



BOOK I

The old chinese doctrine of the Tao



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The Chinese doctrine of the Tao

A multitude of dualist doctrines exist, but it would appear that all of their roots can be traced back to the Tao, which spread around the planet via the different communication channels that existed at the time. It is therefore vital to bring this ancient doctrine to the fore, although care must be taken not to base reflection on it alone.

This work's ultimate goal is to demonstrate that many disciplines of modern thought have commonalities with dualism which, constantly breaking through the surface, emerges as the backbone of all of our knowledge.

Monism fails at this task, able to generate uniformity and vapidness only, when in fact, the world is differentiated. The pinnacle of these differences is the opposite pair, in which the existence of each element is only possible due to the existence of its binomial. It is perfect symbiosis, where the existence of one extreme is conditioned by that of the other. There are a plethora of manifestations of basic, fundamental dualism:

- to be \Leftrightarrow not to be
- something \Leftrightarrow nothing
- 1 \Leftrightarrow 0
- On \Leftrightarrow Off
- Yes \Leftrightarrow No
- absolute \Leftrightarrow relative
- statistical average \Leftrightarrow deviation
- happiness \Leftrightarrow unhappiness
- energy \Leftrightarrow space-time
- open \Leftrightarrow closed
- switched On \Leftrightarrow switched Off
- full \Leftrightarrow empty
- activity \Leftrightarrow rest

and other similar opposites.

Pluralism is nothing more than a combination of dualisms producing diversity and complexity. Our intention then, is to demonstrate that the foundations of our modern universe are based largely on what our ancestors had already understood so many years ago. Humanity's so-called progress since has done nothing to further our enlightenment. We have only rendered more complex that which had been explained in its simple form as duality: one element exists only in function of its opposite.



All things are in constant juxtaposition and opposition,
their goal is to find rest.

One world the right way up, another world inverted.
Just like a coin, the universe has both an upper, and a flip side.

Chinese thought

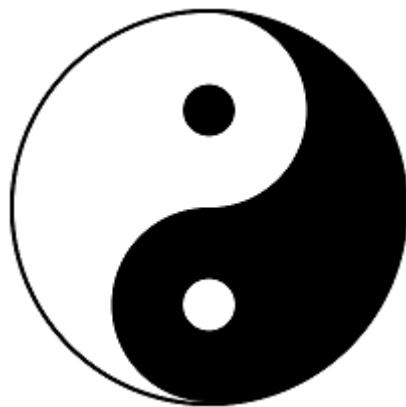
In our language, “it’s all Chinese to me” implies that something is very complex or difficult to understand. This illustrates the challenges of understanding a way of thinking that is unwilling to expose itself, preferring instead to communicate indirectly. Enigma, metaphor, allegory and fable – these are its preferred modes of expression. The Chinese thinker takes delight in the elusive, the allusive, the enigmatic and the elliptic. His color is yellow, mid-way between the two extremes: red and violet. He likes to dance around the issue, daring to approach as close as is possible to its core, its centre, revolving around this point without ever settling definitively on a final position.

Chinese thought is therefore extremely difficult to grasp and we can only hope to reveal here, in these few lines, its fundamental characteristics. The Chinese thinker embraces ambiguity and imprecision. He finds the logical mind uncomfortable. He shuns away from precise definitions as he understands their futility. Had Descartes been Chinese, writing “A Discourse on Method” would have been impossible. The Chinese thinker hedges around the issues and offers a number of interpretations while never tackling their true core. He is aware that he is part of a perpetually shifting world of which he is able to perceive snapshots only. He is incapable of making a distinction between that which is true and that which is false and opts instead for co-existence; a proposal is never wholly true or wholly false, it can be both of these things simultaneously.

This is symbolised by the Yin and the Yang of the unalterable Tao, which are interdependent and oscillate perpetually around an equilibrium which is never attained. A Chinese person does not understand distinction. Instead, all things are interdependent and closely related. Isolated events are part of a continually evolving context. Gradual change is permanent. His mind flees the concept and abhors the development of ordered linear reasoning. The universe represents an immense organism and to look for an origin and a cause, a form, limits; a sense or a conclusion seems nonsensical. He doesn’t employ the word “God”. To understand is meaningless to him, because it would imply trying in vain to adapt human concepts to a fleeting reality, a reality that is constantly slipping out of reach.

Instead, we must understand that there is nothing to understand.

He attempts to fuse with nature, as he is nothing more than a fragment of this nature, intimately integrated with the rest. He does not prove, he illustrates, he observes. He is in tune with rhythms, with alternations, with cycles. He is not attracted in any way to abstraction. He could be compared to an archer whose arrows are dispersed around the target, as though he was aiming for the centre but was unable to reach it. He is incapable of considering an isolated or adiabatic system; everything is interconnected. Western science has escaped the handicap of this way of thinking; it has been able to implement abstraction, thus conceiving events as skeletons, devoid that may harm its binary and linear reasoning.



THE UNIVERSE ONLY EVER REPEATS OR CONTRADICTS ITSELF

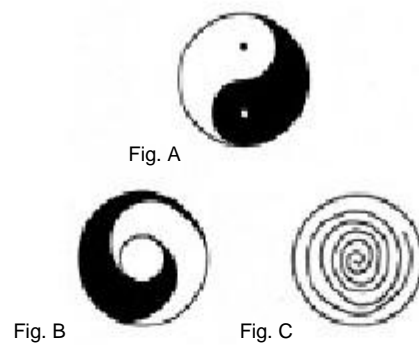


Portrait of Lao Tseu
by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322)
Stamped on stone



First lines of Lao Tseu (Tao-Te-King)
(chapter I et and beginning of chapter II).
Stamped calligraphie by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322).

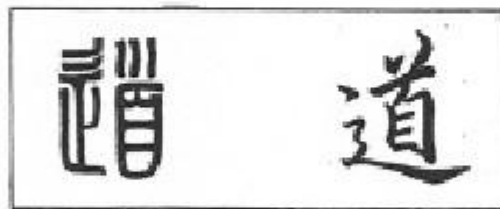
Three traditional representations of Taiji (Supreme-top).



The figure A emphasizes the complementarity of Yin and Yang
 The figures B and C have a form of spiral insist on the dynamics due to interaction between the poles Yin and Yang

德

Te, virtuality and efficiency of Tao



Writing of Tao: On left, the old form
 On right, the present form

陰 陽 萬 物

Yin / Yang

Wanwu (the “Ten thousand Beings”)



The Chinese doctrine of the Tao and modern dualism

II Exploring different approaches of the Tao offers a broader understanding of an issue and, in this case, the chance to perceive the immobile centre of the unspeakable Tao by analysing it from different perspectives.

In preparation for our analysis of the Chinese doctrine of the Tao, passed down to us from the ancient past and which, strictly speaking, represents the very essence of dualism, we studied a number of translations of the “Tao Te King”.

Our consequential observation was this: although the text appears to have been completed several centuries before Jesus Christ, and is unlikely to have been significantly modified since, there are wide divergences in its interpretation.

It would have seemed more likely to discover, except for a few sibylline interpretations, a certain level of coherence. The translation of these archaic ideographs undoubtedly required a deep knowledge of the Chinese soul. In fact, this is no less than one of the world's great works, on a par with the Bible and the Qur'an, which are purposely written in an allusive style to allow the reader to find that which he is seeking therein, a kind of “*auberge espagnole*”. Furthermore, the meaning of these ideographs is dependent on their context and on the punctuation which differs in the different editions of the text. Chinese culture is holistic. Perception is synthetic leaving details aside. There are few great Chinese mathematicians. The collective always dominates over individualism, which our western civilisations sometimes find difficult to understand. Our minds, that have been so badly formed – or even deformed – by the rigour of reasoning, struggle to understand this philosophy. A certain level of

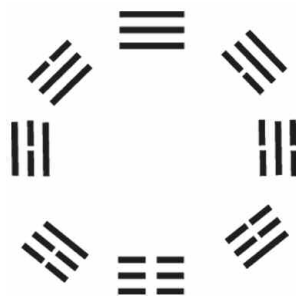
coherence however, can be extracted from this throng of ideas, and it is this that we will attempt to present as the conclusion to our work. First, however, let us surrender to our analytical reflex, before progressing to a synthetic, global and holistic vision.

The “Tao Te King” or “The Book of the Way and its Virtue” is thought to have been written by Lao-Tzu (old master), an official in the imperial archives. We know very little about him, but it is believed that his work was an attempt to record all that had been passed down to him from the primitive civilisations that had come before.

It is thought that the idea of a dualism of opposing forces dates back to a certain emperor by the name of Fou Hi (whose reign began in 3468 BC-?). The emperor is reputed to have used the following demonstration to explain the world in which we live:

He took two identical twigs and engraved a mark in one of them. By symbolizing the twig without a notch by a continual line — and the twig with a notch by a broken line — —, he demonstrated that these twigs could be arranged in a number of ways that produced the famous octagonal trigam, resembling the shell of the tortoise whose rounded back represents the sky and whose flat belly represents the earth.

He therefore proved that from two opposing elements – the “full” represented by an unbroken line and the “empty” represented by a broken line – it was possible to create eight different elements.



This discovery would develop into Morse code – composed of dots and dashes only – but even more staggeringly, it was also the cornerstone for the invention of the computer which, as we well know, bases its impressive calculations on nothing more than 0 (the current does not flow) and 1 (the current flows). The transistor, in fact, functions simply as a switch. Everything can be translated into a series of “0” and of “1”. This emperor had, in reality, identified the following sequence, replacing the unbroken line by 1 and the broken line by 0: 000, 001, 010, 011, 111, 110, 101, 100, in other words $2^3 = 8$ combinations

It was a first glimpse of the enormous diversity of applications for the power of 2. Today's computers function using an octet that is equal to $2^8 = 256$ combinations of 0 and 1.

The following is an anecdote that illustrates the power of 2:
A king, who had been beaten in a game of chess, granted his adversary any wish he desired to reward his victory. His request was simple: he asked that the king give him one grain of wheat for the first square on the board, and that he double the number for every square on the board. The king was delighted to grant the man his wish – he hadn't realised that all the grain stores in his kingdom wouldn't be enough to fulfil the man's request. He would have needed 20 billion billion grains on square 64 alone – equivalent to nearly the entire wheat harvest on the earth for 5.000 years!

It is not surprising then to imagine that the power of two can produce, as the 'Tao Te King' tells us, “ten thousand different beings” (which is a little more than 2^{13} combinations of 0 and 1).

Certain specialists believe that the universe can be represented by 10^{120} octets of combinations of 0 and 1. It is a huge number, one that we are far from being able to fathom. It is absolutely incredible that one man, emperor or not, was able to conceive such a concept thousands of centuries before our existence.

The computer environment is a dualist one then, because it reasons only by a series of 0s and of 1s. We will revisit this key theme in the article “Dualism and logic”.

To analyse the contents of the “Tao Te King”, we are going to explore the intellectual approach adopted by Max Kaltenmark, an eminent sinologist, in his book: *Lao-Tzu and Taoism* (Collection maîtres spirituels, Le Seuil, 1965).

For the text itself, we will refer to the most recent translation; that of Conradin Von Lauer published as an offprint by Jean de Bonnot.

Chinese philosophical thought began to appear several millenniums BC and almost certainly more specifically around the 5th century BC, during a period of unrest known as the Warring States period. Confucius (551–479 BC) wished to reinstate a sense of tradition to quash the rising decadence in his country. Chinese civilisation is certainly as ancient as Egyptian civilisation.

We know almost nothing about the man thought to be the founder of the doctrine of the Tao: Lao-Tzu, which means old master. We will discover that he believed that life should be lived in a humble and discreet fashion. In this, he was successful, as the little we know about him is murky legend. He was almost certainly an archivist in the imperial archives during the Zhou Dynasty. It appears he met Confucius. Unable to bear the decadence that surrounded him, he mounted a buffalo, and taking his texts written on sheets of bamboo, was stopped at the border by a guard who was interested in learning more of the teachings of Lao-Tzu. It is told that Lao-Tzu entrusted his texts to him, which later fell to the ground. The delicate bindings holding the pages together came apart spreading the master’s writings across the floor. Lao-Tzu remounted his buffalo and disappeared never to be seen again. The guardian gathered up the pieces and reassembled them. Some believe this could explain the lack of order in the texts. The text was first called the ‘Lao-Tzu’, as was common practice. It was then given the title of the ‘Tao Te King’ under the Hans (206–220 BC). This classified it among the sacred and canonical texts because ‘King’ can be translated here as ‘moral treaty’, a set of guidelines directing human conduct. Its literal meaning is fabric. The text is composed of around 5,000 ideographs in its different versions. It is divided into 81 short chapters, which are themselves collected in two parts; the first covers all the chapters up to and including chapter 37 and tends to refer to the Tao, while the second part tends to refer more to the Te. The book is largely homogenous, leading us to the conclusion that it was probably written by a single individual.

There are, however, parts written in rhyme and parts that are not, as well as different rhythms in the expression. The book was reworked on several occasions by authors as little known as Lao-Tzu. These alterations, however, took place without doubt before the 3rd century BC and we can therefore be almost certain that the text has remained unchanged since this period. A multitude of commentaries then began to appear. An emperor named Wen (180–157) was among the commentators, but the most important, however, was Wang Pi, who died in 249 AC at the age of 23.

Lao-Tzu appears to have lived at around the time of Aristotle. Their intellectual approaches, however, were poles apart.

While Aristotle was laying the foundations for our logical and rigorous reasoning, Lao-Tzu was introducing ambiguity, estimation, imprecision, constant change against a background of eternity and universal complementary opposition as the foundation of the world. The sail of knowledge was about to be ripped in half. Modern dualism is the stitching that can sew the two pieces back together.

PEACE IS SILENCE



The legendary chinese emperor Fou-Hi (2000 B.C.) would have invented cooking of good and the eight trigrams (Pa-koua) which permit to classify all the elements of cosmos and to put in relation with the fundamental forces of the nature.

«In Ja und Nein bestehen alle Dinge.»

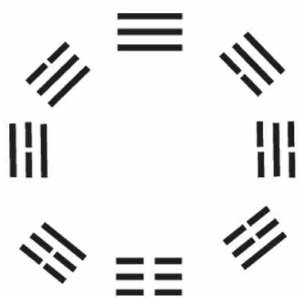
(All things consist of yes and no)

Jacob Boehme

The true sense of the word “Tao” is “way”, or “path”, and therefore by extension interconnection. Tao also evokes the sense of “teaching”, which gives it its doctrinal characteristic. It connects, for example, the Sky with the Earth, by the intermediary of man. One characteristic of the Chinese language is to shy away from giving a word a specific definition. It prefers non-clarity, ambiguity. The meaning is revealed by a word’s context, and definitions can vary as a consequence. This is why translations can differ so extensively. Punctuation also gives words different interpretations and it appears to have varied greatly in the different editions.

Tao can also represent a mysterious or magical power. Chinese religious thought brought together the concepts of “the way” and of order: the way to be followed creates order. This can mean order in the natural sense through the cyclical alternation of the seasons and of day and night. From this stems an alternating rhetoric between two contrary forces, the Yang and the Yin which form the fundamental basis of the Tao. The Yang is associated with light, warmth, masculinity, activity. The Yin, its contrary force, is associated with the dark, the cold, femininity, rest and passiveness. The sky is Yang, the earth is Yin.

The oldest known definition of the Tao is: “One part Yin, one part Yan, this is the Tao”.





老子

道可道非常道名可名非常名無名天地之始
有名萬物之母常無欲以觀其妙常有欲以觀
其微此兩者同出而異名同謂之玄之又玄衆
妙之門

天下皆知美之爲美斯惡已皆知善之爲善斯不
善已故有無之相生難易之相成長短之相形高
下之相傾音聲之相和前後之相隨是以聖人處



The ancient Chinese did not perceive the universe as static. They believed that everything in the world was animated and in continual evolution, and that this evolution did not follow a linear pattern, but a cyclical one.

“Te” is usually translated by “virtue”. The phrase “Tao-Te”, the path which leads to virtue, means “morality”. The notion of Te implies a sense of efficiency and precision. Te can, like Tao (another example of Chinese ambiguity) refer to a natural or acquired power. Tao is the indeterminate. Te is the possibility to work towards specific achievements. In Granet’s words, it is “the effective which is revealed as it materialises”. The Te, usually accepted as the positive force, can however, be a negative influence. Everything is a double-edged sword.

The term “Tao” appears 76 times in the “Tao Te King” with many different meanings. Lao-Tzu perceives it as that which forms the universe:

“It is an analogous and perfect being. It may be considered as the mother of this world but I do not know its name; I will call it the Tao and if it must be given a name this name will be: the great.”

The supreme principle cannot be named. It is like the absolute, which has no relative. A name (ming) is relative to that which is represents. This is the paradox of the Tao which is rest, absolute calm, the void, the vacuum, the inexpressible – but also continuous movement, and all this simultaneously. The more clarity we seek, the more ambiguous it becomes. The concept can be compared to the vacuum state in quantum physics which is, in fact, buzzing with the perpetual movement of virtual particles. Tao appears to refuse distinction. It is the tool used by man to investigate his environment. The infinitely large and infinitely small conceal a never-ending commotion. The outside meets the inside. The infinite can be represented by that which has neither inside nor outside, stretching eternally in an attempt to reach zero. As soon as we try to observe it, the Tao becomes troubled and hazy (see Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in quantum physics). It lies somewhere between zero and infinity, but it masks any clues that could lead to it and rebuffs all who wish to experience the state of beatitude, of non-action which it enshrines. The Tao tirelessly strives to destroy that which seeks to construct itself based on uniformity and vapidty.



THE TAO IS SELF-REFERENTIAL

EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE FOR
NOTHING TO CHANGE



Lao-Tseu by Mu-chi XII-XIII^e siècles (B.N. Paris)

Below is an extract from: "TAO: *The philosophy of time and change*" by Philip Rawson and Lazlo Legesa for a different view of the Tao :

"The Tao is a uniform fabric of uninterrupted movement and change, brought to life, like a river, by undulations, waves and wavelets with momentary instants of calm. Every observer is himself an integral part of this fabric. Its movement never ceases and it never turns back on its course. We can only perceive its diverse forms by the appearance of fleeting images similar to photographic snapshots and, as the concept of reality is relative to that of permanence, none of these images are real for a single instant. Objects and events in the outside world represent, for a follower of the Tao, nothing more than passing clouds, in other words, shapes and movements with enough consistency and durability that we are able to perceive them as physical units. All the destinations that man believes he can perceive in the Tao are nothing more than illusions, simple mental constructions like wavelets on the water's surface. Every human being is himself, nothing more than a complex and mobile system of interactions with his environment. His body is undergoing continuous change; change does not occur as a leap from one state to another; ageing cannot be measured in minutes, in hours or in years but is instead, continuous. The reader reading these lines is not the same as he who began reading the paragraph. The ability to see a man, a tree or a rock as "objects" is nothing more than a useful convention, when in fact, each of them is simply a network of mobile surfaces, made up of changes and transformation, some "exterior" and therefore visible and others "interior" and therefore invisible. And western civilisations are very wrong when they accord authentic value to fleeting images that they perceive as reality. Discovering this truth creates discomfort and paralysis that can sometimes be powerful enough to render them blind to Taoist art.

Taoist intuition is based on two essential principles. The first is that no element or series of events is ever reproduced in exactly the same way. The second principle is that the immense network of undulations itself does not change. It is the intangible block, with no defined form, mother or "matrix" of time, mass of the existent and the non-existent, of the present, the future and the faded past : it is the Immense Everything.

Rock inscription dating from 1556:

*Yes, vast is the supreme Tao
Creator of itself, acting through non-action
End and beginning of all the ages
Born before the earth and before the sky,
Silently embracing all of time
Perpetually traversing the continuity of the centuries
In the West, it instructed the great Confucius
And in the East, it converted Buddha
The model for one hundred kings
Passed on by generations of wise men
It is the ancestor of all doctrines
And the mystery that exceeds all mysteries.*

We perceive a world filled with distinct objects and living beings, existing in an independent space. We consider it a given that these “independent objects” move in empty space, influencing and acting on each other according to the relationships of cause and effect, traversing a series of static states of change. Our science and philosophy are satisfied with an explanation of the real world that is based on definitions of substances that are painstakingly distinguished one from another. Idealism in fact, of the concepts and materialism of atoms, themselves sub-divided into particles. We accept the assumption that the structure of our universe is similar to a structure built of sturdily assembled bricks, each one existing independently. All these materials, in their individuality, their functions and their relationships, appear to us as autonomous concepts that are unrelated to their negative or their opposite. Their forms are clearly defined and separate, and implicitly immutable. We only see change when one object is transformed into another. We obtain our perception and measurement of time by dividing the duration into identical fractions that we accord infinitely large or infinitesimally small dimensions, each fraction remaining separate in the abstract.

Taoism perceives all this as absurd and ignorant. While recognising that it can be useful for the human mind to extract certain constant concepts or situations from a moving reality, it denies the claim that we are able to reconstruct the mobility of the real.

The most important element – and the only one that counts – continually escapes ordinary thinking that reconstructs or understands the world based on such ideas. Any static perception of our world is, ultimately, powerless. The origins and conclusions of our most rational cosmology lie in abstract concepts, scarred by this huge, rudimentary defect.

We often describe the reciprocal opposition of the Yin and the Yang as the symbols of female and male energy. In fact, these two elements, representative of so many Taoist concepts, are of an almost infinite ambiguity: because no Yang can exist without Yin, and no Yin without some trace of Yang. These are impalpable polarisations that cause oscillations without which there would be no movement. And the incessant dialectic between their vibrations and their undulations is the cornerstone on which the framework of the Tao is built. The Yang is bright, red, male, penetrating, high and celestial. The Yin is dark, black, female, receptive, abyssal and deep. They are represented by symbols that have been used consistently in art and their diverse combinations apply to different contexts.

The ultimate goal of the Tao is harmony: harmony that resolves the oppositions of a dialectic situation and creates harmony between man and the turbulent universe, in other words, supreme peace.”

道 德 經

The chinese characters of Tao Tö king.

Reflections on the work:

Taoism Philosophy, by J.-C. Cooper (Dangles Collection Horizons spirituels)

In his work, the author develops the concepts raised by the doctrine of the Tao in as many chapters.

Reviewing them will provide us with a further interpretation of this philosophy. We have learned that the concepts contained within the Tao are, for a multitude of reasons, generally obscure. Every reader can therefore interpret them as he pleases, of course, adding a generous dose of that which he wishes to discover. We have therefore tried to provide a variety of explanations of these concepts in order to better understand their meaning, without attempting to set this meaning in stone. The Tao itself cannot be expressed in words, and attempting to do so transforms it to something that is no longer the Tao. The spoken word is inappropriate for expressing exactly that which the Tao is, in other words the undifferentiated, the vacuum, the nothing. As soon as we write, or speak the word nothing, nothing is immediately transformed into something, because nothing can hold nothing, and certainly not words or the individual that speaks them. Existence is distinction, compartmentalisation, separation, far from the Tao which is the primordial essence, immaculate, the immobile motor, rest and absolute calm. It is ataraxia, complete peace that nothing can disturb. All that can be evoked by the Tao is intuition. A type of reasoning that we call “vicious” is to some extent behind this intuition; the vicious circle or diallel. Opposites therefore appear; contrary elements that cannot exist alone. One creates the presence of the other. Good cannot exist without evil which gives it its worth, and vice versa. Such a vision renders the «supreme good» completely unattainable and reserved for dreamers. Evil is always radical, neutralising it is not possible.

The Tao, by its very nature, presupposes part good part evil, not seeking to eliminate them, but to find the balance between them which is the return to calm, to rest, to the centre. Good and evil oscillate around this central point and should one or the other become too great, it is pulled back towards the centre by a greater force than that which is pulling it away. The attracting force pulls it over the central point and out towards the other side with the same force in the opposite direction. The universe is therefore made up simply of alternations, of oscillations: day and night, happiness and unhappiness, positive and negative. This is how we are aware of its presence. The Tao however, remains an immutable and unchanged whole. Consequently, all events must be compensated by other events to produce an end result of zero, otherwise the equilibrium associated with this state of rest would be lost. The Tao would therefore be changing, which is an impossible event. In order for nothing to change, everything must change through compensation. This explains the law of large numbers in which compensation is achieved through quantity. In the game of heads and tails, a large number of throws will produce an almost equal number of heads and tails. If positive elements of a greater or lesser intensity are added to an overall vacuum, they must be compensated by negative elements of an equivalent total intensity, in order to maintain the vacuum. Clearly, the weaker the deviation from the centre, the closer one is to the median which is the state of rest. The explanation for the principle of least action is found here; nature seeks to minimise deviations which are consumers of energy.

The Buddhist theory of the wheel of existence (reincarnation) known as "Samsâra" provides a clear image of the existential process. Each point in a circle generates another, diametrically opposed point, creating two poles, in an attempt to achieve a stable equilibrium which can never be found. Moving closer to the centre, the ideal state, is the only way to reduce these oppositions (which are as beneficial as they are harmful). This central point is a point at which there is neither happiness nor unhappiness. It is the ataraxic point of complete calm. The only way to achieve this level of beatitude is to reduce our ambitions, our wants and our desires.

“Being happy with little is nothing to be afraid of”, a Taoist precept assures us. Buddhism advises us to reduce the flame of our life almost to extinction, to Nirvana. Man is continually pursuing the positive things: happiness, love, power, money, honour. This thirst for the positive cannot be extinguished. We forget too quickly that a positive event must be compensated by negative events which will inflict an equivalent level of injury as the energy expended in chasing the positive. The rise follows the fall and vice versa. The opposition of an event is not always perceivable at exactly the same instant with exactly the same intensity. In other words, the adjustment is not necessarily immediate. Complete compensation is achieved in the infinite and unlimited Tao. Some people may bask in contentment for their entire lives. It is this that attracts others to attempt to be like them. But, the law of compensation is unrelenting. The aim of justice, represented by a pair of scales, is to find this balance. Those that have abused must be punished and the weak must be rewarded.

An accounting balance sheet has two columns: it contains many entries both in the debit and credit columns but, for the final result to be zero, they must all balance out. This is how the world operates. The Tao, the sum of all the positive and negative changes, is eternally zero. The law of compensation can be expressed differently: any expense of energy manifests itself as a gap, a shortfall. The Tao is eternally replenishing this gap by inversely attracting that which produced it. The force of the attraction is as great as the intensity of the subtraction. The power of this attraction will, metaphorically speaking, “overshoot” the central line – zero – creating a deviation of the same amplitude, but in the opposite direction. The same effect of inverse attraction will result, followed by another contrary and positive pull, creating a series of oscillations around the centre, or zero. In short then, the greater the deviation from absolute rest, the greater the tendency to return, oscillating around the central point without ever actually reaching it.

After this long aside exploring our vision of the concept of the Tao, let us now continue with the analysis of Cooper’s book.

I – The Tao – How to overcome the difficulty of speaking about Tao, expressing the inexpressible, fathoming the unfathomable?

The Tao is the mystery towards which words turn. It resists all logic and only allows those that wish to consider it to do so through intuition. The literal translation of the Chinese ideograph comprises two elements: one signifies head, or leader, the other, foot – or progress. The first element suggests the idea of a guiding principle, the second – walking, moving towards. It can also have the sense of fair, of normative, of rules that conform to those of nature. The name is thought to have been formulated by Houang-Ti (2704–2595 BC), nicknamed the Yellow Emperor. Yellow symbolises the centre, midway between the extremes: red and violet.

We have seen that the idea of the centre is primordial in Chinese thought. It is the point where the circle of extremes known as the vicious circle is reduced. It is a representation of the Tao which encourages us to seek this middle state, minimising our deviations caused by polar tensions. Once the poles reach the centre, they are liberated from any repulsive or attractive force. It is very likely that we speak of a “Central Kingdom” not because of China’s geographical position, but simply because it is the foundation of Chinese thought. The centre is the state in which we can reach complete serenity, the place in which we can shelter from the vicissitudes of life.

This concept of the Tao dates back to ancient times. It resembles the teachings of Buddhism, which themselves contain many parallels with the Hinduism of the Upanishads, and most likely dates back to several millenniums before it. It is highly unlikely that the different fertile deltas of the Indus River, the Ganges, the Yellow River and the Yangtze River did not communicate. Buddha (560–480 BC), a contemporary of Confucius and maybe also of Lao-Tzu, was certainly inspired by the ancient Taoism of the emperors Fou-Hi and Houang-Ti. There are too many analogies between the two doctrines for this not to be the case. And it was Confucius that bestowed on the Tao its behavioural principle; the way in which a good man should conduct his life. In the pure spirit of Taoism, the interpretation of the Tao is more metaphysical. It is the primary transcendent cause, primordial unity, the ineffable principle that is beyond space or time, the principle which came before the sky and the earth, which created the world without being curtailed by it, and which continues to sustain and govern this world.

It is also called the absolute, the ultimate reality, the unnameable, the gate to all mystery, the cosmic order. The Tao draws parallels with the Hindu Atman. It is both within you and for you.

Let us quote Chuang-Tzu: "The word Tao is, after all, nothing more than a commodity of language, because the principle that it underpins transcends the tangible world. It can be passed on, but not grasped, understood but not seen. It existed before the Sky and the Earth, unchangeable... It transcends the zenith, but it is not high. It came before the Sky and the Earth, but it is not old. It came before the first of the ancients, but it is not ancient (chapter VI). The Tao cannot be seen; he who sees himself, it is not he (chapter XXII)".

Lie-Tzu defines the Tao like this: "The producer is not produced, the transformer is not transformed, that which produces and transforms becomes real, perceivable, develops intelligence and energy, acts and sleeps. But wishing to define it by any of these capacities is a mistake".

Although the Tao made everything the way it is, it itself is not a thing; none of these things can produce it (Chuang-Tzu XXII).

Although the Tao did not create itself, it is the source of all creation. It is the principle that animates the universe, the unchangeable principle that governs the abundance of diverse transformations in the world.

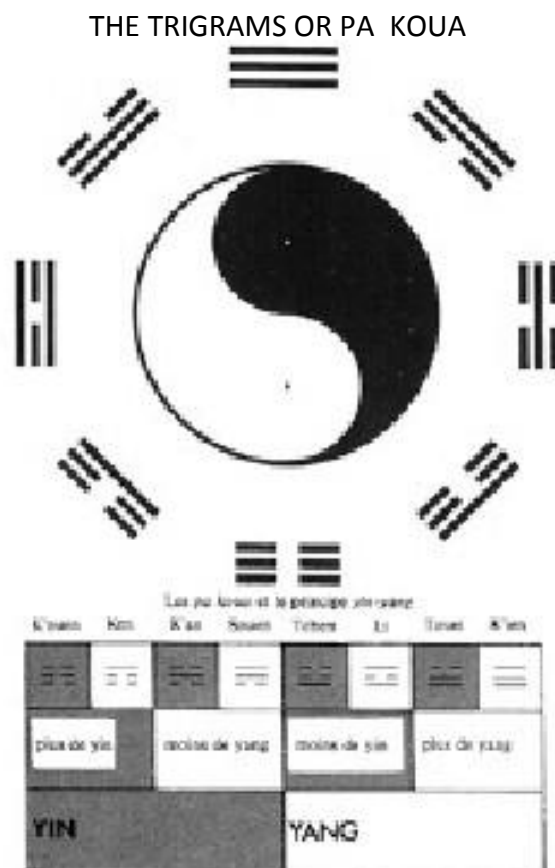
There is no Chinese word that conveys the sense of our word "God". The Tao is impersonal.

Saint Augustin said that any concept related to God cannot be applied to the being himself, but only to the influences this being has on the world. Meister Eckhart professes that all verbal expression formulated about God is, by its very nature, inappropriate. In its original form, the word "Jehovah" contains no vowels and is therefore unpronounceable. All this is analogous to the idea we have of the Tao. It encompasses all the latent powers of potentiality. Its negative form asserts nothing, but harbours all potentialities. Tao is the non-being that contains the potentiality of the being, the emptiness from which erupts plenitude, the obscurity from which a spark of light is already glimmering. The Tao is exempt from even the slightest hint of theism or anthropomorphism. It is present in both the nominal and the phenomenal worlds.

Creation is a spontaneous operation of Tao resulting from the interaction of the Yin and the Yang.

In the Tao, everything is changing, nothing is permanent except the Tao itself. Every being is infused with the Tao. It is a manifestation of this universal energy which governs all change. The Tao is, by its very nature, indefinable and inexpressible. The motive behind such profuse discussion is to try to understand it, to contour it, approaching its ever-inaccessible centre. The numerous volumes written on the subject have only ever succeeding in drawing near, the fundamental meaning continually slipping out of reach.

Let us quote Chuang-Tzu XI: "When man is joyous or when he is downcast, he is moving away from his centre of gravity. This then creates the imbalance that renders his thoughts and his actions ineffectual...". In the state of happiness we are progressing towards the positive pole, in a state of suffering we are seized by the negative pole. The path is that which seeks, through tighter and tighter circles, to reach the centre which acts similarly to the strange attractor in chaos theory.



All is in everything and reciprocally Sri Aurobindo - Synthesis of yoga 1989

II - The Te

“Te” is usually translated as “virtue”, in other words, it is fairness. It depicts all that which is in accordance with the Tao. Te is embodiment of the Tao. The term can be understood if paraphrased as “this thing has the virtue of”, in other words, the capacity to bring about an event. It is achieving perfect harmony... nothing is more devastating than purposefully cultivated virtue which is directed entirely towards the outside world (Chuang-Tzu). He who follows the Tao knows, without the slightest doubt, how to conduct himself in all aspects of his life, detached from everything... external influences can no longer distract him (Chuang-Tzu XVII).

The idea of sin does not figure in Taoist philosophy. We must cooperate with the cosmos. There is no divine law. Our role is to contribute to maintaining the cosmic balance. Taoism refutes moral rules because they leave no room for spontaneity and are too rigid. There is no place for inflexibility in an ever-changing world. Taoism does not comprehend words such as damnation, redemption, remorse, repent, prayer, fall from grace.

Instead, we must reconcile the opposites: good and evil, light and darkness, life and death. There is no hell and no paradise. Just conduct implies respecting nature and living in conformity and in harmony with her. It is one of the cornerstones of Chinese thought. The individual must blend into nature. Man's existence is directly due to that of nature, and is only an infinitesimal part of it.

III - The principle of Yin and Yang

One face of a mountain is illuminated by the sun and the opposite face is in the shade. In Chinese, Yang and Yin are the equivalents of these sunny and shady faces of the mountain. The emperor Wen (180-157 BC), a confirmed Taoist, is reputed to have used these terms to illustrate that the Tao, like Janus, could have two different opposing and complementary faces. The Tao is both Yin and Yang “simultaneously”. The Yin cannot exist without the Yang and vice versa. This is the mystery of dualism. It is the conjugation of these two opposites, their combination which generates perpetual change. A continual struggle is underway between these two tendencies, one of which leads us into the abyssal depths of darkness, while the other guides us towards the light. There is neither conqueror, nor conquered.

It is the oscillations between the extremes which characterise action, motion. Without these two concepts, Yin and Yang, there would be no life. For the Tao to remain unchanged, intangible, its fabric – in other words the Yin and the Yang – must be balanced, in harmony, and compensate for each other. There are different expressions of this opposition such as “Ti and T’ien” or “Earth and Sky”. All that is negative, obscure, feminine, potential is contained within the notion of Yin. The Yin is fertility, mother Earth. Yang is born from potentiality; it is the light which, emerging from the dark, becomes reality. The Yin is the maternal force while the Yang is paternal. The feminine element (Yin) of human nature governs all that is instinct, emotion, intuition, in other words all that influences the personal aspects of life, while the masculine element (Yang), which is intelligence and reason, is directed more towards the outside world. The Yin force is bestowed with some of the characteristics of immobility and the Yang force, of motion. Chuang-Tzu compared the Yin to the majesty of peacefulness and described the Yang as “overflowing and ardent” dynamism. Together, they constitute the inseparable modes of passiveness and activity, which revolve in a continuous cycle, each in turn giving rise to the other. They are the extremes of the primordial creative force which, through them, acts throughout the manifested universe, provoking its incessant transitions. The forces of Yin and Yang however, do not only represent the world’s immanent duality, they can also be translated as accomplishment and entirety. “To seek good without evil, right without wrong, order without disorder, shows that we have understood nothing of the laws of the universe; it is to dream of a sky without an earth, a Yin without Yang, the positive without the negative...”. “To describe something as good, or evil simply because our perception of it is this, is equivalent to saying that nothing is good, or nothing is evil” (Chuang-Tzu XVII).

Such perceptions give us a tiny insight into the deep imbalance that exists in western thought which seeks to eliminate one element to preserve the other. Western philosophy holds the “positive” attitude and the “positive” good in esteem, while any contrary notion is condemned.

There is no doubt, however, that in some contexts, an attitude that is resolutely positive, unmovable, is inappropriate and may even generate anger, while a more negative and conciliating approach can allay such negative reactions. Just and balanced conduct can only result from a capacity to judge each new situation and adopt the most appropriate attitude accordingly. The concession between circumstances and behaviour is an important concept to understand in this world where everything is subject to the rules of relativity. That which is appropriate for one situation, is undoubtedly inappropriate for a different set of circumstances. Taoism does not fall into the trap of focusing exclusively on the good, because, to deny nature's darker forces leaves man powerless before them, although they exist both in the world and within man himself. The contrary is therefore true; man should be fully conscious of the existence of both good and evil, and able to accept these opposites and to reconcile them within himself. Opposites are a product of each other, and exist in relation to each other. They govern the mysterious law of the attraction of opposites, which operates throughout the world of dualism. Virtue therefore only exists in relation to vice, and the day only exists in relation to the night. Opposites therefore, are not only complementary but inescapable. The very existence of negative presupposes that of positive, its opposite. In the instant that we express something – anything – by giving it a name, in the instant that we state its existence, its contrary is born. This is the genesis of duality. The universal law of change through the interaction of the Yin and the Yang is inseparable from the law of reversibility. The Tao is immutable, completely pure but, in the world of duality, good can become evil and evil can become good. Each element ascends to its pinnacle and then descends, gradually revealing its opposite. Nothing in the phenomenal world is absolute:

Existence generates non-existence and non-existence brings about existence

Easy and difficult complete each other

Long and short set each other off

Before and after lend sequence to each other

Good and evil, luck and bad luck are non-static and alternating notions.

Chinese thought differs from western logic which stems from Aristotle's "Terium non datur" or the "Law of the Excluded Middle". Aristotle's theory defines one term of an opposing pair as true, and the other by definition therefore as false. Chinese thought, however, is continually attempting to reconcile these opposites, employing this very middle way, the conciliating element, to do so.

In the same way that Taoism perceives good and evil as two parts of a greater whole, weakness is not, as in western thought, considered as inferior to force. In fact, it is the opposite; for Lao-Tzu, it is the left-hand side which embodies the weakness of the Yin which is the honourable place and which is also by extension a sign of non-violence and of peace. The right-hand side, Yang and powerful, which is usually the hand that holds the sword, holds less importance as it represents violence and dispersion and therefore, destruction. The right-hand side only usurps the left to attain the honourable position in the event of harmful occurrences such as war.

Taoism teaches this extraordinary doctrine that valorises the strength of weakness. Its cornerstone is that the principle of passiveness is more durable than activity. Passiveness allows us to maintain reserves of vital energy while activity drains these reserves, rapidly dispersing this energy. It is this same philosophical approach that underpins the symbolism of the valley, or that of the womb. That which receives, and accepts all things, is the very same as that from which all things come. The valleys of the "yin" are found in the lowest and most humble locations, and they therefore receive water from the "yang" above, which fertilises them. Majestic waterfalls and their turbulent torrents flowing from the mountains descend, in spite of their unequivocal force, to the gentleness that absorbs them, transforming them into wide and peaceful rivers and lakes that, via the fertile delta, reach the ocean, itself a symbol of calm and rest.

The force of water which is Yin and the force of fire which is Yang, alternate in turn between destruction and creation. In fact, all of nature alternates in this way. On occasions, it is mercilessly destructive, at other times it is wonderfully protective and productive.

The principle of Yin and Yang governs the succession and the alternation of the seasons. Autumn, the season when vital forces are fading and winter, when the earth is battenning down her hatches, a stranded animal, passive, cold, at rest and sacred, are Yin. Spring, the season when the plough opens up the earth once more to the celestial heat and the summer, when the generating energy of the sun reaches its height, are Yang.

“The apogee of Yin is peaceful passiveness. The apogee of Yang is productive activity. It is the passiveness of the earth opening itself to the sky and the activity of the sky directed at the earth that gave birth to all existence” (Chuang-Tzu XXI).

Union is achieved when the forces of Yin and Yang are acting in perfect harmony. This union will then become its own force and its own master. Inversely, imbalance and discordance contribute to both psychological and physical disintegration. “If the balance between positive and negative is lost..., man will suffer as a result, even in the physical sense” (Chuang-Tzu XI).

The two powerful forces that govern the universe can be both beneficial and destructive, depending on whether we maintain their balance or whether we destroy it. When the balance is lost, the masculine and feminine elements begin to work in opposition. They both become damaging and destructive. The ego swells, reaching outrageous proportions, resulting in discordance and violence. Neither of these principles must, at any moment, seek to encroach on the action of the other. When they are working in harmony, each principle mitigates the shortfalls of the other, tempers its excesses. The forces of Yin and Yang then, cannot simply be reduced to duality and the different relationships in the manifested world, they also complete the circle of unity of the Tao, an infinite quantity that encompasses all potentialities.

The law of the Yin and the Yang is the perpetual change within the unchanging Tao. The energy, the Chinese word for which is “Qi”, is the force arising from the interplay of Yin and Yang, is the energy that creates life, growth, transformation, disappearance, death and rebirth. It regulates the variations which are manifested by the Yin and the Yang. There is concomitance, synergy, between the Yin and the Yang – reciprocal penetration; they are inseparable.

They cannot be disassociated. Yang represents an excess in the growth of Qi. Yin is its reduction. Everything happens, not randomly, but in an attempt to achieve the balance, the universal harmony that is the Tao. Oscillations of the beam of a pair of scales can never be annihilated, because one oscillation perpetually generates another. It is reducing the deviation which is both the Taoist moral, and the conduct of he who seeks communion with the Tao. As a living being however, complete unity with the Tao is impossible.

The inseparability of Yin and Yang can be understood by considering the unity of the Tao. They interweave without ever reaching the absoluteness of the Tao which stretches between their two extremes pulling them back towards the centre should they deviate too far.

Man is immersed in these fluctuations and, consequently, the Chinese thinker does not require the figurehead of a god, a soul, a spirit or a creation. His only task is to find the calm of the Tao and the peace and consequential serenity within the continual oscillation of the conflict between Yin and Yang. Time and space are in unison with energy. The absolute is a lure. Everything is relative and interdependent, impregnated by an intangible all that is inaccessible to a mere mortal, himself composed of Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang operate in perfect symbiosis, one dependent on the other.


Man is nothing more than one incidence among an infinite number of others. The Chinese appear to have no concept of the uniqueness of the being and the idea that there is a unique path for every being that has never been traced and will never be traced again. Instead, they prefer a more anonymous existence, without distinction, fused together in a collective, merely as passenger. Man is simply a lost traveller who has strayed from his path and must find it once more, the path that will take him back to where he has come from: the Tao. He must create detachment from all things through a sort of calm and ataraxia, conciliating opposing elements and reducing the deviations.

IV - The trigrams or “pa koua”

We pictured the trigrams at the beginning of our study; the unbroken line — represents the Yang and the broken line — — the Yin. We explained that, from these two symbols of Yin and Yang, we were able to illustrate diversity through the power of 2.

The origins of the “Yi-King”, or the “Book of Change” are lost in a mythical era. It combines eight trigrams to form 64 hexagrams. Each hexagram is interpreted individually. The interaction of the forces of Yin and Yang bear the five elements; fire, water, wood, metal and earth which, when combined, produce the “ten thousand beings”, or all of creation.

The fire trigram  is Yang, masculine, positive.

The water trigram has the contrary configuration  and is Yin, feminine and negative.

This demonstrates the ambivalence of the elements of fire and water, both containing the potential to be a creative and a destructive force.

The “Yi-King” is above all considered as a divination system and is therefore of limited philosophical interest.

v Wu-Wei

“Wu-Wei” is most often translated as “non-action”. Like all Chinese ideographs, it is polysemous and our goal is to gain a clearer understanding of that which it could represent without, however, attempting to find an exact equivalent in our own language. Let us begin with the obvious; that which it does not represent: to do nothing. The message is not one that encourages laziness. It does not mean meditating with such immobility that birds are able to nest in your hair! Total inaction is not the issue. What then is the message? Taoism does not preach nonchalance, but a living being’s total commitment to life. Terms such as “non-interference” or “non-meddling” may well be more appropriate.

It is a doctrine that teaches maintaining what is natural, a respect for life, open-mindedness that rejects friction and its inevitable consequences: discordance and conflict, both within individuals themselves and in the world. It is also the doctrine of detachment, of intuitive tolerance and of flexibility. It refuses the ego and instead promotes a state without desire, serenity that exhausts tensions. It is also the doctrine of the immediate, which demands spontaneous adaptation to life in perfect harmony with nature. No discursive thought.

Action plays out around an immobile centre in accordance with the Tao. It is neither inertia nor apathy, nor does it imply placid fatalism, nor submission to a divine will. It is creative passiveness. All the potentialities of action emerge from non-action.

Not from perpetual and sterile agitation. Not by exceeding our natural limits. Taoist non-action can be represented by the centre of the hub of the wheel which remains fixed while the wheel spins around it. The objective is to move as close as possible to this centre, by turning less quickly than the wheel's extremities. The further we stray from the centre, the greater the disordered agitation, often fruitless, and the further we move into the centre, the closer we are to the zone of calm and the more sheltered we are from brutal impacts. It is far easier to maintain ourselves at this level, where there are less counter-shocks. Some of us "burn the candle at both ends" and consequently cut our lives short. These are the strong, the "tough". The weaker element will shrink deeper into his corner, and will therefore resist better that which has the potential to harm him. His strength is his weakness. Protected, his existence will be prolonged. Non-action does not mean doing nothing, but basing actions spontaneously on the context at that instant and in accordance with nature. It is the efficiency of evasion. It is often more beneficial to allow things to follow their natural course. We are not required to align ourselves with the logical world, and we must free our minds to be able to appreciate the eternal newness that is characteristic of life. Conduct such as this – bowing down before the storm – of course also implies non-violence.

Non-action aims to break the circle of violence. How? By observing aggression but abstaining from retaliation and not falling prey to a perpetual cycle of aggression. We are therefore liberated from a non-beneficial situation.

The above discussion of the Wu-Wei presents us with an opportunity to attempt to define the negation that is represented by the Chinese word "Wu". To deny something is to implicitly acknowledge the possibility that this same thing may exist. Consequently, negation cannot be the reduction to nothing. To form the negative of a verb, the verb must first be written or spoken. In doing this, we accomplish an act. This implies a proposition, and that which formulates it.

It is impossible to deny nothing, because in denying it, a formula is expressed by a thinking being, therefore by something that “exists”. So, the non-being is defined by the being. Is the simultaneous existence of a being and a non-being possible?

According to our western logic, no. According to western reasoning, 0 and 1 cannot occur concurrently; 0 “and” 1 is not possible, only 0 “or” 1. We deny that it is possible for the 0 and the 1 to exist concurrently, and we also deny any intermediary states between 0 and 1. It is the excluded middle. Chinese thought incorporates all these possibilities and excludes none. The unchangeable Tao is itself the Yin and the Yang. If this Yin Yang is something (1), rather than nothing (0), alternative predominance of one over the other allows the existence of intermediary situations between 0 and 1. Aristotle, just like Descartes and Gödel, could not have been Chinese. However, we have lived for centuries accepting this formal logic. It allows us to interpret the world efficiently, because it is the root of all of civilisation’s progress. Information technology is a good example because it uses 0 and 1 alone. Chinese civilisation has been crippled by its rejection of this type of reasoning. It does not fear circular logic, because the duo of the Tao and Yin Yang is built on circular reasoning. One cannot exist without the other. They are two interrelated concepts which oppose each other at the same time. It is impossible to consider one without the other. Yes, western science also comes up against this same circle when we talk about energy-matter and space-time. These two notions cannot “exist” separately. One depends on the other, as proven by the general theory of relativity. Energy-matter distorts space-time which channels energy-matter. One has a reciprocal action on the other. It is accepted in quantum physics that a quantum object can be both a wave and a particle simultaneously and that it is, when it cannot be seen, in a state that is likely to be situated between 0 and 1.

“Vicious” circle, “excluded” middle; pejorative concepts in western thought are, to the contrary, fundamental in the dualist vision of the world. The circle is not vicious and the middle is not excluded. By following the scientific path, substantiated by the reasoning of Aristotle, we reach the same conclusion as the Chinese reached several thousand years before us.

Reason, “the devil’s whore” in the words of Luther, has arrived at the irrational, or at least that which our spiritual view considers to be irrational. There is no doubt that by following the torturous path of logic, we have improved the conditions of our existence, which the Chinese were not able to do for thousands of years. The answer then to the question proposed by Leibniz, “Why something rather than nothing?” could be: in fact, at any given moment, there is both something which is achieved... and nothing. This can be summarised as follows: potentialities exist within the Tao due to the compensating alternation of Yin and Yang, which are expressed by the probable between 0 and 1. These potentialities have only a contingent possibility of becoming real events. It is the state of 0, or the state of 1. The thing exists, becomes real (1), or it does not exist (0). The alternation 0, 1, is manifested by the passage to reality through the present. The past contains an infinitely rich number of uncertain possibilities. The passage from the past to the future through the present fulfils these non-certitudes, we enter thus into the realm of the alternation 0 or 1; the future reinserting into the past that which has only just become reality through the present. It can only be 0 or 1. Virtual becomes real traversing the present which is the leap by the probable situated between 0 and 1 (excluded middle), between the real (1) or its negation (0); “The future is a present of the past” in the words of André Malraux.

Yes and no, identity and contradiction, do not have the same value, of a principle of exclusion, as they do in western logic. A negation, or “wu” hides behind all Chinese assertions. When we deny something, not only do we presuppose that this something could exist, but also, as the Chinese believe, that one existence cannot be separated from all existences. So, when we deny something, our denial evokes a whole strain of different creations and we are denying the universe as a whole. The being is simply one possible fulfilled existence amongst an infinite number of probable beings. The being is fleeting, never the same, and always caught in a whirlwind of alternations. To deny something, is to deny something that has already evolved during a short period of negation.

VI - The Taoist Triad

The Great Taoist Triad, T'ien Ti Ren, considers man as the creation of the unison between the sky and the earth. Man is therefore the synthesis of the sky and the earth, and their intermediary. The underlying unity of all pairs of opposites is revealed. If, like the wise man, his life is in conformity with the Tao, he dissolves the Yin Yang dualism in unity. The sky, Yang, is represented by a circle and the Earth, Yin, is a square placed inside the circle.

Man, as the intermediary, must maintain a balance of worldly things within him.

We could ask ourselves whether the Wu-Weï of the Tao is in a manifestation of the principle of least action and the law of compensation, otherwise called the law of large numbers.

The principle of least action stipulates that any object in motion will naturally select the path, of all the paths that are available to it, which requires the least action, or energy and time. Nature does nothing in vain. The choice, from all the hypotheses, will be the simplest: Ockham's razor. In information theory, the message containing the least elements is chosen. According to general relativity theory, matter travels along geodesics, in other words, the shortest path. In three-dimensional terms, this is the line with the steepest gradient that will be taken by water travelling from the source to the ocean. The Chinese Wu Weï does not represent non-action, or passiveness. It simply means interfering as little as possible with the natural operation of the cosmos, protecting ourselves as much as possible from the deviations that are inherent to existence, both joyous and sorrowful. We must reduce our activity to the vital minimum required; living without making waves, without harming ourselves or others and in pursuit of a hidden, slow existence. The strongest would perceive this as the attitude of the weak. But followers of the Tao employ their weakness as a form of defence. They are therefore able to inverse and repel the aggressive force with even greater effect than the force has intensity. Those that live in excess waste their force which is dispersed ineffectively and returns to them like a boomerang.

The greater the number of actions like those described above, the more deviations will be compensated. We can acknowledge the existence of an excessive action, but with the great number of actions there will always be another action in the opposite direction to re-establish the balance and to move as close as possible to the average point, the centre and therefore, to escape contingency.

We are not simply spectators of the evolution of the world, we are also actors in it. We therefore must act, to integrate into nature as closely as possible and to blend into one with her. Nature acts wisely 'naturally', because she is able to correct her own excesses and wastes no effort in vain.

The work attributed to Lao-Tzu, the "Tao Te King", is a collection of aphorisms organised into 80 chapters divided into two sections, the first of which treats the Tao and the second, the Te. The complete work has a sibylline and esoteric feel that can give rise to very different interpretations. The ambiguity of written Chinese does not facilitate a "clear and distinct" understanding, to use the words of Descartes. The thought process does not follow a logical thread and the entire work seems non-homogenous. Perhaps this little book would be better perceived as a source of reflection. Our commentaries bring much of ourselves into the work. This is coherent with the spirit of Taoism which perceives the universe as constantly changing. It is up to us, using the text as a foundation, to feed it with our own convictions. Put another way, the exposé is ambiguous enough for us to have the impression that our personal opinions adhere to it. It is simply a framework for meditation, a mirror in which our own image of the world is reflected, and at the same time clarified. Like many similar texts, it prescribes rules of conduct which should be superimposed with the wise man's attitude to work towards attaining his wisdom. It also teaches the art of governance. We are going to try to move away from all these precepts however, to explore the fundamental core of the Taoist doctrine. We are going to analyse all its chapters in an attempt to extract the "quintessence". The essence of the contents of this "bible" is in fact concentrated in very few, essential, messages. At this point we could also quote Lao-Tzu with a little smile: "Those who know do not speak, those who speak do not know".

This quote should have prompted our author to remain silent in a demonstration of his exceptional wisdom. Sadly however, the conviction that we have for certain issues can only be conveyed and taught using language. We must therefore try to perceive these as more than words, or risk resembling the fool who only sees the finger that is pointing to the moon, and not the moon itself. Lao-Tzu put five thousand characters onto paper. Chuang Tzu, another more eloquent Taoist apostle, is reputed to have employed 100,000 of which 40,000 have been lost.

The essential content of the doctrine of the Tao which has been passed down to us from the depths of history is attributed to a mythical emperor, Fou-Hi, who lived several thousand years before Jesus Christ. Its foundation is above all the concept of the central point between two conflicting opposites. The universe is the stage for an eternal combat between two opposing forces. That which is light, positive and masculine is called the Yang. That which is dark, negative and feminine, the Yin.

The Yang cannot exist without the Yin and vice versa. One cannot prevail over the other. If it were possible to add them together the result would be zero, but this is never achieved. An eternal balance exists, a continual attraction to return to the equilibrium between these two contradictory tendencies. This opposition has no beginning and will have no end. These forces can deviate far from their centre, but compensation is achieved in the entirety because the global addition of the opposites is zero. In other words, we can gravitate towards greater and greater good, but the account must be settled by evil, which will, inevitably, compensate the good in a given time and space. It is an illusion to believe that supreme good is attainable.

Good is nothing alone. Its value can only be perceived in relation to evil. Evil is not radical. Nor can it be complete. Something can only emerge from evil if a counterpart, not necessarily in the immediate, can be placed in opposition. Perfect happiness is not possible in the most complete states of beatitude. There are only small, medium or great states of happiness whose values originate only from the opposing unhappiness in a given space-time. The sinusoid wave is an example of this alternation. We can move away from the centre to a maximum and finite positive point.

Once it is reached, we descend, once more, passing through the middle to move in the opposite direction out to a negative finite point, the inverse of the positive amplitude which is repeated as the sinusoid wave progresses. This negative amplitude is reached at the end of what we call a “period” of time and at the end of a certain linear path we call a “wavelength”. There are a countless number of oscillations in the universe that are superimposed, but that do not cancel each other out. If both signs are positive, the amplitudes are added, if the signs are different, one is subtracted from the other. The outcomes are short, medium or long cycle phenomena. The best known cycle is that of day and night, but there are, in fact, an improbable number of which we are hardly conscious, but whose effects we experience in life all the same.

Evidently, the major characteristic of an oscillation is that it is never linear. It curves around a central line at which its amplitude is zero. If we were able to wave a magic wand and remove space and time, the result would be exactly this; zero amplitude – the sum of everything. This is proven by the law we call the law of large numbers or the law of compensation.

When we repeat a same event with variants, like the toss of a coin which can land on one of two faces; heads or tails, the more times we toss the coin, the more equal the number of heads and the number of tails that are displayed. The deviance from the average is gradually reduced, moving towards complete annihilation. This is a powerful demonstration of compensation through a large number of almost identical events. Nature is not an innovator. She is happy to repeat similar events with only slight modifications, in other words minor deviations from the average. The greater the deviation, the less often it will occur. It will then, in turn, enter into a long cycle to be repeated more or less identically. Compensation is related to space-time. It is a consequence of space-time. Removing space and time entirely, as outlined above, would oppose the deviations, consequently annihilating them overall. This is clearly demonstrated by the law of large numbers.

The deviation is similar to the probability calculation. Its square is called variance which is a manifestation of energy. The greater the energy expended, the greater the deviation.

The so-called Gaussian curve, with its symmetrical bell form, perfectly illustrates the probability of deviations.

All deviations stem from a so-called statistical average which is generated by the number of observations (the sample). There are few very small men and equally few very tall men. Height “oscillates” around an average value that is obtained when we take the average height from a large number of measurements. The greater the sample number, the closer we move towards this average, which will remain constantly out of reach, because measuring an infinite number of men is impossible. The number must be increasing in order to move closer to the average. As this will always be a finite number, the average is therefore unattainable.

Chinese thought understood this centuries ago. It is likely that this is the reason China was baptised the “Central Kingdom”. We uphold that the Chinese believed their country was in the centre of a square earth under a circular sky. We believe that the concept of the centre around which all oscillates between contraries is a fundamental characteristic of their vision of the way in which the world operates. One mythical emperor who contributed substantially to the development of this thought was called Houang-Té, or the Yellow Emperor. The use of yellow in his name may be due to the colour of his skin, but it seems more plausible that the true sense of yellow is its central position in the colour range between the extremes, which are red and violet. Is the Yellow River so-called because of the lemons that were transported along it, or simply because it can be considered as median that divides the country?

Oppositions give rise to a type of reasoning called “circular”. Expressed another way, one extreme authenticates the necessity of the existence of the other opposite extreme. One is not possible without the other. One completes the other. The co-existence of contrary opposites is related to the idea of life and continual agitation. Without contraries, all would be flat and uniform, and therefore lifeless. Fluctuation is a prerequisite for life. “One” alone is equivalent to nothing. The universe only exists due to the alternation of 0 and 1 bringing about intermediary states which are the probable, the potential, the virtual, the reservoir from which two outcomes are possible, 0, or 1; they exist, or they do not exist.

The extreme complexity of these outcomes constitutes the cosmos's staggering diversity – based on nothing more than the circle. Logical systems, such as mathematics, are based on fragile, axiomatic foundations. The axiom is a dual choice between either true or false. An axiom is the arbitrary selection of a proposition.

Gödel demonstrated that, over time, the cracks in this type of logical system begin to show. There is an inevitable moment in the system's construction when we are faced with an “undecidable proposition”, in other words, it has become impossible to state whether the proposition is true or false. We are therefore obliged to choose, to decide, which is simply bolstering the system with an additional axiom. Systems such as this are, in fact, forced to simplify and symbolise things to facilitate operations. A mathematical proposition only contains that which has been included from the outset, in other words the axioms. It is nothing more than a “*petitio principia*”: a statement is contained within the premises. We have simply simplified the resolution of certain complex problems by applying condensed, borrowed, in some ways magical, formulae. The axiom is a logical circle. It is, or it is not. It is, by that which it is not. Its existence depends on its non-existence. The circle is the origin of everything. Everything is interrelated. The universe turns in a circle. The image of the serpent biting its own tail comes to mind, although the expression itself is insufficient. It is important to qualify it with the idea that the snake is feeding from its own tail, and is therefore self-regenerating. It is circular autonomy. Extremes function exactly like this; one feeds from the other. The symbiosis that exists in nature, in an incomprehensibly large number of forms, illustrates that the existence of two beings is interdependent. One cannot survive without the assistance of the other.

One, no more than nothing, cannot exist. Neither one, nor the other, has the capacity to produce the differences that are the essence of our world as we conceive it beyond our perceptions. The relay from one to the other, in other words the circle, is necessary for these notions of 1 and 0 to be surpassed. It is the back and forth, the feeding back, in other words the oscillation between these two inaccessible concepts that is the source of the dense network of interrelationships, the structure, the web of exchanges between

opposites. Extremes do not exist alone. There is no absolute good. Opposites are simply extremes that attract each other if they are of opposite signs, or that repel each other if they are of the same sign. It is this interaction between extremes which is the origin of the perpetual agitation.

If the circle is the origin of everything and the only tangible reality, the question then arises about its centre, a neutral position mid-way between the opposites which lie around the circle's edge. It is a key location where absolute calm reigns like the eye of a cyclone. It plays the same role as the strange attractor in chaos theory. We must spin, constantly attempting to approach the centre, but it remains inaccessible, because absolute rest cannot be part of our world. We can compare it to a conical bottomless well, a maelstrom in which events spin, attracted by the centre without ever reaching it. As we have seen, the deviation from the centre, from the average, requires an input of energy, better expressed as an action, in other words the conjugation of energy and time or the quantity of movement and of space. This action is generated by a differentiation of opposites. A deviation or an expended action is always compensated by an inverse deviation in a given time and space. The centre line must therefore be crossed to reach the other extremity which is diametrically opposite. The action leaves a "hole" in a fund that would be zero if there was complete compensation in space and time. The loss of equilibrium, the division, goes "against the grain" and as soon as the action is produced, it is subjected to a tireless pull back towards its primitive state, the state of rest. The effort expended to return to the centre, the average, creates an elastic effect which generates an action in the opposite direction. The sine wave perfectly illustrates this process; a positive amplitude produces, after a given period and wavelength, an inverse negative amplitude around the median. The famous principle of least action is itself explained by nature's need to return to the original state of rest. We are able to deviate from the rest state to a certain extent, but nature strives to return to the state of non-action, to the Chinese Taoists' Wu-Wei. This return results in an inverse deviation, launching a series of perpetual oscillations with no reason to stop, because one oscillation generates another, even if the resulting movement is a smaller one.

The wave is continual, and superimposed on other waves without there being annihilation. It is also, by definition, infinite. If the earth were to disappear into the depths of the universe as it will, undoubtedly, in a few million years, the alternation of night and day would disappear.

But new oscillations would be born, as energy is conserved and is simply transferred to other activities. Can there be an end to all this?

The answer is no, because this end would be the rest state that is unattainable due to the perpetual oscillations. As the universe has no possible end, it has no beginning either.

The extremes, if we could extend them eternally, would eventually meet. "Too far East is West", as the popular idiom says. The extremes here, of course, are finite ("trees do not grow into the sky", as Goethe wrote). This makes them unattainable for us. Their centre also. We have no way to locate it. It is this centre, this middle point which is of particular interest in Chinese thought. The Chinese believe that this centre contains everything. All events are suspended there. The cosmic dance brought about by the struggle of opposites is contained within this centre. This is the Tao, the inexpressible, the unspeakable, the void, the nothing, generator of everything. The Chinese named this centre the Tao, despite their reticence for designation and definition. Once something is given a name, this same thing can no longer be nothing. A definition can only be human and, consequently, it is something. To say "I do not exist" is a contradiction, because speaking or writing these words is a manifestation of our existence. Moreover, this centre can be perceived in two ways: the point at which we can divide something into two equal halves, or a point which conceals something. In this second sense, it can be considered as the point of complete rest where there is no more movement. There is no beginning, and no end, because both of these concepts imply an absolute duration. We know that space and time are related (special relativity theory) or even more importantly, that space-time and matter-energy are also related (general relativity theory). All these concepts are interdependent. They also form a circle: time is nothing without space, and space- time and energy-matter interact. Space-time is modified in the presence of energy-matter, imposing on the latter the path that it will follow.

We know that the path will be the path of least action. Everything is attempting to move closer and closer to the centre, expending the least action possible. All this results from the circle. The pursuit of the rest state can be conceived as moving in an ever-decreasing circle, approaching as close as possible to its centre, a place of pleasure, luxury, calm, voluptuousness, but alas unattainable because it would result in our very destruction.

We observe that everything in the universe is in continual motion. The pursuit of the least action is simply a platform in our attempt to achieve complete rest, which is both nowhere and elsewhere. If such a place could be reached, it would be the negation of life and, consequently, it cannot be. For this reason, the universe is never at rest and everything is in a state of continual agitation. That which physicians call the vacuum state, that which exists between particles, which themselves only have a probability of existing, is, in reality, also in a state of perpetual fluctuation. It is filled with the movement of so-called “virtual” particles whose fleeting existence we are unable to prove because their action is inferior to the detectable threshold. This threshold, called the Planck constant, represented by the letter “ h ”, is an extremely tiny quantity of action, and is the boundary between virtual and real, real being synonymous with detectable. In this vacuum state, energy and time, quantity of movement and space, electric and magnetic field are so intimately related that we are unable to accurately define one concept without another becoming ambiguous. This relationship is defined by Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty. The logical circle again. One cannot be measured precisely without reducing the accuracy of the other. The circle is, without a doubt, the basis of everything, even in the most infinitely small, or “that which has no inside”, as it was defined by a Chinese philosopher named Houei Che. The infinitely large, applying this same philosophy therefore becomes “that which has no outside”. The expansion of the universe is another good example of the circle. Each galaxy is dependent on all the other galaxies. It could not be removed, assuming this were possible, without modifying the expansion. The speed of separation between two galaxies is dependent on the distribution of the other galaxies. It is impossible to consider one without the others.

The absolute rest state cannot be achieved in the universe due to general interaction. This is why there can be no island of rest, which would contradict the idea of a situation of conflict between opposites, in which a single force never triumphs. For this same reason there can be no beginning and no end, a hypothesis that implies the existence of an “outside” where absolute rest would reign. Everything is related and therefore nothing is stable. Perfect equilibrium is unattainable. Even the slightest variation in equilibrium brings about the formation of opposites (for example, light and heavy) and generates another variation in the opposite direction. Any variation in the equilibrium, whatever its nature, is compensated in the end. “The world is simply an eternal see-saw” (*Essais Montaigne III 256*). The world is a swing whose motion never stops. “If we want everything to remain as it is, everything must change” (*Tomasi de Lampedusa – The Leopard*). In other words, for everything to move, nothing must move.

The fundamental circle is that of the co-existence of something unchangeable, immanent, eternal and instant which has never begun and will never end, which has the consistency of the void and of nothing, whilst at the same time being filled with untiring and unstoppable activity, that is never identical, reproduced by differentiated similarities. The universe repeats and contradicts itself continually. This permanent agitation is the consequence of a continual conflict between opposite poles, with neither conquering nor being conquered, but in which everything is constantly being questioned. It is the permanence of the impermanent, the constancy of the inconstant, the certitude of the uncertain. Evolution is the result of a series of rolls of a dice, but as *Mallarmé* said, “A roll of the dice will never abolish chance”. Randomness reigns in a domain where it has no hold. Deconstruction follows construction in order to leave the stage once more to reconstruction. Structural connections are made, and broken, continuously, on a homogenous background. It is the place in which everything alternates continuously in a frenetic dance of Shiva. The active is confirmed by the passive. Motion is only made possible by the inertia that slows it down. Positive is opposed by negative along a completely smooth, uniform outline. It is the diallel of the discontinuous and the continuous which cannot exist without each other and which blend into an unspeakable all.

The eternal effervescence of light can only exist due to the darkness from which it pours. Oscillations, waves, overlap, are superimposed without annihilating each other and produce a harmony of sound on a unique 'la' of the vocal range. Sound is produced from silence, but the entirety is mute.

The entire dualist Taoist philosophy of conduct boils down to the pursuit of the point where nothing changes. This may be the circle's centre, and our path is therefore to reduce the diameter, eliminating, or reducing the deviations. Buddha explained that our suffering is caused by an inability to rid ourselves of our desires and our passions. Instead, we must try to leave nothing more than a tiny flame of our existence, taking us closer and closer to Nirvana (which translates as extinction). The doctrine does not hold that we should definitively extinguish this flame, although Buddha's last words were: "all composite things pass away". But for Buddha, nothing dies; everything is reborn through the wheel of existence: Samsara. We encounter, then, yet another image of the eternally revolving circle, generating birth and death temporarily to create a new birth that will, in turn, pass away.

Death then, is inevitable. What is important, is to banish all suffering by drastically reducing our needs and our desires. We naturally aspire to becoming the most powerful, the most wealthy, we are constantly seeking pleasure and enjoyment. But there is an antithesis to all this. Pleasure produces suffering, power can lead to prison, enjoyment can cause disease. We must therefore be satisfied with little, and if we are to experience the least possible suffering we must approach as close as possible to the "happy medium". "In medio stat virtus" – in the centre lies virtue.

Returning then to Lao-Tzu's text, we will see that the concepts described above are in fact, the basis of his doctrine.

We will leave the reader free to familiarise themselves with the different translations already mentioned. The choice is a difficult one, but we will attempt to grasp the overall spirit of the text rather than the significance of the individual words.

I – This chapter treats the One (Tao). Lao Tzu tells us that if he had been able, he would have restored language, re-established the meaning of words. However, from the very first lines he is faced with the paradox, that is, wishing to express the inexpressible. If we must give a name to it, let us call it: Tao. But a name does not alter that which is the principle of all things, permanently, and which cannot be identified.

But it is from this “nameless” thing that all things came. He who knows it is without desire. Desire creates limits. The mystery is that of two in one. Opposites enable us to grasp the true essence. It is in moving deeper, into the growing darkness of this mystery that we are able to see the door to the absolute, which is constantly out of reach.

II – This chapter deals with the Two (Yin and Yang) No opposite can exist without the other. Ugly is revealed by beauty. Evil is present in good. The Chinese employ the word “yéou” to designate that which is positive, that which exists (“da sein”), having, being, and the word “wu” for the negation, the void, the lack, the nothing, the non-being. Existence and non-existence give birth to each other. This is the most important sentence in the text. It is a circular relationship between being and non-being, analogous with “two in one”. The being cannot exist without the non- being, the void, the nothing. It is impossible to conceive that non-existence can give birth to existence, but this is compensated by existence itself, which implies non-existence. We consider this type of reasoning to be fruitless. It is, however, the basis of everything. Ugliness and beauty, good and evil, yéou and wu are interdependent. One substantiates the other. This “relay” effect is perpetually at work. Easy is necessary to understand difficult. Something is only short because another is long. Low only has meaning in relation to something that is high. We require high to understand the notion of low. The value of sound is in silence. Sounds are harmonised according to their relationships. Before precedes after, which follows before.

Chapters I and II constitute the basis of Lao-Tzu’s doctrine. Do not try to understand; this is the way of the world. It is an observation. To explain would be entering into a logical reasoning where everything would fit perfectly into place, to our complete satisfaction, because we are particularly reassured by logic such as this.

It is a way for us to control ourselves and our surroundings, making things easier for ourselves, more accessible, more useful for producing the well-being that we seek. But the wise follower of the Tao tells us that progression is not beneficial. An advantage does not exist without its counterpart, the disadvantage. It is therefore better to reduce our activity and reduce the difference. That which is useful for us will not be harmful if we restrict it to the essential, rejecting the excesses which will always cause us harm in the end. We must constantly return to the simple observation that everything is circular, and that we can only move in circles. In order to live a trouble-free life then, we must approach as close as possible to the centre of the circle in pursuit of rest, of calm, of peace, or ataraxia. Here, nothing can harm us, here in the eye of the cyclone or the heart of the maelstrom. The state of beatitude is obtained when we are moving towards the inside of a bottomless well.

The well is conical, in other words, we are moving towards the abyss spinning in ever-decreasing circles, unswervingly attracted by the void.

In chapter IV, we return to this notion of abyss which is the Tao and which is never filled, remaining a void, inexhaustible, but which is also the source of all life. It blunts that which is sharp and unknots knots, filters light and creates from dust. The Tao has no beginning and no end. It was not born and has not given birth.

Chapter V – The universe is like a pair of forge bellows which is constantly emptied to be filled once more. The greater the movement, the more air is expelled. The more agitated it becomes, the further it moves out of reach. We must therefore hold onto the centre where all is calm.

Chapter VI pays homage to the feminine principle, source of all life, analogous with darkness and which is the origin of the sky and the earth. The feminine also evokes the hollow of the valley where this principle flows, infiltrating everywhere, always present and never exhausted.

Chapter XI – Once again this chapter comes back to circular reasoning. Fullness is nothing without the emptiness that accords it its value and emptiness is necessary to be full. A painting's value is due both to the image it displays, and the emptiness that surrounds it. The wheel example is very representative, because it expresses this notion of the circle. Not only the wheels of a tank drive it forward, but also the wheel's centre, the hub where the spokes that hold the wheel converge. It is the immobile central void that moves the tank forward.

Vases are made from clay, but their utility is derived from their inside, their emptiness. A room has walls, doors and windows, but we live in the emptiness that is contained between them. Objects only have value in the emptiness in which they exist. The Tao is the non-being, the nothing, the vacuum, but it is nothing without the being that completes it. The pair "being \Leftrightarrow non-being" is an inseparable pair. One is vital to the other. This doctrine's great discovery is that we can only understand a concept through circular reasoning. For something to exist, it must be considered relative to its opposite. In short, there is the void or the complete, the contents or the container, the lack or the provision, the acquired or the acquitted. The non-being cannot exist in isolation. We cannot talk of nothing, because in the instant we do so, in our thinking of this concept, it can therefore no longer be nothing because a being has thought of it. In the same way, something cannot exist without the possibility that it may not exist. In the statement "A is A", the identity requires the contradiction between "A" and "not A" to be valid. Beyond the circle lies nothing more than a framework of reasoning, which interlocks so neatly together that it becomes a "petitio principii", in other words, the premises are repeated, bringing us back once more to the circle. A syllogism is a form of circular reasoning, because the conclusion is included in the premises. The formulation: "Socrates is mortal" itself contains the two basic assumptions that are: 1) all men are mortal and 2) Socrates is a man.

The same is true for all logical systems. Mathematics, which some consider so complex, is nothing more than basic definitions, accepted as true, that are applied in varying combinations and, through symbolic association, produce concise formulae that are easier to work with than repeating all the propositions in their full form.

In the end, the entire system uses axioms to obtain basic and particularly accurate definitions. Gödel proved that for these systems to remain intact, their foundations needed constant reinforcement; an inevitable moment arises when the system is confronted with an undecidable proposition, in other words, a situation about which it is impossible to determine whether it is true or false, because in fact, it is both. It therefore becomes necessary to “choose” between true and false to continue the construction, this decision requiring an additional axiom. We move in a circle. Contrary to our perception, mathematics is not an explicative science, and is most certainly not contained within nature. It is nothing more than a skeleton of nature, developed by simply leaving out anything that proves to be an obstacle. It seeks concise formulae that facilitate practical application. But it does not reflect life, which is also a constant repetition of the “same”. We obtain the other by uniting opposites and by reproductive errors.

Everything is founded on the symbolism of the circle, and can be summarised as $A \Leftrightarrow \bar{A}$, (\bar{A} representing not A). It is this alone that created the world and the world is this alone.

Chapter XIV qualifies the Tao:

When we look at it, it is invisible
When we listen to it, we hear nothing
We cannot touch it, it is incorporeal
Its height is not light and its bottom not dark
Eternal, it has no name. It is non-existent
It is form without form and image without image
We cannot grasp it, it is constantly slipping away
If you stand in front of it, you will not see its face
If you are following it, you will not see its back
It is by mastering the ancient Tao that we dominate the present.
Water is quoted often, as in chapter XV: “rest turns muddy
watersclear”. When in movement, calm waters become
troubled.

Chapter XXXVII provides us with a good definition of Tao:
The Tao never acts, yet nothing happens without it.

Next, we come on to the second part of the book.

Another definition of Tao: Existence is born from nothing.

The word “nothing” here does not mean the reduction to nothing.

It is the undetermined in the determined. This nothing, which contains all potential, is the source of all creation.

Chapter XLII – From the Tao comes One – from One comes two, from two comes three from which come the ten thousand beings.

The world’s diversity originates from One (the Tao) and from Two (Yin and Yang). The One and the Two, the One and Pythagoras’s Dyad make three and all beings through combination.

The beginning of chapter LVI is often quoted:

He who knows does not talk

He who talks does not know.

This simply means that when we have understood what the Tao really is, we have also understood that it cannot be expressed in words. We have reached that which goes beyond words: silence.

“I only know one thing and that is that I know nothing,” said Socrates.

Chapter LX contains another famous passage:

A state should be governed as a small fish should be fried.

A small fish should be fried without moving it about constantly in the pan, otherwise it will be reduced to crumbs. Similarly, enforcing endless rules to govern a state will only destroy that state. Our so-called modern states would be wise to take heed of this simple principle. We must choose the simple over the complex, as Ockham’s razor teaches us.

Let us end this overview with a comparison to water that is given in chapter LXXVIII and which succinctly resumes the book’s doctrine:

In this world

Nothing is more inconsistent

And weaker than water

And yet

Water attacks

And carries that which is solid and powerful

In the eternal struggle

Between water and rock
It is always water
Which conquers in the end
Nothing can stand up to it
And nothing can conquer it
Because weakness is strength
And flexibility is required to last
Everybody knows this
But nobody adheres to this law
And the wise man says:
“The spirit of the ground
which receives all the kingdom’s waste
will become the master and the lord of the harvest”.

Because
FALSE APPEARS TO BE TRUE
AND TRUE APPEARS TO BE FALSE

In the end, we reach what is called an “undecidable”.

There is no absolute truth. We can conjure up the image of a card on which it is written:

“The sentence on the back of this card is true” on one side,
and on the other:

“The sentence on the back of this card is false”.

True and false are no longer discernable. We encounter the same indecision in the famous words of Epimenides of Crete, “I am a liar”.

If I’m telling the truth then I am also lying.

If I am lying then I cannot tell the truth.

The entire philosophy of the “Tao Te King” lies in the opposition of contraries.

As men have a tendency to value the masculine side, force and the positive, Lao-Tzu stands on the other foot, valuing the weaker, darker and negative side of things. Equality exists between each face of an opposite pair. The wise man seeks to establish the equilibrium between the forces of good and evil. There is never a winner, or a loser, and the struggle is perpetual. Must we take part in this perpetual struggle? The wise man answers that it is better to pursue the happy medium by working to reconcile contraries, without excess on either side. Nothing can exist without its opposite.

We must neutralise with a compensatory force. The continual alternation between one and other is circular. We move in a circle. Our only escape route is to approach as close as possible to the centre where calm and rest prevail. To approach the place where all contrasts – the very essence of existence – are reduced in an attempt to merge into non-existence, without ever succeeding.

The wise man must practise living in a state of ataraxia, in other words, the state of calm where nothing can trouble him, with equanimity or evenness of temper and the forbearance to react with serenity and patience to negative events and to forgive wrongdoings.

TCHOUANG-TSEU

Sources:

Taoist philosophers: Lao-Tzu – Chuang-Tzu – Lie-Tzu.

Texts translated and presented by Lion Kia-Hway and Benedyket Grynpas, edited by Paul Demiéville, Etiemble and Max Kaltenmark.

“Lao-Tzu and Taoism” (Max Kaltenmark, Le Seuil – Spiritual Masters 86).

The Chuang-Tzu is the doctrine of the Tao's second canonical text. Lao-Tzu uses often mysterious aphorisms to elucidate this doctrine in around five thousand ideographs. The text requires interpretation, because an ideograph can often be translated in a number of ways; it is not clear-cut and depends on the context. This gives the work an esoteric feel, complicated at first for the uninitiated. Moreover, we can reduce the text even further if we remove all the aphorisms that deal with human conduct. In fact, we have done exactly this.

The author of the Chuang-Tzu does the opposite. He attempts to explain the doctrine using fable, intermixed with a simple commentary rendering this vision of the world more accessible to a wider audience. This text, with its 60,000-odd characters, can be considered more as an explanation of Lao-Tzu's earlier work.

We know very little about the author, Chuang-Tzu. This is often the case for wise men such as those who chose to live a hidden life, sheltered from honour and celebrity. He lived during the 4th century BC and everything we know is taken from legend.

The writer employs a unique style, satirically spirited and filled with fantasy, with no trace of dependence on or reverence to anyone or anything. The text evokes the author's personal conviction in the doctrine he is discussing, which is in opposition with a clear understanding of the ideas, the ways and customs of his time. It is a pearl of Chinese literature, and warrants the admiration that it receives.

Chuang-Tzu lived during an era characterised by internal fighting during which he watched evil spread in its most terrifying forms. He believed that the deep-rooted cause of human suffering lay in the individualism of men who had forgotten their common origins. To think, is to break things down into clear ideas that are incompatible with a complex reality whose essence is fundamental indivisibility; to act, is to decide on one of these abstract ideas which are in fact closely related. Overcoming the separatist machinations that pollute the human mind and, as a result, eliminating all of man's inevitably arbitrary decisions, will lead the way to rediscovering the primitive happiness of a humanity once more plunged into universal harmony.

Chuang-Tzu believed that rejecting all fragmentation of intelligent thought and all partiality of human action would wipe out the germ of human conflict and therefore bring peace to the world. Let us quote the Chuang-Tzu:

"Kung-nî replied death and life, preservation and ruin, failure and success, poverty and wealth, superiority and inferiority, blame and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and heat, these are the changes of circumstances, the operation of our appointed lot. Like day and night, they follow each other, but no human intelligence can know from where they originate. The soul of any being who does not allow himself to be influenced by these events will remain intact. He therefore preserves, day and night, his balance, his ease and his good humour. As beneficial as spring, he adapts to everything and to all circumstances. This being has complete power to develop his natural powers."

"To know that which is beyond our control and to accept it as destiny: that is the supreme virtue". It is pure stoicism.

"And what about he who masters the substance of the universe, who has the force of six winds at his finger tips and he who has seen infinity, what does this man rely on? And so he says: the perfect man is without me, the inspired man is without bible, the saint leaves no name."

"How can the Tao be so obscured that there should be a True and a False in it ? How can speech be so obscured that there should be a Right and a Wrong in it ? Where is the Tao not and when therefore is speech not plausible? The Tao becomes obscured by partiality. Speech is obscured by innocence."

“To be honest, everything is the other, every being is one-self. This truth cannot be seen from the other, but is understood in relation to one-self. So, it is said: the other comes from one-self, but one-self also depends on the other. We support the doctrine of life, but in reality, life is also impossible and the impossible is also possible. Adopting the affirmation is adopting the negation; and adopting the negation is also adopting the affirmation. So, the Sage does not adopt an exclusive opinion and takes inspiration from the sky. That too is a way of adopting the affirmation”.

“One-self is also the other; the other is also oneself. The other has his own conceptions of affirmation and negation. You have your own conceptions of affirmation and negation.”

“Is there really a distinction between the other and one-self, or does this difference not really exist ? The point at which the other and one-self are no longer in opposition, this is the axis of the Tao. The axis lies at the centre of the circle and applies itself to infinity. There are infinite cases of affirmation, and infinite cases of negation. So, it is said: the best is to have a source of illumination.”

“The Tao has its reality and its efficiency. It does not act and it has no form. We can transfer it, without another being able to receive it. We can understand it without being able to see it. It is its own root and it has existed forever, even before the creation of the Sky and the Earth. It has no height other than being the supreme universe. Born before the Sky and the Earth, it has no finite duration. Older than the most ancient history, it does not age.”

The universe is the stage of an eternal struggle between the Yin and the Yang, which are the modes of action of the Te. The dual is perpetual with neither force vanquishing. An eternal conflict where victory is never definitive, one using the aggressiveness of the other, as in judo, to compensate through passivity and weakness, and to return the force, like a boomerang, with an equivalent effectiveness. You can bend a rod, but once released, it can come back and hit you. The confrontation takes place around median line where calm and rest reign. By applying the principle of “wu-wei” (no artificial action), we reduce the deviation from the centre. We move into a place void of happiness, but equally void of unhappiness.

An excess of good will eventually produces an excess of bad. As living beings, it is impossible for us to reach the central point, as this is the complete negation of life, which is constant motion, as it is the conflict between order and disorder. Opposites are reduced as we move towards the stable equilibrium and contrasts fade. This is the course of action, the path, the Tao recommended by Lao Tzu.

This theory is analogous to that of Buddha, in which suffering can be reduced only by reducing one's own desires, needs. This is the sense of his "enlightenment". We must reduce the flame of our life candle, without completely extinguishing it and reach Nirvana, which means extinction. Maintaining a constant, tiny glow will stabilise the life that has been entrusted to us. Beings succeed one another by the transmigration of souls, with the wheel of Samsara, bettering themselves by moving closer to the vacuity of the hub, the immobile centre, where there is no pleasure but no suffering either.

The Tao is this mysterious entity from which all things were born, which is older than everything and that no word can describe. By calling it the Tao, the path, we can only symbolise its action; the path is that which guides living things, which fixes the direction in which things evolve. It is the very principle of their evolution.

When we have accepted that, through "eventual compensation", all our good experiences will be equalled in a determinate period of space-time by that which is harmful (but which may be beneficial to others), we can neither blame the creator, as he has, in Leibniz's words, created the best world he was able to create, nor nature which is responsible for this eventual compensation. We must be satisfied when it is raining, because it is a sign that fair weather will return sooner or later. Joy and suffering are shared. Death is not an affliction, because it bears new life.

The Tao is universal spontaneity. It does not act with a defined intention. Everything is accomplished naturally without assistance from divine intervention or providence. The Tao is older than Chang-ti, the individual and unique God of the ancient Chinese, and has no interest in the spirits of the ancestors or the divinities of nature. The Tao is the origin of all things and of all the living beings in the universe. It is the immanent cosmic principle of all human existence and all of nature's actions.

The Te is its efficiency and is totally unrelated to Confucian virtue, which is directed at the contrivances of a civilisation. The Tao is the fundamental and undifferentiated unit where all contradictions, and all the distinctions of human experience and thought, are resolved.

The Taoist vision is based on an experience in the immediate and non-intellectualised reality. The essence of oriental perception is the conscience of unity and of the interaction of all things and all events, the manifestation of a single, ultimate and indivisible reality. Reality cannot be segmented. Division is an abstraction forged by our discriminatory and categorising judgement. It is an illusion to believe in our abstract concepts of things and of events, disassociated from the realities of nature. We are forced to consider things with our classical concepts that are adapted to our daily lives.

“Isolated material particles are abstractions, their properties being definable and observable only through their interaction with other systems” (Niels Bohr).

Although in quantum physics we are only able to express things in terms of probabilities, these probabilities do not represent probabilities of existence, but rather of interconnections. The existence and nature of things is a result of their mutual dependence, alone they are nothing.

Space and time are constructions of the mind whose purpose is to bestow order on the objects and events that surround us. Our spirit, crippled by our separating minds, is incapable of grasping the Tao in its entirety. We are not crippled only by our minds, but also by our physical means—hands, eyes, ears, etc. We are trapped in a three-dimensional environment. What would happen if we could experience existence in a world with n dimensions? This is pure science fiction. What, at the end of the day, are we missing? Nothing?

The Tao is simply a word to describe exactly this all, everything that we are able to understand and everything that we are not. It is very likely that it is the whole of this reality that is out of our grasp, like zero, infinity, continuity, the absolute, eternity, pure concepts that we can contemplate in our minds, but that remain out of reach.

Towards the end of 1973, in Ma-wang-t'ouéi near to Tch'ang-cha, in three tombs of the Han dynasty (206 BC) a manuscript of the "Tao Te King" was discovered, written on silk with the parts covering the Tao and the Te inverted. This is the oldest manuscript that exists. It proved that the text, which has remained more or less unchanged since the end of the 3rd century BC, underwent a number of alterations.

The text was first translated into French by Stanislas Julien in 1830 and mentions Heshang Fong (c. end 2nd century BC).

We cannot, however, end this study on the Tao without mentioning the best-seller : "The Tao and Physics" by Fritjof Capra (Ed Tchou – 1975, English – 1979, French), which is well worth reading.

Our intention is that this presentation of the chinese doctrine of the Tao illuminates our vision of our everyday reality and allows us to glimpse, for a fleeting instant, the infinite beatitude of the inexpressible Tao, and lifts the fog of our purely statistical interpretation of phenomena which prevents us from gaining a fundamental understanding of the depths of things.

This fleeting instant of lucidity should be enough to give us the strength to bear the burden of life, and hope that our small light will burn itself out when our moment comes.

Everything is hidden from us by the veil of contrast. We must be able to lift one corner of this veil that envelopes reality and free ourselves from the inhibition which is caused by our tendency to be differentiated and compartmentalised.



The Yin can be represented by an upright empty bowl, the hollow, the valley. When it is turned upside down, it becomes Yang, the mountain. A marble, on the outside, is in constant imbalance, but inside, it is in a stable, oscillating state of equilibrium.

This is the way of the world, neither more, nor less.

This work is no essay on Oriental philosophy on the Chinese doctrine of Tao (even if it does begin with a statement from him). Rather, it seeks to establish that the world that we know today (both material and spiritual) shows enormous convergences with this Yin / Yang doctrine; first explained 6000 years ago by an enlightened Chinese emperor (named Fou-Hi). In spite of the vast range of human knowledge at the beginning of the 21st century, which one generally accepts as a sign of enormous progress, we can but state that this progress is but an illusion; all it does is verify and confirm that which the Ancients had premonitions about. We strive to prove it all via a series of very diverse themes, collected in articles which have been gathered together in books, covering a vast range of disciplines – each of which can be approached separately. We have tried to bring forth a philosophy from this confrontation between this venerable age-old thought and the vision of all that man has been able to create which separates him from animals, a philosophy which we call the «doctrine of modern dualism». There is no doubt that this doctrine has had certain ties with other dualisms, such as Manichaeism or Cartesianism; but it especially tries to operate a holistic and globalising synthesis from it. It is about simply stating how the world really functions, and arriving at behavioural reasons for it all.

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