

## CONFUCIANISM AND TAOISM IN DIALOGUE: TWO CONSTANT PARADIGMS OF A TOTALITY IN LIFE APPROACH AND ACCEPTANCE

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When years ago, upon my arrival to China, I told professor with whom I was to work, of my wish to research into the *Doade jing* –the basic work of Taoism –the master answered: "Good, just start with a translation of the Four Books from classical into modern Chinese and research into the Confucian Canon". That was not, as I realized later, a whim of the master, that he did not want to be directed by the obstinacy of a beginner. Rather it was wisdom, born of an experience that one has to penetrate gradually into Taoism, starting with the experience of the world that is offered to us in our everyday reality, or, as this reality was philosophically determined by Confucius.

Not that a critique of Confucius would be a cornerstone of Lao Zi's and Zhuang Zi's teachings. Confucius' doctrine was just an occasion and medium, which facilitated their putting into words their essential inexpressible ideas. Confucius' main concern was social and ethical problems and he was trying to restore and morally reform the society in which he lived. His essentialism –the main target for the Taoists–was revealed in the doctrine of the rectification of names (*zheng ming*), which in its essence is something very simple, common to our everyday experience and action, something that our common sense, or better, rationality demands. The problem is that intellect by its nature cannot carry out its functions if the distinctions among things are created and fixed so that they appear as independent entities which are divided among themselves. Confucius bases these natural distinctions among things on a very simple philosophical rule that each thing is unchangeably founded in its essence or quiddity. The role of language is to endow this essence with permanency. Thus, if a certain thing or phenomenon was named in a certain way, this was linked to the essence within the thing or phenomenon, consolidating this essence even more and thus changing it into a defined object with clearly delineated borders around it, which prevents us from confusing this object with any

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other one. The names—titles—are symbols upon which it was agreed, so that in material and graspable form the essence of a certain object could be crystallized.

Withdrawal from the principle of the rectification of names was, for Confucius, a sign of moral decay and intellectual chaos in society. On an entirely rational basis, his disciple Xun Zi worked out a semantic theory, to assure that, on the basis of its essence, something is what it really is. So that to each title, or name an appropriate objective and constant part of reality is assured. Philosophically this position could be called realism or essentialism.

This is however the very principle that the Taoists tried to disapprove. For Zhuan Zi, the distinctions that we usually imagine to exist among the things are not something essential or crucial. There is nothing in the world that would objectively and in its essence be beautiful or ugly. The distinctions between beautiful and ugly are based on the viewpoint of the subject. By ontological relativism, everything is brought into question, other Confucian values as well.

In contrast to the Confucian standpoint, reality, as understood by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, is based on an unusual vision, acquired in a special kind of mystical experience. The world of Being, as it appears to Taoists or to their spiritual eyes, is a vast, limitless space, where the things exist in an amorphous, dreamlike way of existence, connected to each other and always changing and flowing into each other. This is not a usual world in which all the things are clearly distinguished and differentiated among themselves and in which each would be clearly and unchangeably limited and defined. In this amorphous and dreamlike world nothing is rigidly fixed by the so-called essence. Metaphysical fluidity, as Isutsu<sup>1</sup> very aptly termed this main concept of Taoist ontology, is the most important feature of this world. Things without any essence flow in a dreamlike insecurity and indetermination. This does not mean that in the world of Being there are no borders. There are limits, but they are fluid. They are changeable, are constantly changing. The primal function of the intellect is that it holds to this mobile and flowing borders, fixes them into a quiet entities. The result of this is that clearly defined and rigidly fixed distinctions are formed. So in our mind, the image of so-called reality is formed.

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<sup>1</sup>Isutsu Toshihiko. *The Absolute and the Perfect man in Taoism*. In *Eranos Jahrbuch* 1967. Rhein Verlag, Zurich, 1968, p.393.

For Taoists, however, reality is a surface reality, just a phenomenon, or appearance. This is just a distorted image of a real unity of reality, which lies at the deepest level, hidden from the eyes for a common human being.

With unexpressed Tao the realm were opened upon which a specific Daoist theory of language developed. As Zhuang Zi stated:

The Way cannot be thought of a being, nor can it be thought of as nonbeing. In calling it the Way we are only adopting a temporary expedient. 'Nothing does it', 'something makes it like this'—these occupy a mere corner of the realm of things. What connection could they have with the Great Method? If you talk in worthy manner, you can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to the Way. But if you talk in an unworthy manner, you can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to mere things. The perfection of the Way and things—neither words silence are worthy of expressing it. Not to talk, not be silent—this is the highest form of debate.<sup>2</sup>

Language is the indispensable tool of intellect, which helps it to create the distinctions of everything and the borders among the myriad of things, which in their very essence are inseparably connected in One. Border, namely, is indispensable in defining the essence of single phenomena, things. Essence is, on the other hand, the condition for the functioning of logos in the sense of intellect and language. Since in reality nothing is defined with its essence, the true reality must be beyond the grasp of logos. So, as Taoists state the undescrivable, inexpressible, idea: the Way or Tao which manifests itself in everything.

Here we deal with two levels. The surface one, on which reality manifests itself in the form of the ten thousand, myriad things, and the other one, beyond it, which is spoken of (or kept silent about) in the sense of the first chapter of the Doade jing:

As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way;  
As for the names, the name that can be named is not the constant name.  
The nameless is the beginning of the ten thousand things;  
The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.

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<sup>2</sup>The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu. (Trans. Burton Watson) Columbia University Press. New York, 1968. P. 293.

Therefore, those constantly without desires, by this means will perceive its subtlety. Those constantly with desires, by this means will see only that which they yearn for and seek.

These two together emerge;  
They have different names yet they're called the same;  
That which is even more profound than the profound-  
The gateway of all subtleties.<sup>3</sup>

The Taoists hereby point to the perspectives of experiments with words in the realm of essence-less. This is the level of unity, where all the things pour into each other and return to their original base. The diagram *Taiji* (*Taiji tu*) and various commentaries to it also represent these two levels and indicate various dilemmas in describing with words the undescrivable level. *Wuji* is the ultimate concept of Non-Being and at the same time the axis around which the developing process of cosmic life into the myriad of things is spread and once again embraces and encircles all the inner steps of differentiation.

For Chinese philosophy, from the beginning through its various steps and periods, the game of putting into words the inexpressible is significant. The awareness of the insufficiency of words, in the Song dynasty for instance, led to a variety of diagrams, "tu", by which the philosophers represented their theories, which often arose on the basis of meditation techniques. On the level of commentaries the words became, once again, a center, sometimes also as the explanations of the diagrams that appeared exactly because of the unsuitableness of putting specific experiences into words. Such an example is also Zhou Dunyi's *Taij tushuo*.

## II

He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt. While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe that are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things, calling this man

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<sup>3</sup>Lao-tzu. *Te-tao ching*. (Trans. Robert G. Henricks) Ballantine Books. New York, 1989, p.53.

ruler, that one herdsman-how dense! Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you are dreaming, I am dreaming, too. Words like these will be labeled the Supreme Swindle. Yet, after ten thousand generations, a great sage may appear who will know their meaning, and it will still be as though he appeared with astonishing speed.<sup>4</sup>

The one who remains limited to the world of multitudes can acknowledge the leading role of the intellect. On a higher level of unity, however, there are entirely different functions of the mind as the twentieth chapter of the *Daode jing* describes. Through these an individual, on the basis of and experience of enlightenment, finds an entirely different mode of experiencing the world.

Agreement and angry rejection;  
 How great is the difference between them?  
 Beautiful and ugly;  
 What's it like—the difference between them?  
 The one who is feared by others?  
 Must also because of this fear other men?  
 Wild, unrestrained! It will never come to an end!  
 The multitudes are peaceful and happy;  
 Like climbing a terrace in springtime to feast at the t'ai-lao sacrifice.  
 But I'm tranquil and quiet—not yet having given any sign.  
 Like a child who has not yet smiled.  
 Tired and exhausted—as though I have no place to return.  
 The multitudes all have a surplus.  
 I alone seem to be lacking.  
 Mine is the mind of a fool—ignorant and stupid!  
 The common people see things clearly;  
 I alone am in the dark.  
 The common people discriminate and make fine distinctions;  
 I alone am muddled and confused.  
 Formless am I! Like the ocean;  
 Shapeless am I! As though I have nothing in which I can rest.

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<sup>4</sup>*The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (Trans. Burton Watson) Columbia University Press. New York, 1968, p.47

The masses all have their reasons for acting;  
 I alone am stupid and obstinate like a rustic.  
 But my desire alone differ from those of others-  
 For I value is drawing sustenance from the Mother.<sup>5</sup>

This is a being, who, due to the liberation of the narrow Ego, is spiritually detached, unbound and therefore able to penetrate into the mysteries of Being. Only such and enlightened being is able to get to know its real Self, which also leads to a direct and intuitive understanding of the Way and union with it. Such an experience, of course, influences one's experiencing in a way that afterwards the world is seen in an entirely different light. Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi present an image of the world of an individual who, after the experience of unity with the Way, has returned to the usual, normal state of consciousness. While looking into such works we encounter the problem of the interpretation of such experiences and the states of consciousness, translation of them into the realms of common language and grammar is certainly too narrow a realm to encompass the absolute spiritual freedom with which such an individual enters, on the basis of the state of no-death-n-life-, into the world of cosmic unity and balance. This experience of becoming one, undifferentiating and dwelling beyond everything also means, of course, transition to a level beyond language, which can be a questionable medium for the cartography of the spirit.

The twentieth chapter of the *Daode jing* is interesting, since it presents a solitary human being, bound to Tao (the Mother) in the crowd of people that live with everyday-ness as their only reality. This contrast, in itself, is the point which gives this chapter a specific power.

This everyday-ness, or the way of experiencing it, is the multitudinous level which encompasses the crowd of the ten thousand things, clearly limited entities in their fleeting connection. Their world is the world of things, which, in an ideal Confucian state, have their essence and substances, and therefore there is no doubt about them as particulars. All this is then reality, which, according, is supposed, to be in such a state that it can be mastered by the intellect, albeit in the pragmatic sense of mastering everyday situations, or on higher philosophical level, with the logic of clear consciousness.

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<sup>5</sup>Lao-tzu. *Te-tao ching* (Trans. Robert G. Henricks) Ballantine Books. New York, 1989, p.72

The crowd swarms in illusion to know what it does, where it wants to go. People are concerned that they are the ones who direct the happenings and they are striving to get some profit, some advantage out of it. In reality they are caught within the dynamics of long term incomprehensible mechanisms of the material world and they are unable to realize their actual role in the universe. The twentieth chapter of the *Daode jing* however, does not unfold this last thought. The lonely Taoist does not appear as the wise one beyond the crowd. One does not boast being the perfect one, but, on the contrary, judges oneself in this situation through the eyes of the successful crowd. One describes oneself as an outsider, homeless and poor, who does not yet know where and how to find his image. One feels a useless fool puzzled and confused that one had given oneself up to the atmosphere of obscurity where one even feels really at home, and that if everyone thinks about one that way, one probably deserves the situation one is in.

Is this a sincere image of losing one's way and of the helplessness of a being who finds oneself lonely in a foreign land? Someone trying to adjust, to feel in the way the people in the crowd are seeing and looking upon such outsider and even approving of their attitude. We could think that way if the twentieth chapter did not begin with the first lines that are very close to the reflections of the nineteenth chapter, which in turn is very much directed against the Confucian virtues.

Eliminate sageliness, throw away knowledge,  
 And the people will benefit a hundredfold.  
 Eliminate humanity, throw away righteousness,  
 And the people will return to final piety and compassion.  
 Eliminate craftiness, throw away profit,  
 Then we will have no robbers and thieves.  
 These three saying—  
 Regarded as texts are not yet complete.  
 Thus, we must see to it that they have the following appended:  
 Manifest plainness and embrace the genuine;  
 Lessen self-interest and make few your desire;  
 Eliminate learning and have no undue concern.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Lao-tzu. *Te-tao ching* (Trans Robert G. Henricks) Ballantine Books, New York, 1989, p.71

Or does the description from the twentieth chapter of the *Daode jing* contain the irony of someone who has, by the way of enlightenment, transcended the multitudinous level coming to an image of unity that enables one to see in the ten thousand things only one and just one unity and oneness, so that he also has overcome the opposites like the one between life and death and can now look down with a smile on his face and observe the people caught in the multitudinous net.

Among Taoists Zhuang Zi is the one who attacks Confucius' standpoints and his virtues in the most biting way. Inclusion into the practicalities of everyday life demands a multitudinous orientation, which does not demand the abolishment of the experiences of enlightenment. If the twentieth chapter had been written by the bitter Zhuang Zi, there would be no second thoughts about this. However the main part of this chapter (from the sixth line on) was written as a mockery of the spiritually unenlightened people, the Confucian oriented, who accept multitudinousness as a constitutive principle of reality and, in accordance with this, also subordinate their own everyday life practice to this principle.

Since, as presupposed, this chapter was written by Lao Zi, the first master of Taoism, we might accept only a third explanation. Somebody who really experienced this unity and accepted the world and oneself together with it on this level can grasp the Way (Tao) in the individual form and the Way per se, before it starts to bifurcate and diversify. As such, he does not see an incompatible opposite in the described two standpoints, but he has the power and insight to accept the Truth in both of its aspects—as the one shown from the outside, the orthodox one of the science of rectification of names and the one which has been grasped from the inside, through illumination or enlightenment.

How can we, however, understand the tone on one's own insufficiency present all through this chapter?

Lao Zi's original approach to the truth is illuminative. When he is arriving from the state of ecstatic unity with the Way and is returning to his normal state of consciousness in the world of multiplicity, surface reality, he becomes aware of his alienation, but at the same time he knows, that the enlightened one cannot and should not wipe this alternative from his consciousness. Although having his safe haven—Mother (the Tao)-, the undifferentiated and inexpressible, he sees in that his



deficiency. He was not able to adjust to the pattern of the majority, the one which accepts the plurality of the ten thousand things together with their essences as self-understandable, and experience the illusion of one's own reality, by degrees, as something unexpected. The enlightened one accepts this plurality (for everyday use) actually just as mimicry, or as an entirely equal pattern of experiencing existence—but with the experienced insight into unity, oneness, as realized in his enlightenment.

Understanding the Confucian and Taoist paradigm as two seemingly opposite spiritual orientations in life attitude is not an esoteric undertaking, which would fulfill the intellectual interests of narrow sinological and philosophical circles, but can be understood as a model of an actual dilemma, that subtly attacks the cornerstones of so called "Western" culture, be it as appearing in movements like New Age or postmodernism and other directions that doubt in the unassailability of principles on which up till now the "West" has been building its philosophy and life-practice.

### III

Can we talk about the fact that we live in times when the pillars of any kind of fundamentalism are shaking? If we take this term in relation to the dogmatic stressing of the teachings, we could apply, in its broader sense, the main characteristics of this term to various religions or different ideologies. If they, on the basis of dogmas and shortsighted presuppositions, try to expose one level of people as a chosen nation, and together with it put into subordinate position everything that does not adapt to criteria defined by them. Even if any new fundamentalism such as religious conviction, nationalism, adherence to a political party and the like, is born it certainly is of a very short-lived, shorter even if, inside the group, it is more binding and, to the outside, excluding.

Confucianism and Taoism are two paradigms of a principle approach of a human being to the existential, in their essence basic psychological, problems on the one hand and ontological realizations on the other hand. Asian philosophical traditions have clearly formulated this duality. European and American philosophical traditions might be much closer to the Confucian paradigm, Taoist approach being still quite alien to them, and we could more easily find elements of such stands in alternative groups that are now compounded in the New Age movements, a form of

continuation or a new version of the so-called anti-culture of the sixties and seventies. Far from being a form of organization, it is rather a conglomerate of individuals and groups that share a common view of the world and form a specific life-style and can be recognized by some common features such as: aspiration to a foggily defined "extension of consciousness"; tendency to a kind of a new religiosity; resistance to technocratic civilization; endeavor for a healthy, peaceful community which respects life and cares for the ecological purity of this planet.

This general orientation is also based on a certain lifestyle which rejects yearning, or longing for material goods, inclines to vegetarianism and simple clothing and which does not tend to uniformity but rather likes bright colors. Large organizations are uncharacteristic of this movement, which cultivates communes, union, ashrams, libraries for literature, with a corresponding affinity to alternative healing, parapsychology, syncretism, or religious ideas, approaching to Hinduism and Buddhism or "Eastern wisdom" in general, but of course rejecting any kind of fundamentalism, also the Christian one.

Forming organizations, or even parties, endangers the existence of amorphous, diffuse movements, which are maintained and grow from inner motives. Narcissism of the individual who thinks that, in that way, in the crowd, one can get some profit or advantage for oneself, in the sense of "Western value", even more where there are hidden leaders, can be dangerous. Such tendencies can be a most destructive germ that drives such movements and deforms them in various deviant directions, until they finally drown in the existing social chaos.

Adherents of such orientations and movements are usually young people who abdicate from the consolidated and generally accepted pattern of communication, standard value scales and ambitions. They are unable to do it any other way. They do not reveal their standpoint in a demonstrable way, and they do not manifest any destructive ambitions toward the existing norms. If they are labeled freak, outsider, queer fellow and the like, they do not protest against them. With a slight sadness they accept them, being aware of their insufficiency, namely that they did not possess enough mimicry for the others to accept them for themselves. In their solitude, which does not bother them, they are creative—from themselves and for themselves—not in the quantity, but in regard to quality of their creations, that are often a little ahead of the times, as much so indeed, that they do not live to experience their acclaim.