The name "Daoism" was first coined by Han scholars to refer to the philosophy developed by Laozi and Zhuangzi. We have already encountered some of the thoughts of Zhuangzi in the Prelude to this book. We will focus here on the ideas of Laozi (Wade-Giles spelling, Lao Tzu) as found in a book entitled Laozi, but popularly known as the Dao De Jing (Wade-Giles spelling, Tao Te Ching).

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

The Dao De Jing 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 of all, 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. Fourth, as I mentioned in the first chapter, some philosophers go beyond Western conventional logic in their search for truth. Conventional logic will be challenged in what follows and this will force us to reexamine some of our basic assumptions about what is rational.

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 Dao is such a case) the best we might hope for are negative indications, analogies, metaphors, and symbols.

Daoism 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 overflowing 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 Dao, it may be helpful to say something about some of the key concepts of Daoism. Let us begin with the Dao itself.

The word Dao means "road" or "way" in Chinese. Before Laozi, 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. Laozi extends the term and gives it a cosmic and metaphysical meaning. 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 Daoist distinguishes between reality and existence so that both the existent and nonexistent can be classified as real.

1 Kessler, Voices of Wisdom, pp. 219-229
Since the *Dao* is the source of all reality, it is not a thing (a being or a substance), nor is it a nonthing (nonbeing). 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 *Dao* is called "the nameless," i.e., the indefinable.

This negative designation suggests that the *Dao* is closer to nonbeing than to being, and indeed, Daoists sometimes say the *Dao* is nonbeing. But it is not non-being in the Western sense of total nothingness. It is nonbeing in the sense of "nothingness." 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 *Dao De Jing*. 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. Laozi sees things differently. Something can come from nothing; indeed, this whole marvelous universe did come from the nothing that is the Way of all things.

*De* can be translated as "virtue," "power," or "excellence." So the title of Laozi's mind-expanding poem has been translated as "The Book of the Way and Its Power." It is a book (*jing*) about the excellence of the *Dao*. *De* is sometimes thought of as the *Dao* itself viewed from the perspective of individual things. The excellence (perfection, power) of each thing is called its *de*, and this is the *Dao* manifesting itself on the individual level. To actualize the potential of one's nature and condition in an excellent way is to exhibit *de*. For humans (as for all natural things) this actualization occurs by living in accord with the *Dao*.

*Wuwei* literally means "no action" and refers to the manner in which the *Dao* acts. The Way that is non-thing acts by not acting! This rather mysterious claim can be elucidated somewhat by looking at the various levels of meaning of *wuwei*. Laozi 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 Daoist use of the *yin/yang* concept. The Daoists adopted this concept in order to characterize the universe that stems from the *Dao*. *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 *Dao* by means of *yin* and *yang*.

So the *Dao*, 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.
Reading Questions

1. What does it mean to say that the Dao is nameless, and why do you think it is "named" that?

2. What is the main idea that Chapter 2 of the Dao conveys about the nature of opposites?

3. How is it possible for the sage (wise person) to act without acting and teach without speaking?

4. What do you think the comparison between the Dao and a bowl implies about the relationship between the substance of a thing and its function?

5. Analogies are drawn between the Dao and a valley, a female, water, the hub of a wheel, a utensil, and a room. What do these analogies tell us about the Dao?

6. If the Dao is invisible, inaudible, and formless, how can it be known?

7. Chapter 25 of the Dao presents a brief outline of Daoist cosmology (a cosmology is a kind of picture of the structure of the universe). Draw a diagram of this cosmology.

8. How does the Dao "run" the universe?

9. What does it mean to say that "reversion is the action of Dao"? 10. Is Daoist metaphysics a materialism, idealism, dualism, monism, or something that these categories fail to express adequately? Provide evidence to support your answer.

Suggestions for Further Reading

You should read the entire Dao De Jing. The selection I have made here is only a small portion of the text and focuses almost exclusively on its metaphysical parts. This selection is somewhat misleading since the book is as much a book about political philosophy and ethics as it is about metaphysics. Chan's translation reflects excellent scholarship and his introduction will provide you with more background. You may wish to compare his translation to the many others available (along with the Bible this is one of the world's most translated books). A popular "version" that is very readable but takes great liberties with the literal meaning of the text is Stephen Mitchell's Tao Te Ching (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).


If you wish to explore the possible relationships between the Daoist vision of reality and modern physics, see Fritjof Capra's The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1975) and Gary Zukav's The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1979).

Dao De Jing

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. In this case, in substituting the ideas of being and non-being for the ideas of having desires and having no desires, Wang shows a greater recognition of the philosophical content of the Lao Tzu, as it deserves.

> When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,
> There arises the recognition of ugliness.
> When they all know the good as good,
> There arises the recognition of evil.
> Therefore:
> Being and non-being produce each other;
> Difficult and easy complete each other;
> Long and short contrast each other;
> High and low distinguish each other;
> Sound and voice harmonize each other;
> Front and behind accompany each other.
> Therefore the sage manages affairs without action
> And spreads doctrines without words.
> All things arise, and he does not turn away from them.
> He produces them but does not take possession of them.
> He acts but does not rely on his own ability.
> He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it.
It is precisely because he does not claim credit

that his accomplishment remains with him.

COMMENT

That everything has its opposite, and that these opposites are the mutual causations of each other, form a basic part of Chuang Tzu's philosophy and later Chinese philosophy. It is important to note that opposites are here presented not as irreconcilable conflicts but as complements. The traditional Chinese ideal that opposites are to be synthesized and harmonized can be said to have originated with Lao Tzu.

The idea of teaching without words anticipated the Buddhist tradition of silent transmission of the mystic doctrine, especially in the Zen (Ch'an) school. This is diametrically opposed to the Confucian ideal, according to which a superior man acts and thus "becomes the model of the world," and speaks and thus "becomes the pattern for the world." It is true that Confucianists say that a superior man "is truthful without any words," but they would never regard silence itself as a virtue.

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 further 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 deprecation of phenomena, as is the case with certain Buddhist schools. To describe
the world as dusty may suggest a lack of enthusiasm 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 true 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." . . .