

Wang Meng

WHAT IS THE TAO?

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[Wang Meng, born 1934, is one of contemporary China's most important authors. He served in the PLA prior to Liberation. In 1956, during the short-lived "blooming and contending" period of relative free speech, he published a much-discussed short story, "The Young Newcomer in the Organization Department," describing the atrophy of the sense of revolutionary commitment under the pressure of daily work in a Party office. Wang was labeled a rightist and exiled to Xinjiang until 1979. He resumed writing fiction and also achieved a certain official approbation. Indeed, at international writers' conferences authors from Taiwan took to calling him the "Old Man in the Organization Department," mocking his willingness to explain away continued shortcomings in mainland literary policy. In the late 1980s he served as Minister of Culture, but was fired after the June 4 1989 crackdown on dissent. He continued to publish however, including some transparent satires on Deng Xiaoping and Deng Xiaoping's manner of governing.

The current essay is a semi-playful explication of the important philosophical concept of Tao, and it is not always easy to figure out how to take it: when is Wang Meng joking and when is he being serious? Thus, the Tao is a principle of unity, and Wang remarks that "our countrymen are fond of unity." One suspects that this is satire, since Wang has previously argued for the value of western concepts of plurality or pluralism. Also, the analysis here is often hard to follow, and one is at a loss to know whether the confusion is intended facetiously or whether it is simply plain old confusion.

The general argument begins with the standard Marxist critique of religion: theology is really anthropology; statements about God are really statements about man. But, Wang says, according to Taoist thinking, behind religion, Marx, and everything else, there is Tao. Wang may or may not be aware that this is what the orthodox Christian would call God (with the exception that the Tao seems to be a purely immanent principle within and behind the universe, whereas God, as creator, transcends the universe). Tao is the functioning of all things. Tao cannot be perceived and so it cannot be described or spoken of, although we may know something of it from its effects. Wang Meng would seem to subscribe to a rather subjective concept of the Tao: since the Tao cannot be described or even clearly conceived, any conception of it is apparently as good as anyone else's. The Tao for me is whatever is most basic for me—and the Tao for you is whatever is most basic for you. But the Tao has no limits, so everything is always within the scope of the Tao.]

What is the Tao (道, Dao; the Way)? The *Cihai* (辞海) dictionary explains it in terms of a road, a method, and a rule. Another classic reference work, the *Guide to a Hundred Fields of Study*, explains it as the basis and origin of the world and the rules of its operation. It especially cites Zhuangzi: Tao is the origin of the ultimate; there is nothing it does not

include, nowhere that it does not move. It is the self-creating self-transforming structure of the universe.

This theory may perhaps give rise to doubts, since at the time of Laozi our countrymen did not talk that much about the world or the universe. No matter: in Laozi there are references to Heaven and Earth, the ten thousand things, the ten thousand phenomena—and these will do.

Naturally, Laozi was not the first to use the term *Tao*. It appears in the *Book of Odes*, where it means a road. Confucius said, “If in the morning I hear the Tao, I’ll be content to die that evening.” Here the Tao is the sum of all value. But Laozi and Zhuangzi treat the Tao as the origin, essence, or basic structure of the world. This is a manner of theorizing peculiar to themselves.

Laozi seeks the Tao in what is common to the world, Heaven and Earth, the ten thousand things ^[1] and the ten thousand phenomena. One characteristic of the thinking of philosophers is concern for the ten thousand things and the ten thousand phenomena, for what is valid for ten thousand generations and ten thousand years. The ten thousand things, the thousand expressions, the hundred forms constantly produce and extinguish each other, always in flux. Can they, then, have anything in common? If you can grasp that commonality, isn’t that tantamount to grasping the ox of the world by the nose? This is something very appealing to a philosopher, to one who pursues wisdom.

When Laozi discourses on the nature of Tao, in fact he is addressing what is common to the ten thousand things. This commonality is described in terms of:

One, spontaneity. Things move of themselves and undergo their own transformations, not as a result of outside force or of will—whether the will of man or the will of God. They are not subject to concepts of value, moral standards, or love or hate. This is the primary characteristic of Tao. Non-action, non-speaking, simplicity, non-wisdom: these also arise from this spontaneous self-motion.

Two, change, transformation. The ten thousand things are in a process of continuous change. Thus, we can’t be shortsighted, like a mouse who can only see an inch from his nose, or act on the basis of a single idea—so forth.

Three, dialectic. Things are mutually opposed and mutually constitutive. When things reach an extreme they will go back. Disaster and good fortune depend each upon the other. Particularly, being and nothingness mutually produce each other. Nothingness necessarily transforms into being and being necessarily transforms into nothingness. Being is produced from the midst of nothingness and nothingness from the midst of being. Being and nothingness are forms of existence and rules of transformation that cannot be departed from.

Four, softness. The great Tao is a giant vulva and womb. It is soft and not firm. Lightness is the root of heft, silence governs noise.

Five, a tendency toward the low. Like water, it flows downward. It self-consciously takes the lowest position,

occupying the wet places others are unwilling to dwell in.

Six, selflessness. It produces without owning, acts without assurance, accomplishes without claiming. It knows the male but keeps to the female, knows white but keeps to black.

Seven, thoughtlessness. It is a concentrated disposition, a vacant disposition, a lively disposition. This is related to the Chinese-Mongol legend of the splitting of the Great Clod to produce heaven and earth. It even brings to mind some theories concerning the origins of the universe, such as the nebular hypothesis, so forth.

Eight, mystery. Its words are great, piling mystery upon mystery. It is the gate to myriad marvels. Explanations of the Tao are abstract and penetrate deeply into things; it is not something that can be grasped at one sitting.

Nine, precious. What we value, we preserve (*ren zhi bao*, *ren zhi bao*—人之寶, 人之保). If we obtain the Tao, there are no worries, no blame, no harm, no dead ground. If we lose the Tao, fear of ruin and destruction is never far away.

There is more of this sort of thing, but these nine points are the most important. How do we name these nine points? We can say Tao, origin, nature, rules, basic structure.

If we talk about unity, we can seek it for a long time and become aware of it for a long time. We will discover and become aware that Tao is all there is, that it is unitary. If we have that unity, from one thing we can understand a hundred things. Laozi says (Ch. 39): Heaven obtains One and becomes clear; Earth obtains One and becomes calm; the Spirit obtains one and becomes numinous; the Valley obtains One and becomes full. The ten thousand things obtain One and so are productive; the kings and nobles obtain One and control Under Heaven.

Our countrymen are fond of unity. We worship unity. We say: understand all things through one thing; be consistent from beginning to end; act as always in the past; one heart and one mind; with one mind for the common good; remain faithful until the end^[2] --all of these are considered to be good sayings. Also, those things that are not one all contain one: one produces two produces three produces the ten thousand things, unto the limitlessly large Tao: and the Tao is one, solitary, united, unified, coordinated.

Laozi discovered the Tao and discovered the uniqueness of the Tao. This depends first on the discovery of what all things share in common; secondly, on the discovery of their sources. And if we trace the sources we come to Tao.

Many religions are rich in concern for the Ultimate. But the concern for the Ultimate in religion tends toward the search for a great Lord, for a Ruler of Heaven and Earth. We find among us persons of great and unusual natural endowments, persons who can work miracles, persons with a great sense of mission. These are angels and demigods sent by the Ultimate Lord, a bridge from this shore to the other, the messengers of the Lord: for example, Jesus or Sakyamuni. In the end, these persons of a divine character become generally recognized as embodying the divinity in

human character.

Laozi, however, works through the dialectic. He does not seek out the relationship of god and man, but rather for the ultimate nature of god, what he calls Name (*ming*; 名), and he gradually raises the level of the concepts he uses. Laozi, for example, is not satisfied with the concept of Heaven-Earth-Man, but raises this to the conceptual level of Nothingness. Regardless of whether it is Heaven, Earth, Man, or none of the above, if it is not Being then it is Nothingness. All Nothingness must come from somewhere. Nothingness is the Being of Nothing, and Being is the Nothing of Nothingness. Originally there were no people. Then the problem and argument about Nothing and Not Nothing did not exist. Originally Man was Nothing.^[3] There was Nothing to produce Man and Things; nor was there any concept or discussion of Being. For example, we cannot discuss when there will be a person who never has been. So before there was no Heaven, no Earth, and no Man, or after there was no Heaven, no Earth, no Man—what kind of world was that?

This is like searching for the largest number that there could be, the highest height, the deepest depth, the longest period of time, the earliest origins, the farthest distance. If X is the largest number there can be, there still must be X+1 or X+X. But X+1 and X+X are both larger than X. And we can keep on going this way: X+1+1, X+X+X+X; and if we do keep on going, eventually we will produce ∞ --limitlessly large, nameless, inexhaustible.^[4]

So: That which was before Being, before Nothing, before Spirit, God, and the world, that which is limitlessly big, limitlessly distant, limitlessly deep, eternal, whose roots are limitlessly roots of all nature, origins, rules, reason, paths, and methods—what is it? Laozi says that kind of thing is not easy to name, but if we have to give it a name, we call it Tao.^[5]

Concrete things are produced and destroyed, but Tao is everlasting. The concrete ten thousand things are like leaves on a tree. Each one sprouts, grows, develops, dies, and falls. But the great Tao is the tree or the roots of the tree: a great tree that is invisible, eternal, and limitless.

There is some rationality to this kind of thought. If there were no principle of order and existence like the Tao, then Being and Nothing or Heaven, Earth, and Man could never be able spontaneously to come to life. Nothingness is eternal and incapable of change, and Being likewise is eternal and incapable of change; and so is the absence of distinction between Being and Nothingness. It follows in that sense that Being does not exist, and neither does Nothingness.

In the west there is the idea of the so-called Prime Mover. From the perspective of Newtonian mechanics, it is God that gives things the first shove. After that the world moves ceaselessly. For Laozi, however, the Tao provides an eternal motive. This motivation is eternal and without limit. There is no first or Prime Mover, no more than there is a final

mover. Who would be able to discover something that was there before everything, or will be there after everything is gone? How can we arrive at the first in something that is inexhaustibly great or find something that is last, that marks the end? Under conditions of the inexhaustibly great, a straight thread forms a circle, and the end is the same as the beginning. That is, there is no end or beginning; or any single point is itself both end and beginning. While the existence of the Tao is difficult to prove, it is relatively easy to disprove the nonexistence of the Tao. That is to say, if there is no such a priori road, rule, or structure like the Tao, then it is easy to falsify any proposition whatever. Since it is universally recognized that matter is never destroyed and energy is eternal, and also that there is motion in the world, then there are roots and sources. There is, then, a first and last motion and before that the first matter and energy—if we follow the trail to the end it is very confusing, but we will arrive at the “Tao.”

The Ultimate is not a concept from the laboratory or an empirical concept. Rather, it is a mental concept, a rational concept. It is the expression of a high degree of spiritual freedom. If the Ultimate does not lead to theology then it leads to mathematics. It leads to infinity or to zero. Or, alternatively, it leads to the appearance of philosophical concepts: and that is Tao.

So, then, in the end just what is Tao? After all, what is it? The question itself is a synonym. As explained above, Tao is “in the end.” It is the “end” that all people pursue. It is “after all”—it is the totality of what we seek. According to the famous Taiwan sinologist Fu Fengrong, Tao points to the “final truth.” The end is Tao and Tao is the end. Tao is after all, and after all is Tao. People sometimes like to ask: What came first—the chicken or the egg? Laozi says: Long before there were chickens or eggs, there was the Tao, and the Tao produced the chicken, the egg, and everything else.

Tao is possibly also a process. It may be said that Laozi explored this process and you may continue to explore it today. Since it is an Ultimate, Laozi did not reach it and you will never reach it either. It is enough that you grope for it and that you constantly approach it.

Tao is also a perfection. Once you have reached the Tao, you cannot move further beyond the concept of the Ultimate. Tao is itself infinite and ultimate. From what you understand of the source you get some idea of the infinite. But from the perspective of the future you are in effect at point zero, because the future itself is infinitely distant and large.

Perhaps Tao is in the nature of a philosophical exercise or some similar sort of belief, perhaps even an emotion, an impetus toward the highest and most distant origins. If you believe in the Tao, then that is the Tao. If you do not believe in the Tao, then what Laozi calls the Tao is your unbelief. Since you believe nothing whatsoever concerning theories or concepts of the Ultimate, the picture of the Ultimate painted in your brain is pitch black, and consequently your Tao is also pitch black.

If you believe that the Ultimate in the world is emptiness, then emptiness has already taken the position of the Tao discussed by Laozi in your eyes. Nothingness that comes from Nothingness and returns to Nothingness: is this not your Tao, even your God? Your God is Non-God! If a person thinks about, studies, senses God and comes to the decision that it is nothing, then isn't Nothing your God? God does not push out the other, nor is God a standard form or brand.

If you believe that the Ultimate in the world is matter and the movement of matter, then matter and the movement of matter are your Tao. If you believe that the world is ruled and created by Spirit or Soul, then Spirit and Soul are your Tao.

Laozi clearly said: "I don't know its name, so I will call it Tao; if compelled to go further, I will call it Great." There is an interesting play here between "name" and what it is "called." The nameless, the named, the eternal name refer to that without designation, to the designation, to the eternal designation: this explication has been around since antiquity. This is certainly acceptable, but then we have to go back to that "if compelled to go further." Let's make a daring conjecture and treat "designation" as a courtesy name (biao zi—表字): is this OK? As in: "His surname was Li, his name was Er, his courtesy name Boyang" (from the biography of Laozi in the *Historical Records*). "Tao" is a courtesy name [used in public, among strangers], not a true name. Laozi says: "The eternal Tao is nameless." Tao in itself has no name, only this "after all" and "at bottom." Tao is its courtesy name, a secondary name used in place of the true name. The name is the host and the designation the guest. Tao is what is after all and at bottom, what is highest—it is the host. Designating it, calling it the Tao is the "guest." I don't know whether this has anything to do with the etiquette of calling someone by his courtesy name instead of his more intimate name. Thus, we talk about [Sun] Zhongshan or Yat-sen, but very rarely do we use his formal name Sun Wen. But in the past some people, writing to Mao Zedong, would address him as "Runzhi" [Mao's courtesy name]. Tao's formal name is yet to be provided. Its courtesy name is Tao, and if forced to provide a name, it would be "Great"—limitlessly great.

So whether we call it Tao or not doesn't matter. Tao here is simply a term of convenience, a nickname for the Ultimate. Just as there may be substitute Prime Ministers or substitute grand officers, there may also be substitute concepts. It is the Original, the Ultimate, the Inexhaustible, the Highest, the supreme concept. It is the absolute and the spirit of all concepts.

According, then, to what Laozi says, aside from this all suppositions, explications, and quests, all alternative theories, denominations, beliefs are the products of later human civilization. They all appeared after the Tao; they are by-products, not the original thing. These include Nothingness, Nameless, Being, the Named, the World, the Universe, the Ten Thousand Things, the Ten Thousand Phenomena, Spirit, God, worship, reason, science, religion, and civilization: all of these are products of the Tao, manifestations of the Tao, expressions of the Tao.

The limitlessly great includes all; there is nothing that is excluded from it. There is no escape from it: you are always under Laozi's spotlight.

Xin Hua Wenzhai, 3 March 2009

[1] A classic way of referring to the universe, everything that is.

[2] All of these phrases in Chinese contain the character *yi* (一), one.

[3] Such statements, to those of a positivist mindset, must seem incoherent, and remain so even on a sympathetic reading. As used in western philosophy, Nonbeing often comes across simply as a special kind of being, in which case the concept may lack intellectual respectability (as if it consisted of statements about things that do not exist—although, of course, being and existence are strictly speaking not identical. In Chinese, “being” (有) means having specific properties or traits, and nonbeing (無) means not having properties and traits. Each of the ten thousand things has its own peculiarities. The Tao, the source of the ten thousand things, has no particular properties of its own: it is not a thing, and in that sense it lacks “being.”

[4] Actually, in mathematics there are different infinities, some larger than others.

[5] Language makes the world intelligible, and names denote things. But the Tao is not a thing and cannot be named—and is not intelligible. We know Tao (to the extent we do) from its operations and its effects.