). Instead, they solely offer negative descriptors. Thus, the first step towards approaching ultimate existence (Dao) involves continuously negating specific cognisance and speech, treating cognition and speech themselves as finite, negative individual activities. Starting from such a negational linguistic method, Zhuangzi's employment of everyday language displays an ironic attitude akin to Kierkegaard. Also, similar to Kierkegaard, the transcendence of mundane language offered by irony only serves as the starting point for Zhuangzi's spiritual practice. To approach the Dao, Zhuangzi centralises methods such as 'Making all things equal and I' (齐物我) and 'sitting in oblivion' (坐忘). Starting from negating objective reality and its associated specific speech, Zhuangzi's spiritual practice points towards a deeper 'oblivion' or negation.

### The spiritual practice methods in Zhuangzi

For Zhuangzi, the spiritual practice directed towards 'oblivion' essentially points to a further negation of the 'self'. The negation of the 'self' forms the core of Zhuangzi's methodology of spiritual practice and ultimately compels the subject in practice to confront the 'power beyond oneself'. The individual life is thus liberated (or saved) from various limitations.

Zhuangzi elaborated on his spiritual practice methods in two chapters, *Qiwulun* (Discussion on Making All Things Equal) and *Dazongshi* (The Great and Venerable Teacher). As discussed previously, an ironic negation method constitutes the starting point of Zhuangzi's spiritual practice. 'Making all things equal' is a thinking method that negates the difference between things and between humans and things. Looking at the logical progression in *Qiwulun*, Zhuangzi initially intends to highlight the absurdity of seeking the ultimate existence (Dao) through words. This quest for Dao is inevitably associated with and shaped by a subject. The

recognition of 'things' and their limitations must be traced back to the relationship between subject and object ('things').

Zhuangzi's approach requires the existence of the subject of spiritual practice, which is evident.

Admittedly, Zhuangzi introduces a 'mind like dead ash' or the 'heartless' state at the beginning of the chapter, it implies the loss of all activities; external things do not have any influence on the mind. The mind seems to be non-existent, yet it indeed exists, establishing the premise for the later emergence of 'I have lost myself'. From a traditional perspective, the verb 'equalising' in *Qiwulun* seems to erase the difference between 'I' and 'things'. He also states:

Everything has its 'that' (things/things), everything has its 'this'(I). From the point of view of 'that', you cannot see it; but through understanding, you can know it. So I say, 'that' comes out of 'this', and 'this' depends on 'that' – which is to say that 'this' and 'that' give birth to each other. (Zhuangzi 2013:10)

Accordingly, 'that' or 'things', and 'I' are mutually defined. However, if we only focus on the relationship between 'this' and 'that', we may overlook the subsequent sentence 'From the point of view of "that", you cannot see it; but through understanding, you can know it'. Upon closer inspection of the sentence, the seemingly mutually determinative relationship subtly leans towards 'this'. From the perspective of 'myself', a seeing or knowing subject cannot gain knowledge from any other place ('that') different from 'this'. This echoes the previous sentences such as 'without myself, there is nothing to take' and 'everything takes for itself', so that 'I' is presented as the subject of 'take' and others are established as the things being utilised. Therefore, 'that' is not an objective object independent of the subject who 'takes'. When 'that' is constituted as 'that' by 'myself', it already carries the mark of 'myself' (Su 2021; Yang 2020).

Furthermore, based on the above discussion, Zhuangzi advocates 'Making all things equal and I', negating 'I' as a unique subject independent and separated from 'things'. This point is also articulated at the beginning of *Qiwulun*:

Ziqi of South Wall sat leaning on his armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing – vacant and far away, as though he'd lost his companion. Yan Cheng Ziyou, who was standing by his side in attendance, said, 'What is this? Can you really make the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the armrest now is not the one who leaned on it before!' Ziqi said, 'You do well to ask the question, Yan. Now I have lost myself. Do you understand that? You hear the euphony of men, but you haven't heard the euphony of earth. Or if you've heard the euphony of earth, you haven't heard the euphony of Heaven!' (Zhuangzi 2013:7)

In the aforementioned text, the phrase 'I have lost myself' succinctly encapsulates the philosophy of Zhuangzi. At first glance, 'I' [吾] and 'myself' [我] bear near synonymous meanings in Chinese, both appear to express a simplistic negation of self. Yet, considering its etymology, 'myself' carries connotations of 'inclining'. In the *Analytical Dictionary*

of *Characters* (说文解字), Xu Shen (1963) states that the word 'myself' (我) refers to oneself or 'incline to'. In this context, 'myself' is a more explicit, directive term for 'self'. Chen Jing (2001) posits that in *Zhuangzi*, 'myself' exists within objectified relations, perpetually within object-self, human-self, yourself, myself, right and wrong, oppositional relationships, manifests form and state based on different things. Therefore, the word 'myself' demonstrates a unique characteristic, serving as the 'focal point' in the relationship between the subject and other 'things', thereby making all relationships concentrate on and 'incline' to 'myself'. From this point of view, 'I have lost myself' implies a denial of 'myself'.

The theory of 'Three Euphonies' may also support this conclusion. According to Meng Zhuo (2020), Zhuangzi introduces the 'Three Euphonies (heavenly, earthly, and human)' discussing the mechanisms of forming techniques and shapes, further elucidating 'myself' that corresponds to earthly euphony. Different hollows of the earth are filled by the wind of the heavenly euphony, forming varied and numerous sounds. This movement into holes, corners and specific mental and physical existences is the genesis of the emergence of 'myself'. The specificity and peculiarity of 'myself' exhibit an 'incline' characteristic. It differentiates itself from the world. Therefore, 'I have lost myself' actually signifies the loss of 'self' formed by words and cognition. As the meanings of 'loss', 'disappearance' and 'oblivion' are closely intertwined in the texts of Waring State Time, 'lost self' could be interpreted as the absence or forgetting of 'myself'. This aligns with the 'forgetting both things and self' method proposed in *Dazongshi*. The spiritual practice of 'irony' does not seek to deny the objective world or 'myself' but strives to explore a new understanding of 'myself' from the negation of the objective world and self-sufficient subjects. In the state of 'forgetting both things and self', the distinction between things and myself becomes as illusory as the difference between things. 'Myself' is not a self-contained existence independent of 'things' but can accept its inherent relationship with 'things', a relation unattainable by a 'self' distinguished from 'things'. Therefore, the ultimate stage of spiritual practice resides in the dual negation, oblivion of 'myself' and 'things'. The 'I' in 'forgetting' as a state of 'encountering' exhibits the relation between the subject and its things after negating a closed 'myself'. In this context, 'I' is not in opposition to external things but exists in a 'transparent', unobstructed relation with them. This provides the possibility for 'myself' to truly establish a relationship with the Dao. Therefore, for Zhuangzi, just as the same for Kierkegaard, the significance of irony can also be extended from the linguistic level to the existential level, as he believes that language directly constitutes an obstacle to existence. Irony, as a negation of language, is essentially a negation of the limitations of returning to oneself. However, this negation must delve deeper, as the 'self' returned to through irony also constitutes a limitation. The true removal of limitations is not achieved by a certain 'self' or 'non-self', but by the 'I' that serves as the real goal of spiritual practice.

In summary, the methods of 'Making all things equal and I' or 'forgetting both things and self' commence with the 'irony' of language eliminate the restrictions formed by a common language and then further underscore the limitations of language activities initiated by language users themselves. However, eliminating the constraints of both objectivity and subjectivity does not equate to dissolving the 'self' into a changing, ineffable world. Zhuangzi's irony, in fact, attempts to awaken the awareness of the subjective 'I' through the negation of the limited 'self'. This can only be attained through the negation of the 'self'. In this sense, the subjective 'I' emerges through the transcending and negating power over the 'self'. Hence, we can argue that the spiritual pursuits in Zhuangzi's philosophy ultimately align with those of Kierkegaard; both strive to cultivate an ideal personality through spiritual practice. For Kierkegaard, within the Christian context, the emergence of an ideal subjective personality ('transparent self' connected with God) is termed 'salvation'. Similarly, Zhuangzi views individuals confined by language as being in a state of ignorance. They require elevation to a higher state, not achieved solely by the 'self', but somewhat reliant on the relinquishment of the 'self', aided by the active power of the 'Dao'. This parallels Kierkegaard's notion of 'salvation', which signifies a transformation beyond an individual's capability, a transition that essentially negates the self.

## Conclusion

Drawing from our preceding analyses, it becomes evident that both Zhuangzi and Kierkegaard articulate a profoundly consistent process of individual spiritual practice, that is, a pathway to salvation characterised by a dual negation method. Both figures maintain scepticism about defining or describing an ultimate existence beyond the individual's practice process. Zhuangzi persistently underscores the chasm between linguistic, conceptual definitions and the Dao, while Kierkegaard emphasises the necessity for the individual to adhere to the Socratic method, speaking of faith through indirect analogies, rather than seeking to 'transcend Socrates'. The 'Daoist ironical idiot', as proposed by Moeller (2008:122), does not even recognise his ignorance. In a similar sense, the Kierkegaardian 'self' cannot define its state of 'ignorance'. Recognising one's ignorance of 'ignorance' is indeed the prerequisite for moving toward the 'transparent self'. This viewpoint aligns with both Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi's theoretical inclination.

As such, perceiving the differences between Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi as opposing reveals that theology and natural theology do not genuinely align with their ideas and may obscure the potential for intellectual dialogue between their philosophies.

Firstly, Kierkegaard does not advocate for a positive representation of the object of belief. Instead, Kierkegaard seeks to illustrate the harm of 'direct communication' to the Christian faith. Expressing faith, including the confession of the Sin, can only be accomplished within the gradient change of self-consciousness, that is, the denial of the self-affirming

'self'. Zhuangzi similarly criticises the self-affirming 'self', though he does not employ the concept of Sin.

Secondly, we cannot comprehend Zhuangzi's ideas through notions such as 'naturalism' or 'relativism' (Stokes 2016). Zhuangzi employs an 'ironical' method to eliminate the absolute differences between things and oneself, meanwhile flipping around to understand the relationship between the self and things anew. The resulting relationship is one of transparency between the self, things and the Dao, in which the emphasis on the fluidity of nature acts as a necessary segment.

The amalgamation of these two points provides us with a theoretical foundation for reevaluating the relationship between Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi. If neither has a strictly analogous religious disposition or naturalist presuppositions, we have ample reason to abandon such premises. The outcome suggests that both philosophers concentrate on the spiritual practice, suspending direct knowledge of ultimate existence derived from reason and, thus, encouraging an 'indirect communication' that makes it possible for an individual to accept the ultimate existence (God/Dao) (Xie 2014).

In essence, despite the fundamental ontological differences between the two cultures, they imply a method that allows life to become fundamentally consistent in reaching the ultimate existence. This method does not rely on any specific ultimate existence and thus can pave the way for interfaith dialogue. The insights from our studies suggest a possibility of dialogue within different traditions in Christianity and Daoism, rooted in the process of spiritual practices. Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi both attempt to reveal the limitations of straightforward religious discourse and the close relationship between indirect discourse and spiritual practices. Whether adopted from Christian or Daoist traditions, establishing a spiritual practice begins with irony, leading to the path of individual spiritual salvation.

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### Author's contributions

P.Y declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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