

A Critical Analysis of Lao Tzu's *Tao Teh Ching*
Understanding Non-Western Philosophy

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*"It lies in the nature of Grand Virtue to follow the Tao and the Tao alone. Now what is the Tao? It is Something elusive and evasive ... And yet it contains within Itself a Substance. Shadowy and Dim! And yet It contains within Itself a Core of Vitality. The Core of Vitality is very real, It contains within Itself an unfailing Sincerity. Throughout the ages Its Name has been preserved. In order to recall the Beginning of all things. How do I know the ways of all things at the Beginning. By what is within me."*¹

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in non-western philosophy. The rigid position of regarding philosophy as a purely Western activity has been challenged partly because philosophers have come to realise the limits of Western rationalism and the impossibility of building wholly coherent logical systems.² These considerations have led some philosophers like Feyerabend to conclude that all systems of knowledge are ultimately incommensurable; i.e. understanding can only take place within a system of knowledge, and comparing different systems objectively is impossible.³ Another reason for the rise of World Philosophy has to do with the prevailing postmodern paradigm, according to which, there cannot not be more or less justified world views or knowledge claims, but all of them make sense only in the context of a certain discourse.

This paper attempts to understand Chinese philosophy of Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, by analysing his book *Tao Teh Ching* (eng. *The Treatise on the Way and its Power*). This short book is written in an aphoristic and poetic style as a guide to good living and government. It suggests that there is a source and principle of the cosmic order (tao, eng. *the way*) and the constant flow of the life force (chi, eng. *breath, vital spirit, force*) in unceasing change of the world. It also claims that because *tao* of humanity and that of the universe are the same, humans should try to live in tune with nature and the universe. The cosmic principle of *tao* is elusive, deep and obscure and cannot be expressed properly in words. Consequently, much of Lao Tzu's argument is built on analogies and paradoxes, *tao* being consciously defined in a way that leaves the reader perplexed about the definitive meaning and nature of it.

In the following, I will first set a background by explaining some central features of Chinese philosophy, summarise the argument of *Tao Teh Ching* (from now on *TTC*), and then critically analyse the logic and the use of concepts of the book. In the conclusion, I will make some observations about the process of understanding of a non-western text and the value of *TTC* as philosophy.

One might raise an objection that my approach does not attempt to understand *TTC* on its own terms, and that logical and conceptual analysis are very much the methods of Western philosophy. This objection

cannot be fully met, because it is probably impossible to understand anything "on its own terms", since there is always an element of interpretation involved in all inquiry, and since all cultural descriptions are necessarily comparative. If, on the other hand, "on its own terms" means a hermeneutic understanding, i.e. understanding a piece of text, or an argument, in the context of the whole of the text; or understanding from within, as phrased by Higgins and Solomon, one may point out that there is probably a degree of hermeneutic understanding in all intelligent reading, and full-fledged hermeneutics can easily lead to circular thinking.⁴

This does not mean that the only, or proper, way of philosophising is that logical and conceptual analysis. The analytical method has its limitations: it unwittingly introduces a line of criticism, a type of conclusion, and favours Western rationalism, but as one is aware of these limitations, it is more likely to be able to enter into a genuine dialogue with a non-western text and be able to understand how philosophy "happens" in that context, even if one is using the analytic approach. It can also be argued that historically speaking the distinction between Western and non-western philosophy is to a certain extent artificial and that it is by no means necessary to assume every culture to have their own philosophy. Rather, it is an assumption of this essay that philosophy has certain universal characteristics: it is characterised by being reflective, normative, critical, rational and systematic way of thinking.⁵ Kwame Gyekye explains in his book *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*:

"A close examination of the nature and purpose of the intellectual activities of thinkers from various cultures and societies of the world reveals ... that philosophy is essentially a critical and systematic inquiry into the fundamental ideas or principles underlying human thought, conduct and experience. Ideas, which include the beliefs and presuppositions that we hold and cherish, relate to the various aspects of human experience: to the origins of the world, the existence of God, the nature of the good society, the basis of political authority, and so on."⁶

Although the nature of philosophy is a matter of great dispute, it is necessary to define philosophy in some way when attempting to understand the works of another culture. Without such a definition the term philosophy would become quite empty and useless, for anything or nothing could be regarded to belong into its sphere. But what does it mean to say that philosophy is reflective, normative, critical, rational and systematic thinking? "Reflective" means philosophy examines the most basic underlying assumptions of one's cultural tradition, "normative" that philosophy is concerned between value distinctions such as "correct" and "incorrect" way of thinking, and concepts like "good", "real" and "true". "Critical" means philosophy does not accept at face value the popular or longaccepted believes, and "rational" that a philosophical argument will supply reasons for believing one thing rather than another. "Systematic" means that philosophy, to a certain extent, aims to build a view in which different arguments form a whole that explains various phenomena of human experience.

Again, it is possible to present criticism against this definition of philosophy and the approach I have laid out: one could, for example, claim that what is rational in one culture may not be regarded rational in another, and consequently the definition for philosophy offered in this essay is culturally laden. I am aware of interpretative difficulties in using language to convey meaning, but it is not in scope of this essay to deal with these issues. I must only assume that the definition of philosophy as a type of thinking presented here is adequately clear for our purposes, and the type of thinking that does not meet the criteria I have presented cannot be regarded as philosophy, but is some other form of intellectual practice.⁷

2. The Nature of Chinese Philosophy

The Western and Chinese civilisations developed almost entirely independently of one another and this can explain many differences in their ways of thinking. One striking difference between the Chinese and Western thinking relates to the sense of order. The Western sense of order could be regarded as "scientific" in contrast to the Chinese "aesthetic" sense of order. Western philosophers try to build rationally defensible systems, with an assumption that there is something permanent, perfect, objective, and universal that disciplines the changing world and guarantees natural and moral order. An examples of this type of philosophies are plenty starting from Plato's World of Forms to St. Aquinas and Hegel's massive systems of philosophy. Also, Western thinking is often cosmogonical and teleological, assuming that there is, and must be, a beginning and an end, and that there are also causal connections between phenomena.

For the Chinese order is simply the patterned regularity we find in the world as we discover it and as we add to it. It is *the way* things happen and we make them happen – it is *tao*. *Tao* can be found in the natural world, in DNA, in complex structure of snowflakes and in language. It is an ever changing pattern of order which inheres and is inseparable form the world that is ordered. *Tao* is both how the world is and what it is.⁸ As TTC puts it:

"The Tao is like an empty bowl, Which in being used can never be filled up. Fathomless, it seems to be the origin of all things. It blunts all sharp edges. It unites all tangles, It harmonises all lights, It unites the world into one whole. Hidden in the deeps, Yet is seems to exist forever."⁹

"The Great Tao is universal like a flood. How can it be turned to the right or to the left? All creatures depend on it, And it denies nothing to anyone. It does its work, But it makes no claims for itself. It clothes and feeds all, But it does not lord over them [...] All things return to it as to their home ..." ¹⁰

With *tao* as the fundamental concept, the Chinese regard life as a process of refinement, comparable to learning to write well-formed characters in the art of calligraphy. The art of cooking is also often used as an example of harmonious order in Chinese philosophical literature. In cooking ingredients are supposed to retain their integrity while being enhanced by relationships to other complementary ingredients. In the same way shaping one's character and building a successful community can be achieved by developing one's own

resources and productive relations with others. The opposites in Chinese mind are not dualistic in the Western sense, but complementary and mutually explicatory.¹¹

”Tao is nameless. Small as it is in its Primal Simplicity, It is inferior to nothing in the world. If only a ruler could cling to it, Everything will render homage to him. Heaven and Earth will be harmonised And send down sweet dew. When once the Primal Simplicity diversified, Different names appeared. Are there not enough names now?”¹²

”Tao never makes any ado, And yet it does everything. If a ruler can cling to it, All things will grow of themselves. When they have grown and tend to make a stir, It is time to keep them in their place by the aid of the nameless Primal Simplicity, Which alone can curb the desires of men. When the desires of men are curbed, there will be peace, and the world will settle down of its own accord.”¹³

These lengthy quotations give some feel about the style of philosophising in TTC and underline the point that *tao* is the how the world really is and a principle to follow. Another interesting idea related to *tao* is the idea of returning: anything that has gone far in one direction will inevitably move in the opposite direction. Because of this ”law of returning” humans should avoid overly striving after worldly goals, which inevitably leads to loss, and should instead be non-assertive and have few desires.¹⁴

It has already been pointed out that the sense of order in Chinese philosophy is different from that of the Western one. There is also a difference when it comes to a very important term ”knowing”. In Chinese philosophy knowing does not mean that there is a correspondence between mental ideas and external reality, as Westerners often understand the concept, rather knowing means ”to penetrate”, ”to get through without obstruction.” In modern Chinese ”I know” is *chih tao* which means ”I know the way.”¹⁵

After presenting some general features of Chinese thinking and the central concept of *tao* it is useful to elaborate some features of Taoism, for Lao Tzu’s text TTC is regarded as one of its classic texts. Taoism is a religio-philosophical tradition that has, along with Confucianism, shaped Chinese life for more than 2,000 years. Taoism, like Confucianism, is relational rather than dualistic, and it advocates self-sufficiency by taking full advantage of the possibilities available in various relationships in the world. It suggests that the most productive relationships are inclusive and non-coercive. Hence, rather than separating gender into male and female and privileging one of them, it is better to be androgynous, also hard and soft is better than just hard, or sweet and sour is better than simply sweet.

An area in which Taoism depart from classical Confucianism is its ecological sensibility, for it emphasises humans’ relation to the natural order, as well as to the social and cultural environment. Another major concern of Taoism, that has already been mentioned, is the limitation of language: Taoists are concerned that language can mislead us to think that there is something permanent in the world or our experience. Two other general features of Taoism are those of perspectivism, an idea that we are always looking at a situation from some perspective (without being relativist i.e. that there is no basis for making judgements), and

mysticism which in Taoism as a way of appreciating the endless richness and uniqueness of each particular thing in the world.¹⁶

3. The Argument of *Tao Teh Ching* Criticised

As mentioned above, TTC argues that *tao* is the world and the principle of its cosmic order. It also claims that everything is in change because of the life force, *chi*. TTC propagates a view that a wise person or a ruler should take *tao* into account in all their actions. A wise person lives in harmony by not aiming to achieve too much, stretching oneself beyond one's proper limits, but rather allowing oneself to play the role that comes naturally, almost passively. He should "know the masculine, keep to the feminine; know the white, keep to the black; know the glorious, keep to the lowly" and recognise that "a great tailor does little cutting."¹⁷

In words of TTC one should avoid "ado" and "practice Non-Ado" with a promise that then "everything will be in order."¹⁸ Figuratively speaking *tao* is like water that will find its way however much humans fight against it, and consequently a wise person would not fight against the flow of water, rather desire to be desireless, and cultivate virtue in one's person.¹⁹ TTC particularly warns against accumulating worldly possessions beyond one's actual needs,²⁰ boasting about one's achievements,²¹ trusting in violence and the arms as a source of strength,²² or setting up a tyrannical government²³ for in the end the soft will win the hard, and the weak will win the strong.²⁴

The teachings of TTC do not form an argument in the Western sense of the term. There is no one great conclusion that will follow a lengthy thesis, rather a collection of short aphorisms and words of wisdom that aim to awaken a reader to recognise the principle of *tao*. Therefore, there is no point of trying to criticise the text as a whole, but rather to take examples that shed light to the logic of reasoning in TTC. When doing this one almost instantly notices that the argumentation is almost wholly based on analogies. For example in chapter eight one reads:

"The higher form of goodness is like water. Water knows how to benefit all things without striving with them. It stays in places loathed by all men. Therefore it comes near the Tao. In choosing your dwelling, know how keep to the ground. In cultivating your mind, know how to dive in the hidden depths. In dealing with others, know how to be gentle and kind [...] If you do not strive with others, You will be free from blame."²⁵

The striking feature of these analogies is that they are analogies only in a poetic sense. One might ask what does it mean that water benefits of all things without striving? How does water do that? How can water benefit from anything at all? Also the passage leaves open exactly what is highest form of goodness: is it a principle of not striving with others or being free from blame, or something else? And if we do not know what the highest form of goodness is, how could we know it is like water? This type of analysis seems futile after a while. TTC simply does not become accessible through it, the conclusion being that even if in

between lines and very vaguely TTC does make the general points mentioned earlier about *tao*, it does so very elusively, poetically and between lines.

Consequently, the structural and conceptual analysis of TTC, if one only reads the meanings of the words as they can be literally understood, leads to a conclusion, that TTC puts forward a collection of dogmas that one must either believe or reject, and offers no rational ground for believing them. It all depends on one unfounded premise that is introduced over and over again in various parables, the reality of *tao*. At times TTC is quite explicit about this. In chapter forty-one we read: "When a wise scholar hears the Tao He practices it diligently, When a mediocre scholar hears the Tao, He wavers between belief and unbelief. When a worthless scholar hears the Tao, He laughs boisterously at it. But if such one does not laugh at it, The Tao would not be the Tao!"²⁶ This type of *ad hominem* argument would be totally unacceptable in Western philosophy, because we strive for *reasons* to believe something, and uphold the view that the truth value of some belief is not related of mine or somebody else's reaction to it.

Even if rational grounds for belief are not offered, TTC is very appealing to one's emotions for it, like all sweeping explanations of how the world is, opens up a perspective that explains everything. It is all encompassing explanation of the reality, and consequently gives a sense of clarity and security, probably something people seek to find in religion, or pseudo-scientific theories, such as psycho-analysis.

As for the use of concepts in TTC one might list endless examples of vagueness. Everything is *like* something but not precisely so. Only the ethical guidelines are expressed clearly, and represent a typical rule-based ethics, whereby the rule is presented as a solution to a specific problem. Of course, correctly understood the totality of rules form a whole from which principles or perspective can be extracted. As an example of vagueness and paradoxical nature of TTC we may read that "High Virtue is non-virtuous; therefore it has virtue"²⁷ It must be admitted that in this passage the equivocation of the word "virtue" is deliberate to aim our attention to the idea that a person that is truly virtuous does not seem like that, for he is morally advanced enough not bring it forth, and is reaching for something higher than virtue, *tao*. This is the pattern throughout the text: the concepts are used vaguely in order to lead a mind away from conceptual thinking to the direct realisation of *tao*, which is "always nameless."²⁸

However, one cannot help thinking that the wisdom of TTC may only be in the style of vague and poetic writing and an invention of one concept, that of *tao*, which is introduced over and over again as a metaphysical, ethical and epistemological principle. If so, anyone writing with the same style and with a wide enough audience could attract faithful believers, who "see" *tao* working in the world and helping them in their lives.

Another interesting feature in TTC is that practice of non-ado may actually discourage people to seek knowledge, for "in the old days, those who were well versed in the practice of the Tao did not try to enlighten the people, but rather to keep them in the state of simplicity. For why are people hard to govern? Because they are too clever!"²⁹ In other chapters we are told to "drop wisdom, abandon cleverness, and the people will be benefited a hundredfold ... see the Simple and embrace the Primal, Diminish the self and curb the desires!"³⁰ and "have done with learning, and you will have no more vexation."³¹

These are hardly advice that a philosopher could give. One cannot help to think that such advice does not help to reach the aspects of thinking that in the beginning of this essay were defined as philosophical, on the contrary, they will easily lead to a dogmatic and uncritical frame of mind that easily manipulated by great principles and vague promises such as "attain to utmost Emptiness",³² and "the Feminine always conquers the Masculine by her quietness, by lowering herself through her quietness."³³

4. Conclusion

Is TTC philosophy, religion or poetry? Getting back to our definition of philosophy as reflective, normative, rational, critical and systematic way of thinking, we are now ready to assess to what extent TTC can be regarded as a work of philosophy. The argument put forward in TTC is reflective in the sense that in the cultural context where it was first presented it did challenge and elaborate some assumptions of Confucianism, thus bringing something new in Chinese intellectual tradition.. The argument of TTC can be regarded normative in the sense that it makes value judgement, that are derived from the principle of *tao*, and gives examples of correct or incorrect way of thinking about *tao*. However, to my mind, TTC is not rational, for it does not give reasons to believe in *tao*, but instead appeals to fallacious argumentation. Neither is TTC critical for it presents itself as *the* way of thinking and living and consequently offers a dogmatic world view even if it leaves room for interpretation. As for being systematic, TTC could be regarded as a systematic philosophy because it does offer an all encompassing world view, but it does this at the cost of being vague and elusive.

TTC seems to be lacking in philosophical qualities, and can only be read as philosophy if one is ready to ignore the elusive and poetic style, logical fallacies and dogmatism, and concentrates on the message as a whole. In the context of Chinese thought, TTC seems altogether different, for it did, as mentioned above, contribute and develop further the concepts and ideas of Chinese tradition, and it uses the familiar way of arguing. Thus, maybe it is regarded more to qualify as philosophy by the Chinese, even if for me, as a westerner, it does not open up that way.

This leads us to a very important point about understanding non-western philosophy: in order to understand it we must, to some extent, give up on our criteria and apply the principle of charity when it comes to logic

and the use of concepts. Only this way we can do justice to forms of thinking that could potentially make an important contribution to our way of thinking. The problem is, of course, where do we draw the line between charity and criticism, to what extent we must give up of our dearly cherished principles in order to do justice to other ways of thinking? When are we justified saying: “this is not philosophy.” It is difficult to draw this line, but it is certain that without some charity, without willingness to listen and learn, one will find it very difficult to enter into a dialogue with non-western thinkers, especially when some of them, like Lao Tzu, regard that their main principles cannot be talked about.

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NOTES

¹ TTC, ch. 21, p. 30 – 31.

² Gödel’s Theorem.

³ In Feyerabend: *Farewell to Reason*, Verso Edns (Oxford) 1987.

⁴ Higgins, Solmon: *From Africa to Zen*, p. 1 – 8.

⁵ Blocker, *World Philosophy, An East-West Comparative Intorduction to Philosophy*, p. 3 – 6.

⁶ Gyekye Kwame: *Tradition and Modernity : Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, Oxford University Press (Oxford), 1997. Quoted from Blocker, p. 3.

⁷ Blocker, p. 6.

⁸ Higgins, Solmon: *World Philosophy: A Text with Readings*, p. 30 –34.

⁹ Tao Teh Ching (TTC), ch. 4, p. 6.

¹⁰ TTC, ch. 34 p. 52.

¹¹ Solmon, Higgins: *World Philosophy: A Text with Readings*, p 30 – 34.

¹² TTC, ch. 32, p. 49.

¹³ TTC, ch. 37, p. 55.

¹⁴ TTC, ch. 40, p. 61.

¹⁵ Solomon, Higgins: *World Philosophy: A Text with Readings*, p. 44.

¹⁶ Solomon, Higgins: *World Philosophy: A Text with Readings*, p. 42 – 44.

¹⁷ TTC, ch. 28, p. 42, 43.

¹⁸ TTC, ch. 3, p. 5.

¹⁹ TTC, ch. 64, p. 96.

²⁰ TTC, ch. 3, p. 4.

²¹ TTC, ch. 22 p. 32.

²² TTC, ch. 31, p. 47, ch. 30 - 31, p. 45 – 48.

²³ TTC, ch. 17, p. 25, ch. 51, p. 74.

²⁴ TTC, ch. 76 and 78, p. 109, 111.

²⁵ TTC, ch. 8, p. 10 – 11.

²⁶ TTC, ch. 41, p. 62.

²⁷ TTC, ch. 38, p. 56.

²⁸ TTC, ch. 32, p. 49.

²⁹ TTC, ch. 65, p. 97.

³⁰ TTC, ch. 19, p. 27.

³¹ TTC, ch. 20, p. 28.

³² TTC, ch. 16, p. 23.

³³ TTC, ch. 61, p. 89.