7.2 The Tao

The name “Taoism” was first coined by Han scholars to refer to the philosophy developed by Lao Tzu. As the name implies, central to this philosophical view is the notion of Tao, often translated as the “way of nature.” Lao Tzu is the alleged author of a book popularly known as the Tao Te Ching (also called the Tao Tzu).

We have legends about Lao Tzu and when he lived, but we have very little firm historical information. According to tradition he was a contemporary of Confucius (551–479 BCE), but some scholars have placed his book later, during the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE).

The Tao Te Ching is a classic of world literature. Each time you come back to it, you will find something new and profound. However, the first time you read it you are likely to find it obscure. This is why I have included the translator’s comments along with the translation.
You may find it obscure for a variety of reasons. First, it is written in a poetic and cryptic style. Poetry employs symbols and metaphors, uses paradoxes and unexpected contrasts in order to stimulate thought. It thrives on ambiguity. Second, this is a translation from ancient Chinese, and our English words often do not convey the richness of the Chinese concepts. Third, although 80 percent of the book deals with ethics (how one should live) and politics (what is the best way to govern), the rest deals with difficult metaphysical issues about the basic principles of reality, and it is these metaphysical portions of the text that are included here.

According to Aristotelian logic, a good definition should be positive. But what if there are realities that transcend the definitional abilities of human language? In such cases (and the Tao is such a case), the best we might hope for are negative indications, analogies, metaphors, and symbols.

Taoism has been characterized as a process ontology in contrast to a substance ontology. Process ontologies emphasize change and becoming as fundamentally real. In addition, they often emphasize the interrelatedness of an everflowing reality in which nothing is totally independent. Substance ontologies emphasize permanence and unchanging being as fundamentally real. Reality, it is thought, is made up of one or more substances that can exist independently.

Before you plunge into this bewildering, fascinating, and thought-provoking book about the Tao, it may be helpful to say something about some of the key concepts of Taoism. Let us begin with the word Tao itself.

The word Tao means “road” or “way” in Chinese. Before Lao Tzu, the word had been used by the Confucians to refer to the way of humans, that is, the proper way that human beings ought to live. Lao Tzu extends the term and gives it a cosmic and metaphysical meaning (at least according to some interpreters). It now becomes the way of the universe and the source of all reality. Reality consists of all the sorts of things we think exist (which we can classify as being) as well as what we take to be nonexistent (which we can classify as nonbeing). Already we encounter something odd from a traditional Western perspective. How can the nonexistent be real? Where we tend to identify the real with what exists (being) and the unreal with what does not (nonbeing), the Taoist distinguishes between reality and existence so that both the existent and nonexistent can be classified as real.

Since the Tao is the source of all reality, it is not a thing (a being or a substance). It is beyond distinctions and hence beyond the definitional powers of language. To define is to distinguish. But how do you define that which is the source of all distinctions? So the Tao is called “the nameless,” that is, the indefinable.

This negative designation suggests that the Tao is closer to nonbeing than to being, and indeed, Taoists say the Tao is nonbeing. But it is not nonbeing in the Western sense of total nothingness. It is nonbeing in the sense of “no-thingness.” It is real, but not a thing. Hence, it is compared to a positive emptiness, that is, an emptiness (like the hollow of a bowl) that makes being (the usefulness of the bowl) possible. This notion of nonbeing as positive and creative is a unique insight of the Tao Te Ching. For the Greeks and much of the Western tradition since the Greeks, something cannot come from nothing. Nothing is absolute nothingness. It is a totally negative void. Lao Tzu sees things differently. Something can come from nothing; indeed, this whole marvelous universe did come from the no-thing that is the way of all things.

Te can be translated as “virtue,” “power,” or “excellence,” so the title of Lao Tzu’s mind-expanding poem has been translated as “The Book of the Way and Its
Power.” It is a book (ching) about the excellence of the Tao. Te is sometimes thought of as the Tao itself viewed from the perspective of individual things. The excellence (perfection, power) of each thing is called its te, and this is the Tao manifesting itself on the individual level. To actualize the potential of one’s nature in an excellent way is to exhibit te. For humans (as for all natural things), this actualization occurs by living in accord with the Tao.

Wuwei literally means “no action” and refers to the manner in which the Tao acts. The way that is no-thing acts by not acting! This rather mysterious claim can be elucidated somewhat by looking at the various levels of meaning of wuwei. Lao Tzu provides advice to rulers in his book. He tells them to govern according to wuwei. In this political context, wuwei means that rulers should not interfere unnecessarily in the lives of the people. In other words, the less government, the better. On a moral level, wuwei means acting unselfishly and spontaneously, free of all selfish attachment to the consequences of our actions. And on the cosmic level, wuwei refers to the way nature acts—spontaneously, freely, and naturally. There is nothing artificial in natural events. Nature does not calculate how to act, it just acts.

Finally, we need to speak of the Taoist use of the yin/yang concept. The Taoists adopted this concept to characterize the universe that stems from the Tao. Yin and yang stand for complementary opposites: yin for all things that manifest a passive or receptive force; yang for all things that manifest an active or aggressive force. The passive and the active are complementary opposites; you cannot have one without the other.

There is a little bit of yang in yin and a little bit of yin in yang. In time, opposites will change into each other. Hence, the universe is essentially a vast, harmonious process. This can be illustrated by the seasonal cycle. Winter is the most yin season because it is cold and dark, and life processes are slow. However, winter contains an element of yang, which expands over time until we reach spring with its warmth, light, and flourishing life. Yang continues to expand and reaches its zenith in summer. Yet summer contains an element of yin, which expands into fall and eventually winter again. Such is the operation of Tao by means of yin and yang.

So the Tao, which is not a thing, acts naturally, freely, spontaneously, unselfishly, without force, thereby producing and sustaining a universe of harmonious processes in such a way that it is possible for each individual thing to manifest its own excellence. This is the way of nature, the way of reality. I hope this profound vision of reality whets your appetite for more. Read on, and as you do, see if you can answer the following questions.
Tao Te Ching

LAO TZU

1

The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Named is the mother of all things.
Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety,
And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome.
The two are the same,
But after they are produced, they have different names.
They both may be called deep and profound.
Deeper and more profound,
The door of all subtleties!

COMMENT

This is the most important of all chapters, for in one stroke the basic characteristics of Tao as the eternal, the nameless, the source, and the substance of all things are explicitly or implicitly affirmed. It is no wonder the opening sentences are among the most often quoted or even chanted sayings in Chinese.

The key Taoist concepts of the named and the nameless are also introduced here. The concept of name is common to all ancient Chinese philosophical schools, but Taoism is unique in this respect. Most schools insist on the correspondence of names and actualities and accept names as necessary and good; Taoism, on the contrary, rejects names in favor of the nameless. This, among other things, shows its radical and unique character. To Lao Tzu, Tao is nameless and is the simplicity without names; when names arise, that is, when the simple oneness of Tao is split up into individual things with names, it is time to stop.

The cardinal ideas of being and non-being are also important here, for in Taoism the nameless (wu-ming) is equivalent to non-being and the named (yu-ming) is equivalent to being. For this reason, when he comments on the saying about the named and the nameless, Wang Pi says, “All being originated in non-being.” As students of Chinese thought well know, the ideas of being and non-being have been dominant throughout the history of Chinese philosophy. They are central concepts in Neo-Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, and also Neo-Confucianism. It was the importance of these concepts, no doubt, that led the Neo-Confucianist Wang An-shih to deviate from tradition and punctuate the phrases “always be no desires” and “always be desires” to read “Let there always be non-being, so we may . . . ,” and “Let there always be being, so we may . . . .”

Wang’s punctuation not only underlines the importance of these ideas; it also shows the new metaphysical interest in Neo-Confucianism. Confucianism had been fundamentally ethical in tradition, but under the impact of Buddhist and Taoist metaphysics, the Neo-Confucianists developed Confucianism along metaphysical lines.

ase, in substituting the ideas of being and
ng for the ideas of having desires and
to desires, Wang shows a greater recog-
nize the philosophical content of the Lao
t deserves.

the people of the world all know beauty as
uty,
aris the recognition of ugliness.
ay they all know the good as good,
aris the recognition of evil.
foe:
ng and non-being produce each other;
iscuit and easy complete each other;
ng and short contrast each other;
gh and low distinguish each other;
and and voice harmonize each other;
nt and behind accompany each other.
fore the sage manages affairs without
ction
d spreads doctrines without words,
 things arise, and he does not turn away
om them.
roduces them but does not take possession of
em.
acts but does not rely on his own ability,
completes his task but does not claim
redit for it.
is precisely because he does not claim credit
that his accomplishment remains with him.

IENT

everything has its opposite, and that these
es are the mutual causations of each other,
basic part of Chuang Tzu’s philosophy
Chinese philosophy. It is important to
at opposites are here presented not as ir-
able conflicts but as complements. The
nal Chinese ideal that opposites are to be
ized and harmonized can be said to have
ted with Lao Tzu.
idea of teaching without words antici-
he Buddhist tradition of silent transmission
the mystic doctrine, especially in the Zen
school. This is diametrically opposed to

the Confucian ideal, according to which a su-
rior man acts and thus “becomes the model of
the world,” and speaks and thus “becomes the
pattern for the world.” It is true that Confucian-
ists say that a superior man “is truthful without
any words,” but they would never regard silence
itself as a virtue.

4

Tao is empty (like a bowl).
It may be used but its capacity is never
exhausted.
It is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of all things.
It blunts its sharpness,
It unties its tangles.
It softens its light.
[It becomes one with the dusty world,]
Deep and still, it appears to exist forever.
I do not know whose son it is.
It seems to have existed before the Lord.

COMMENT

This chapter, on the substance and function of
Tao, shows clearly that in Taoism function is no
less important than substance. Substance is fur-
ther described in chapters 14 and 21, but here,
as in chapters 11 and 45, function (yung, also
meaning “use”) is regarded with equal respect.
There is no depreciation of phenomena, as is the
case with certain Buddhist schools. To describe
the world as dusty may suggest a lack of enthu-
siasm for it; indeed both Buddhism and later
Taoism employ the word “dust” to symbolize
the dirty world from which we should escape. It
is significant to note, however, that Taoism in its
ture sense calls for identification with, not escape
from, such a world.

6

The spirit of the valley never dies.
It is called the subtle and profound female.
The gate of the subtle and profound female
Is the root of Heaven and Earth.
It is continuous, and seems to be always existing.
Use it and you will never wear it out.
COMMENT

The valley and the female, like the infant and water, are Lao Tzu’s favorite symbols for Tao. The symbol of the valley is employed again and again. There is nothing mysterious about it or its spirit; it simply stands for vacuity, vastness, openness, all-inclusiveness, and lowliness or humility, all of which are outstanding characteristics of Tao. This is the interpretation of Wang Pi, and commentators, with only a few exceptions, have followed him. To understand the “continuous” operation as breathing, or the valley as the belly or the Void, and then to interpret the whole passage as one on the yoga technique of breathing, or to single out the characteristic of stillness of the valley and then to present it as an evidence of Taoist quietism, is to fail to interpret the passages in the context of the whole. These interpretations are not supported by the symbolic meaning of the valley elsewhere in the book.

The spirit of the chapter is far from quietism. Instead, it involves the idea of natural transformation and continuous creation. As Chu Hsi has said, “The valley is vacuous. As sound reaches it, it echoes. This is the spontaneity of spiritual transformation. To be subtle and profound means to be wonderful. The female is one who receives something and produces things. This is a most wonderful principle and it has the meaning of production and reproduction.”

8

(The best man) in his dwelling loves the earth.
In his heart, he loves what is profound.
In his associations, he loves humanity.
In his words, he loves faithfulness.
In government, he loves order.
In handling affairs, he loves competence.
In his activities, he loves timeliness.
It is because he does not compete that he is without reproach.

COMMENT

Water is perhaps the most outstanding among Lao Tzu’s symbols for Tao. The emphasis of the symbolism is ethical rather than metaphysical or religious. It is interesting to note that, while early Indian philosophers associated water with creation and the Greek philosophers looked upon it as a natural phenomenon, ancient Chinese philosophers, whether Lao Tzu or Confucius, preferred to learn moral lessons from it. Broadly speaking, Western thought, derived chiefly from the Greeks, has been largely interested in metaphysical and scientific problems, Indian thought largely interested in religious problems, and Chinese thought largely interested in moral problems. It is not too much to say that these different approaches to water characterize the Western, the Indian, and the Chinese systems of thought.

11

Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.
Clay is molded to form a utensil,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends.
Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends.
Therefore turn non-being into advantage, and turn non-being into utility.

1. Most commentators and translators have understood the Chinese phrase literally as the highest good, but some commentators and translators, including Lin Yutang, Cheng Lin, and Bynner, have followed Wang Pi and taken the phrase to mean the best man. Both interpretations are possible. The former interpretation has a parallel in chapter 38, which talks about the highest virtue, while the latter has a parallel in chapter 17, where both Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung interpret “the best” to mean the best ruler. I have followed Wang Pi,

not only because his commentary on the text is the oldest and most reliable, but also because the Lao Tzu deals with man’s way of life more than abstract ideas.
COMMENT

Nowhere else in Chinese philosophy is the concept of non-being more strongly emphasized. This chapter alone should dispel any idea that Taoism is negativistic, for non-being—the hole in the hub, the hollowness of a utensil, the empty space in the room—is here conceived not as nothingness but as something useful and advantageous.

The Taoist interest in non-being has counteracted the positivistic tendency in certain Chinese philosophical schools, especially the Legalist and Confucian, which often overlook what seems to be nonexistent. It has prepared the Chinese mind for the acceptance of the Buddhist doctrine of Emptiness, although neither the Taoist concept of non-being nor that of vacuity is identical with that of the Buddhist Void. In addition, it was because of the Taoist insistence on the positive value of non-being that empty space has been utilized as a constructive factor in Chinese landscape painting. In this greatest art of China, space is used to combine the various elements into an organic whole and to provide a setting in which the onlooker’s imagination may work. By the same token, much is left unsaid in Chinese poetry, for the reader must play a creative role to bring the poetic idea into full realization. The Zen Buddhists have developed to the fullest the themes that real existence is found in the nonexistent and that true words are spoken in silence, but the origin of these themes must be traced to early Taoism.

14

We look at it and do not see it; Its name is The Invisible.
We listen to it and do not hear it; Its name is The Inaudible.
We touch it and do not feel it; Its name is The Subtle (formless).

These three cannot be further inquired into, And hence merge into one. Going up high, it is not bright, and coming down low, it is not dark.

16

Attract complete vacuity.
Maintain steadfast quietude.
All things come into being, And I see thereby their return.

Infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name; It reveres to nothingness. This is called shape without shape, Form without objects. It is The Vague and Elusive. Meet it and you will not see its head. Follow it and you will not see its back. Hold on to the Tao of old in order to master the things of the present. From this one may know the primeval beginning (of the universe). This is called the bond 2 of Tao.

COMMENT

Subtlety is an important characteristic of Tao and is more important than its manifestations. The Confucianists, on the other hand, emphasize manifestation. There is nothing more manifest than the hidden (subtle), they say, and “a man who knows that the subtle will be manifested can enter into virtue.” The Buddhists and Neo-Confucianists eventually achieved a synthesis, saying that “there is no distinction between the manifest and the hidden.”

To describe reality in terms of the invisible, the inaudible, and the subtle is an attempt to describe it in terms of non-being. Because the three Chinese words are pronounced i, hsi, and wèi, respectively, they have been likened to Elo, Heh, Var, indicating the name Jehovah, and to the Hindu god Ishvara, but any similarity is purely accidental. The threefold description does not suggest any idea of trinity either. Basically, Taoist philosophy is naturalistic, if not atheistic, and any idea of a god is alien to it.

2. Chi, literally, “a thread,” denotes tradition, discipline, principle, order, essence, etc. Generally it means the system, principle, or continuity that binds things together.
All things flourish.
But each one returns to its root.
This return to its root means tranquillity.
It is called returning to its destiny.
To return to destiny is called the eternal (Tao).
To know the eternal is called enlightenment.
Not to know the eternal is to act blindly to result in disaster.
He who knows the eternal is all-embracing.
Being all-embracing, he is impartial.
Being impartial, he is kingly (universal).
Being kingly, he is one with Nature.
Being one with Nature, he is in accord with Tao.
Being in accord with Tao, he is everlasting.
And is free from danger throughout his lifetime.

COMMENT

The central idea here is returning to the root, which is to be achieved through tranquility. Generally speaking, in Taoist philosophy Tao is revealed most fully through tranquility rather than activity. Under its influence, Wang Pi has commented on the hexagram Fu (to return) in the Book of Changes in the same light. He says, “Although Heaven and Earth are vast, possessing the myriad things and transformations, yet its original substance is absolutely quiet and perfect non-being. Therefore only with the cessation of activities within Earth can the mind of Heaven and Earth be revealed.”

This Taoist position is directly opposed by the Neo-Confucians, who insist that the mind of Heaven and Earth is to be seen in a state of activity. As Ch’eng I says, “Former scholars all said that only in a state of tranquility can the mind of Heaven and Earth be seen. They did not realize that the mind of Heaven and Earth is found in the beginning of activity.”

To yield is to be preserved whole.
To be bent is to become straight.
To be empty is to be full.
To be worn out is to be renewed.
To have little is to possess.

To have plenty is to be perplexed.
Therefore the sage embraces the One
And becomes the model of the world.
He does not show himself; therefore he is luminous.
He does not justify himself; therefore he becomes prominent.
He does not boast of himself; therefore he is given credit.
He does not brag; therefore he can endure for long.
It is precisely because he does not compete that the world cannot compete with him.
Is the ancient saying, “To yield is so be preserved whole,” empty words?
Truly he will be preserved and (prominence and credit) will come to him.

COMMENT

Taoism seems to be advocating a negative morality. In this respect, it is not much different from the Christian doctrine taught in the Sermon on the Mount, which extols meekness, poverty, and so forth. Whatever negativism there may seem to be, it pertains to method only; the objective is entirely positive.

25

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete,
Which existed before heaven and earth.
Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not change.
It operates everywhere and is free from danger.
It may be considered the mother of the universe.
I do not know its name; I call it Tao.
If forced to give it a name, I shall call it Great.
Now being great means functioning everywhere.
Functioning everywhere means far-reaching.
Being far-reaching means returning to the original point.

Therefore Tao is great.
Heaven is great.
Earth is great.
And the king is also great.

3. The Fu I and Fan Ying-yuan texts have “man” in place of “king.” This substitution has been accepted by Hsi T’ung, Ma Hsü-lun, Ch’en Chu, Jen Chi-yü, and Ch’u Ta-kao. They
There are four great things in the universe, and
the king is one of them.
Man models himself after Earth.
Earth models itself after Heaven.
Heaven models itself after Tao.
And Tao models itself after Nature.

COMMENT

Taoist cosmology is outlined here simply but
l Easily. In the beginning there is something un-
differentiated, which is forever operating; it pro-
duces heaven and earth and then all things. In
essence this cosmology is strikingly similar to
that of the Book of Changes. In the system of
change, the Great Ultimate produces the Two
Dodes (yin and yang), which in turn produce
all things. We don’t know to what extent Tao-
ist thought has influenced the Book of Changes,
which the Confucians have attributed to their
ancient sages, chiefly Confucius. At any rate, this
naturalistic philosophy has always been promi-
 nent in Chinese thought, and later contributed
substantially to the naturalistic pattern of Neo-
Confucian cosmology, especially through Chou
Tun-i. As will be noted, he has added the con-
cept of the Non-ultimate to the philosophy of
the Book of Changes in order better to explain
how he originally undifferentiated. It is to be noted
that the term “Non-ultimate” comes from the
Lao Tzu . . .

37

Tao invariably takes no action, and yet there is
nothing left undone.
If kings and barons can keep it, all things will
transform spontaneously.
If, after transformation, they should desire to be
active,
I would restrain them with simplicity, which has
no name.
Simplicity, which has no name, is free of desires.
Being free of desires, it is tranquil.
And the world will be at peace of its own accord.

COMMENT

“Transform spontaneously” seems to be a pass-
ing remark here, but the idea became a key
concept in the Chuang Tzu and later formed a
key tenet in the Neo-Taoism of Kuo Hsiang.
In the Lao Tzu, things transform themselves
because Tao takes no action or leaves things
alone. Chuang Tzu goes a step further, saying
that everything is in incessant change and that
is self-transformation. In his commentary on
the Chuang Tzu, Kuo Hsiang goes even further,
stressing that things transform themselves sponta-
neously because they are self-sufficient, and
there is no Nature behind or outside of them. Na-
ture, he says, is but a general name for things . . .
Reversion is the action of Tao.
Weakness is the function of Tao.
All things in the world come from being.
And being comes from non-being.

COMMENT
The doctrine of returning to the original is a prominent one in the Lao Tzu. It has contributed in no small degree to the common Chinese cyclical concept, according to which the Chinese believe that both history and reality operate in cycles.

42

Tao produced the One.
The One produced the two.
The two produced the three.

4. Cf. chapter 1. This seems to contradict the saying, “Being and non-being produce each other,” in chapter 2. But to produce means not to originate but to bring about.
5. The doctrine is also encountered in one sense or another in chapters 14, 16, 25, 28, 30, and 52. To D. C. Lau, returning to the root is not a cyclical process. According to him, the main doctrine of the Lao Tzu is the preservation of life, which is to be achieved through “abiding by softness.” Softness is real strength, because when strength is allowed to reach its limit, it falls, whereas softness preserves itself. Thus opposites are neither relative nor paradoxical, and their process is not circular but a gradual development to the limit and then an inevitable and sudden decline. This idea may be implied in the Lao Tzu but there is no explicit passage to support Lau’s theory. See his “The Treatment of Opposites in Lao Tzu,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, XXI (1958), 349–50, 352–7.

And the three produced the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang, and through the blending of the material force they achieve harmony.

People hate to be children without parents, lonely people without spouses, or men without food to eat.
And yet kings and lords call themselves by these names.
Therefore it is often the case that things gain by losing and lose by gaining.

What others have taught, I teach also:
“Violent and fierce people do not die a natural death.”
I shall make this the father of my teaching.

COMMENT
It is often understood that the One is the original material force of the Great Ultimate, the two are yin and yang, the three are their blending with the original material force, and the ten thousand things are things carrying yin and embracing yang. The similarity of this process to that of the Book of Changes, in which the Great Ultimate produces the Two Forces (yin and yang) and then the myriad things, is amazing. The important point, however, is not the specific similarities, but the evolution from the simple to the complex. This theory is common to nearly all Chinese philosophical schools.

It should be noted that the evolution here, as in the Book of Changes, is natural. Production (sheng) is not personal creation or purposeful origination, but natural causation.