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## The Tao Te Ching [Laozi] /Lao-tzu Metaphysics (What is existence?)

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## Abstract

As Chinese philosophies enter the global marketplace, Taoist ideas are emerging with greater frequency. In order to make Zhou Dynastic Taoist ideas accessible to Western acculturated readers, a more conventionally “Western” approach to a key Taoist text, the "*Tao Te Ching/Dao De Jing*" by Lao Tzu/Laozi. Therefore, in this paper, I will examine the foundational metaphysics presented in the *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu contends that the *Tao* transcends all conditions, all conceptualization and naming, presenting an inherent conundrum. I argue that by evoking an a-rational and experiential discourse, the *Tao Te Ching* attempts to impart impressions of The *Tao*. By this, an example is set forth of the paramount value of *wei-wu-wei* (naturally derived action) as a greater means to achieving understanding than the more didactic approach favored by Lao Tzu’s contemporary Confucius (Kung-fu-tzu) and the thinkers that followed him. These two schools of thought share cosmology theories: e.g., The *Tao*, *ch'i* [qi] 气, *yin/yang* 阴/阳 and *te* [de] 德. However, their prescriptions for appreciating and harmonizing with these forces are mirror images of one another. In examining Taoist metaphysics through a more Western philosophical lens, I attempt to give the reader a way to extract deeper meaning from the *Tao Te Ching*.

Keywords: Taoism/Daoism, Tao/Dao, Laozi/Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching/Dao De Jing,  
Metaphysics

*The Tao Te Ching*

Lao-tzu/ [Laozi]

Metaphysics (What is existence?)

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Chinese philosophy and Taoism in particular gained a greater degree of visibility in the Western world through such media as film, art, children's literature and the world of martial arts. From the *Tao of Po* to the *Tao of Physics*, the "*Tao of...*" has become prolific on Western bookshelves, "cover[ing] almost every aspect of human life" (Prothero 283). Greater interest, understanding, and recognition of Taoism, from the halls of academia to the silver screen, have emerged. Today's "globalized" citizen has likely had multiple exposures to Taoism, regardless of their awareness of it. It is because of this obliquity and vagueness that this article endeavors to impart an understanding of Taoist Metaphysics that is more palatable to the "Western" reader, that is, a reader not raised in an East Asian society or culture.

Eastern thought and language does not readily lend itself to clean and exact Western translations, and the conversion of Chinese ideograms into Romanized words has long proved difficult for Western writers. The two predominant systems to transliterate this non-alphabetic language, Wade-Giles and Pinyin, are respectively favored by the diaspora of Chinese populations (Taiwan, Singapore, etc.) and official Mainland Chinese. To further complicate matters, there are two character systems, traditional and simplified, which make discourse rather daunting. In this text, I have taken the liberty of switching between simplified and traditional, Wade-Giles or Pinyin, as I deemed fit. I will often provide the alternate Romanized version in brackets [like so] at least once upon first exposure. This is simply an aesthetic choice.

To set forth the Taoist Cosmology (the origins and development of existence) and the metaphysics that follow (the underlying nature of existence), we must first address a so-called first principle of Taoist discourse. For the Taoist, the universe and all subsequent phenomena are fundamentally unknowable and as such present an interesting conundrum: if a truer nature of the world is only observable through our uniquely obfuscated human blinders, then how is one to understand anything at all in this world? Can partial knowledge ever render a complete picture? Taoists answer that while we may not be able to fully comprehend existence (or non-existence), we are able to get *a feel* for it. It is in these “ah-ha” moments that we catch a glimpse of the *Tao* (The Way) from within a *tao* (a way). Here, an attempt to impart such a glimpse is set out.

The entirety of existence cannot be comprehended intellectually and yet it is possible for intuition to guide us towards a better understanding. In his work on the intersection of modern cognitive sciences and traditional Chinese thought, Edward Slingerland defines these types of knowing as System 1 (automatic, effortless, fast, or “hot”) and System 2 (deliberate, effortful, slow, or “cold”) cognitions (29). He goes on to describe their synthesis (the “hot” working with the “cold”) as the result of “...an intelligent spontaneity that is perfectly calibrated to the environment” (29). It is through knowing like this that we create a feeling of harmony, of resonance with the greater world. Much like a discordant instrument can be adjusted closer to perfect pitch, so too can we comport ourselves in a manner designed to bring us into greater tune with the world. Taoists call this feeling of harmony *wu-wei* 無爲 or even *wei-wu-wei* 爲無爲, and we can derive it by modeling the ease with which the world adapts to all activity within it: “The Tao never does anything, /yet through it all things are done” (Lao-Tzu 37). Or in

another translation of this passage on *wei-wu-wei*, “The Way constantly does nothing, yet nothing is not done” (Christine Gross-Loh 113). Yet despite the refrain to do “nothing,” Taoists have done a great many works (writings, paintings, etc.) expounding on the paradoxical nature of the *Tao*.

#### THE CONFUCIAN/TAOIST DIVIDE

One of Taoism’s seminal works, the *Tao Te Ching*, is credited to the semi-mythical sage figure Lao-tzu (c. 600-400 BCE), but the text was very likely composed by several authors over many centuries. It served as a countervailing treatise to the prevailing Confucianism of the time. Taoism “has almost always played second fiddle to its doppelgänger of Confucianism,” in a sibling rivalry that spurred each philosophy on (Prothero 289). Because this is the context from which Taoism arose, it is valuable to look at some of Confucius’ ideas.

Confucius (Kung-fu-tzu) understood and spoke of the *Tao*, or way, extensively. However, his vision of self-cultivation to harmony with the *Tao* was heavily predicated on accumulation of knowledge (particularly knowledge of the five Zhou dynasty classics: *The Book of Odes*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, *The Book of Documents* and *The I-Ching*). Immersion in these classics led to an intellectual grinding and polishing of one’s baser, more instinctual character. “Their [Confucians’] aim was still *wu-wei*, but this was understood as a kind of *artificial* spontaneity, a cultural and educational achievement, rather than the result of simply going with the flow” (Slingerland 57). For Confucius and the thinkers who followed in his footsteps, the human spirit was like a wild and unbroken horse that required tireless effort and domestication in order to be at peace within a civil society. Confucius prized knowledge

and reason, attributing all the ills in the world to the improper ordering of things (i.e. the need for the Rectification of Names). The breakdown of societal order fell squarely at the feet of men who had begun to wrongly refer to themselves as “kings” and refused to act according to their true station. To assume titles, powers, and responsibilities that are not rightly within one’s purview is to invite the downfall of all social order:

With regards to what he does not know, the superior man should maintain an attitude of reserve. If names are not rectified, then language will not be in accord with the truth. If language is not in accord with the truth, then things cannot be accomplished. If things cannot be accomplished, then ceremonies and music will not flourish. If ceremonies and music do not flourish, then punishment will not be just. If punishments are not just, then the people will not know how to move hand or foot. Therefore a superior man will give only names that can be described in speech, and say only what can be carried out in practice. With regards to his speech, the superior man does not take it lightly.

— Confucius, *Analects*, Book XIII, Chapter 3, (W.-T. Chan 40)

If things could simply be put back in their rightful order, if proper terms and names were re-designated, then all would be right with the world. This was the bedrock of Confucius’s recipe for ending the strife of his era. Lao-tzu and the Taoists who followed found themselves deeply skeptical of Confucius. Not only did he assess human nature as something feral, but also his central prescription for harmonizing and domesticating the human race under a rubric of fixed titles seemed like swapping one type of artifice for another.

To the Taoists, it was not the individual that needed reshaping but societal expectations. They considered Confucius' so-called "ordered time" a product of utopian nostalgia, and took particular issue with the over-emphasis placed on the accretion of knowledge. The Confucian vision of a world ordered by gentlemen-scholars, an elite literati jockeying for a position similar to Plato's philosopher-king, was self-serving and myopic. It also neglected a fundamental truth: peoples' lives depend on actions (eating, sleeping, fornicating, etc.) more than concepts, disregarding the idea that:

In the pursuit of knowledge,  
every day something is added.

In the practice of the Tao,  
every day something is dropped.

Less and less do you need to force things,  
until finally you arrive at non-action.

When nothing is done,  
nothing is left undone. (Lao-Tzu 48)

Not that the whole of the literati class were feeble, ineffectual, and foppish buffoons; they were, however, dogmatic in their absolute certainty of solutions, with great disdain for a world in which they might be called upon to undertake manual labor. Taoists were particularly suspicious of Confucius' solutions to the woes of the Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE). In *Zuo zhuan* (*The Commentary of Mr. Zuo*), a book purported to be written during the latter half of the 4th century BCE, Hansen "describes over five hundred battles among polities and more than one hundred civil wars with the polities – all in the 259 years between 722 and 463 BCE" (59). As Taoists saw it, Confucius had hit

upon the right diagnosis (people losing the *Tao*) but had then offered the wrong prescription: try harder! “Lead them by virtue, *restrain them with ritual* [emphasis added]: they will develop a sense of shame and a sense of participation” (76).

#### GETTING A FEEL FOR THINGS

The opening passage of the *Tao Te Ching* makes clear what Lao-tzu thought of Confucianistic ritualism, the rectification of names, and absolution: “*Tao k’o tao, fei ch’ang tao. /Ming k’o ming, fei ch’ang ming. [Dao ke dao, fei chang dao./Ming ke ming, fei chang ming]*” (Lao-tzu 1). It roughly translates to: “The tao that can be told/ is not the eternal Tao. /The name that can be named/ is not the eternal Name” (Lao-Tzu 1). This not-so-veiled swipe at Confucianistic (and all other) truth claims is, to my mind one, of the most elegant “disclaimers” ever committed to a philosophical text. What Lao-tzu is saying here is that to understand The *Tao* is an experience that transcends the narrow confines of language, but language being what was available, is how he chose to impart a “Taoistic” experience. There is a cadence and rhythm to the writing that is evocative, almost like a mantra or a song. One can imagine chanting these opening lines (and I have) to induce a meditative state of mind. All the poems of the *Tao Te Ching* seek to not only engage the conscious rational “System 2” mind but also the unconscious emotional “System 1” mind, thereby engaging the whole being. If it was not laid out plainly enough in the opening, Lao-Tzu drives the point home in the often quoted verse, “Those who know don’t talk. /Those who talk don’t know” (56).

In spite of his professed ignorance, Lao-Tzu manages to pack a great deal of insight and meaning in his terse 81 verses. But the *Tao Te Ching* is not just a collection of pot-shots against the other philosophical schools of the time, nor is it a just a holy script meant to invoke a transcendental state of mind. The *Tao Te Ching* contains many layers



of profound meaning and understanding about the very nature of things. It acts as a vessel for insight while simultaneously being self-aware of the tensions that exist in using language and laying out paradigms that must in themselves be intrinsically incomplete. If those who know don't speak, why does Lao-tzu say anything at all? Perhaps this disclaimer tells us that what is meant to be imparted is not knowledge itself but a compass pointing at knowledge, and it is up to the reader to let go of the expectation of some didactic formula. Instead one can obtain an impression, a hint, or an intuition of knowing.

#### IMPRESSIONISM IN WORDS

The very title, *Tao Te Ching*, has within it multiple levels of premise. It is one of the most-often translated texts in the world, and the title has been translated variously as: "The Way and its Power," "The Way of Virtue," "Classics of Integrity and the Way," among many others. About 5,000 characters combine into 81 pithy, whimsical poems rich with wisdom, wit, and beautiful meter. Yet, even the title is worth examination and is meant to be scrutinized. The word *tao* 道 means "a way." That can mean a way to travel, a way to interact, a way to set forth a text or dialogue. But it also has a fundamental meaning of being "not yet treaded," or pure in a sense of blankness, emptiness, void-ness. It can be thought of as quintessentially dark, quintessentially *yin* 阴. In contrast, the term *te* 德 is sometimes translated "of," but this is a bit of an oversimplification. *Te* is a term used to ascribe virtue to something, to express what is attributable to it. In much the same antiquated way that we might describe a plant as having healing virtues or a stream to have calming virtues, the term *te* expresses a revealing of what is observed about a subject. Hence, it is associated with what shines forth or what emanates from the halo of

light, the *yang* 阳. The terms *yin* and *yang* are always relative and only comparable to their complementary correspondent. There is nothing that *is* absolutely *yin* or absolutely *yang*. They exist only in correspondence to each other. At their utmost extremes, they give rise to the seed of their complement and cannot help but transform around the cycle again. Each contains a small point of the other emerging in the apex of the expression. Wing-Tsit Chan sums up *yin/yang* thusly: “both yin yang and the Five Agents doctrines may be regarded as early Chinese attempts in the direction of working out a metaphysics and a cosmology” (245). A better understanding of the *yin/yang* is forthcoming.

Still, just within the two first words of the *Tao Te Ching* one can begin to see how the multiple depths of impregnated meaning are demonstrated. Housed within the lines of this ultimate *yin/yang* composition of *ching* 经, classics, sacred books, or pure distillations, are many layers of thought. Lao-Tzu points at the ultimate nature of reality in the text, while also acknowledging its true *unknowability*:

There was something formless and perfect

before the universe was born.

It is serene. Empty.

Solitary. Unchanging.

Infinite. Eternally present.

It is the mother of the universe.

For lack of a better name,

I call it the Tao. (25)

The *Tao* is this ultimate reality. It is, simply put, the Way things are. But it may also be the Way things were, or the Way things will be. Or even the Way things may have been. The *Tao* is the fertile void against which all of creation arises:

The Tao gave birth to One.

One gives birth to Two.

Two gives birth to Three,

Three gave birth to all things.

All things have their backs to the female [*Yin*]

and stand facing the male [*Yang*].

when male and female combine,

all things to achieve harmony. (Lao-Tzu 42)

What is this “One,” these “Two,” these many “things?” This is a summation of the Taoist cosmology. It is intentionally succinct and vague. Lao-tzu, suspicious of words’ ability to convey these ideas, leaves room for some interpretation. However, it is very likely that some of the more established ideas of Chinese thought informed this passage. These are concepts that were ubiquitous within ancient China, but Lao-tzu’s summation of them illustrates the conceptual continuum they occupied within the Chinese mind.

*Tao* gave rise to *ch'i* [*qi*] 气 (the one), an often vexing and enigmatic ancient Chinese concept. The notion of *ch'i* has been a basic assumption of Eastern thought for centuries, as “the Chinese term *qi* 氣 has incorporated in the course of its two-millennia-long existence numerous conceptual layers that cannot be expressed by a single European word” (Jinsheng 19). Western thinkers have occasionally groped for equivalencies, yet Jinshen believes:

It would be futile to search in Chinese for a conceptual equivalent to the European “spirit”, as there is no Chinese term that could be used to include meanings ranging from Holy Spirit to methylated spirit. Similarly, the Chinese term *qi* 氣 has incorporated in the course of its two-millennia-long existence numerous conceptual layers that cannot be expressed by a single European word. (19)

*Ch'i* remains a concept of much controversy and skepticism in the Western world. But in the East, this concept was as unexceptional and matter-of-course as the concept of the human spirit remains for many in the Western world.

The very oldest of the Chinese classics, the *I-Ching* [*Yi Jing*], says of *ch'i*, “Essence and material force (*ch'i*) are combined to become things” (Chan 265). For the time being, it may be easiest, albeit incomplete, to conceive of *ch'i* as kinetic energy writ large. All things that exist in this universe possess some quality of motion, of action. From the smallest subatomic particle to the largest modeling of the universe, all rely on motion to perpetuate their existence. It is this energy (*ch'i*) that causes all phenomena to behave within its nature, vacillating from *yin* to *yang* (the two). As *ch'i* makes this vacillation, so all things must, as well.

The three Lao-Tzu spoke of are likely heaven 天, earth 土, and man 人: “Man follows the earth. /Earth follows the universe. /The universe follows the Tao. The Tao follows only itself” (Lao-Tzu 25). The significance of this is that it is through man that the “ten thousand many things arise;” they do so by virtue of mankind’s incessant need to separate and categorize things (25).

In the second part of the above quote, Lao-Tzu lays bare a central Taoist truth. These myriad things all possess *yin* out of sight, behind their backs, and *yang* right up front, in their embrace. All phenomena dance upon the otherwise blank canvas of the *Tao*; “Its net covers the whole universe” (Lao-Tzu 73). It is only because of this venue that taking advantage of that existence occurs at all. *Ch'i* is quintessential to all these existent things, and all *ch'i* must ultimately flux from its *yin* to *yang* manifestations. If it is allowed to do so in its natural balance, its proper blending, then things derive a vital harmony. Put another way, if one adopts *wu-wei*, following the model of natural phenomena, and does not force more *yin* or more *yang*, one's *te* will naturally be revealed. The need here arises to expand on the subject of *yin/yang* in greater detail.

The characters *yin/yang* were deep-rooted in Chinese thought long before the composition of the *Tao Te Ching*. By the time of Lao-Tzu, *yin* 阴 had come to mean dark or shadowed; its simplified character comes from the component characters town 阝 and moon 月. The more complex traditional character connotes the shady side of a hill. What then does it mean for *ch'i* to behave in a *yin* manner? All *yin* manifestations will be slower and patient; they will exhibit calmer, gentler qualities than their *yang* counterparts. *Yin* is receptive, darker, and more enveloping; it is the nadir of *ch'i*'s cycle and typically more enduring in this phase.

*Yang* 阳 means sun; its simplified character comes from the component characters town 阝 and sun 日. The more complex traditional character connotes the sunny side of a hill. What then does it mean for *ch'i* to behave in a *yang* manner? *Yang* is the more agitated manifestation of *ch'i*; it is more excited and active polarity. *Ch'i* in this phase is more competitive and domineering.

Not surprisingly, *yin* is traditionally viewed as the more feminine polarity, while *yang* exhibits more masculine principles. Humans do not continue to exist without the coupling of both sexes; likewise, *yin/yang* by necessity require one another, shape one another, and perpetuate one another. The iconic representation of this idea is seen in the *T'ai chi* [*Taiji*] 太极 symbol. It is meant as an expression of these cosmological “great extremes” of *yin/yang* vacillation from which all our perceived existence emerges. The *yin* (“negative,” or black) and *yang* (“positive,” or white) are represented with a swooping connection meant to invoke animation. The motion of the symbol, by necessity, typically requires the imagination of the viewer. Had it been possible to draw or sculpt the *t'ai chi* with cartoonish animation, it would likely have been rendered in action on every façade or relief upon which it is depicted.

#### EMERGING, CYCLIC, AND PHASIC

Taoist metaphysics takes the supposition of *yin/yang* beyond just cosmology. It is not only the so-called “natural world” that is subject to the fluctuations of *yin/yang*; everything is subject to them. *Everything* exists within, upon, and is imbued by the same *Tao*. Because of that, the *Tao* can be observed even within our artificial human contrivances. All is part of the world and must fall prey to its “natural law.” Let us consider the *yin/yang* character of human warfare, where:

Weapons are the tools of fear;  
 a decent man will avoid them  
 except in the direst necessity  
 and, if compelled, will use them  
 only with the utmost restraint.

Peace is his highest value.

If the peace has been shattered,

how can he be content?

His enemies are not demons,

but human beings like himself.

He doesn't wish them a personal harm.

Nor does he rejoice and victory.

How could he rejoice in victory

and delight in the slaughter of men? (Lao-Tzu 31)

For most of human history the escalation of warfare between larger and larger nations was the norm. This reached its apex with World War Two, when most of the nations on the planet were in one way or another engaged in conflict with one another. The invention of the atomic bomb, the largest scale of destruction in one instance of human action and the abject defeat of the Axis forces, could all be seen as *yang* at its most *yang*. But these events laid the foundation for both the Marshall plan and the MacArthur Japanese reconstruction, devised to foster peace and economic recovery after the war for both enemies and allies. It inspired the Treaty of Rome, which led to the creation of the European Union and the Schengen Agreement (allowing for free movement of individuals within the EU). Similar aid and alliance programs were taken up in Asia. As the human race began to see the cost of war between industrialized nations as stakes too high, we entered a much more *yin* phase of our existence. We are close (by September of 2045) to the first full century in human history without two or more major world powers engaging in open territorial conflict. As Fareed Zakaria stated in his 2012 Harvard

Commencement Speech, “we are living in the most peaceful times in human history.” If the *yang* phase of human warfare managed to last for twelve thousand years or so, how much longer might the *yin* phase of our existence last?

Again, *yin/yang* do not constitute absolutes; we ought to be careful to disabuse ourselves from the all too human tendency to dichotomize. There have been wars in the last century (many proxy or civil) and this is not meant as a sanguine revision of modern horrors. It is meant instead to point out that even those phenomena we tend to ascribe as “unnatural” (other creatures clash in battles, but sustained strategic conflict is exceedingly rare) and volitional can be cast through the scope of Taoist metaphysics. The spiraling levels of complexity within a given event mean that on one level it can be cast as moving from *yang* to *yin* (for example, modern warfare writ large), while within this macro-phase there can simultaneously exist micro-phases vacillating in a contradictory fashion—such as the buildup of modern militaries, or the development of new weapon technologies). Infinite complexity in the world means the opportunity to observe the *yin/yang* within the *yin/yang* of one event, and the *yin/yang* within that, etcetera, etcetera, ad infinitum.

Wake, rise, work, rest, repeat. Come forth, grow, mature, decline, demise. Choose your cycle, and *yin/yang* can be seen within it. Educate, work, retire, and forget. Initiate an inhalation, lungs half full, half empty. Reach the apex, and then begin the complementary action of breath.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-Tzu does not attempt to educate us on the nature of reality. Instead, he attempts to remind us that these are things we already know about the



world, every moment of every day. The template of the universe is laid bare before us, in ourselves and the “ten thousand many things” we observe all the time:

Therefore the Master takes action  
by letting things take their course.

He remains as calm  
at the end as at the beginning.

He has nothing,  
thus has nothing to lose.

What he desires is non-desire;  
what he learns is to unlearn.

He simply reminds people  
of who they have always been.

He cares about nothing but the Tao.

Thus he can care for all things. (Lao-Tzu 64)

As with any good work of art, the *Tao Te Ching* is not surmised at a glance.

Instead, it attempts to draw out of us something truer and more profound with each encounter.

#### WHAT EXISTENCES?

There is a blank canvas upon which all experiences unfold. That canvas is fertile with potentiality to allow *all* other phenomena to occur. As Lao-Tzu notes, “The Tao is called the Great Mother: /empty yet inexhaustible, /it gives birth to infinite worlds. It is always present within you. /You can use it any way you want” (6). An empty field may become a football pitch, a baseball diamond, a wedding venue, etc. The white spaces on this page

make the letters' appearance possible. All occurrences, subsequent to this fertile void, behave in cyclic manners, vacillating between more *yin* and more *yang* manifestation. A wedding, for example, is more *yin* than a rugby match, and some letters obstruct more white space than others. The stuff that does the vacillating does so because of its *ch'i* and relies on this *ch'i* to have some form of existence. As *ch'i* fluctuates from *yin* to *yang* and *yang* to *yin*, it carries with it whatever it imbues.

Early Confucionists and Taoists seem to have agreed on aspects of a shared cosmology; they differed, however, on a prescription for better harmonizing with and understanding it. Albert Einstein is legendarily credited with having said about Heisenberg's uncertainty principle that, "God does not play dice!" Being ill-at-ease with the unknown is a common human trait, but the audacity of claiming to "know" was what Taoists rejected. In doing so, they instead sought to better embrace the unknowability of existence. They turned to other means for better connecting and resonating with the cognitively chaotic. There exists a dynamic process of knowing that penetrates deeper than the stagnant archives of knowledge.

As a father, I continually know I love my child; the lived experience of it is more profound than, and easily supersedes, any biochemical or evolutionary theory that attempts to explain or intellectualize it. Similarly, reading music will never move a person as deeply as, nor will it replace the experience of, hearing it played. These unaccountable, unquantifiable experiences strike us as true, *truer* in fact than any scientific investigation of the phenomena. Knowing the *Tao* is akin to this, and this is the way Taoists opted to better understand the cosmos. Better insight into what really exists

is more readily found by relinquishing the crutch of hyper-intellectualization and opening oneself up to have the living experience of the way things are.

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