

Paper 2 - Tao Te Ching

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1 The Axiomatic Foundation of Tao Te Ching

You don't know what you don't know, and what you don't know may itself be greater than what you know, and therefore you may not know anything -proportionally speaking- if you fixate solely on what you know. Which we could perhaps summarize: the more you know the less you know.

The aforementioned conclusion is paradoxical unlike the preceding rational, but being paradoxical doesn't preclude information. Language is universal, but sometimes it's not the best vehicle or medium for conveying information. For instance algebra began from language, but nowadays we use a better medium, a symbolic medium, for conveying mathematical structure.

In this manner it's not obvious why e.g. sine and cosine are considered to be

‘odd’ and ‘even’ functions respectively. Yet the simple fact manifests itself so plainly by simply transforming the given function into a literal infinite series of terms, something that may itself be counterintuitive, yet there is a rationale to such.

This is the analogy by which I propose we should try to understand Tao Te Ching. Similar to the position Tanaka takes in the limit of language in Daoism. Who wrote,

The [Taoists] seem to have noticed that there is a limit to what language can do and that the limit of language is paradoxical.

(Tanaka)

Who also gives a similar analogy,

‘Don’t be guided by any guidance!’ is a paradoxical guidance. The only way to be guided by the guidance is by not being guided by it. But not being guided by the guidance, we are guided by it. How can we be guided or not be guided by this guidance?

(Tanaka)

Who likewise adopts a similar thesis,

In general, the Western philosophers (and Indian philosophers) take language to be representative. Language is thought to

represent the world, beliefs and so on (extra-linguistic ‘reality’).
The Western study of language thus focuses on the semantics:
how extra-linguistic reality is ‘mirrored’ in language. The main
function of language for the Western philosophers is descriptive.
(Tanaka)

Yet Tanaka and I come to different conclusions, from a similar premise where
we both argue that the manner in which something is conveyed may not
necessary be the best for understanding such.

That is, Tanaka fixates on the paradoxical themes of Tao Te Ching and then
asserts that such stems from a fixation on human behavior within society.
But this doesn’t necessarily help us evaluate paradoxical information, let
alone Tao Te Ching in general.

Whereas I believe the more uniform and encompassing theme of Daoism is
best understood by relational thinking. For instance, I have said that “the
more you know the less you know”, is literally paradoxical. But in terms
of relations, we are simply describing inversely proportional quantities and
from this outlook isn’t problematic or obscure, just -perhaps- unconventional.
This is the unconventional manner or framework that I propose we should
seek to understand Tao Te Ching.

From the very first line,

The tao that can be described is not the eternal Tao.

(Chapter 1 — Translated by McDonald)

For all possible descriptions of the Tao, there exists no description of the eternal Tao. In the very first line we are told that language itself is insufficient, by means of a relation between the descriptive Tao and the eternal Tao. Yet luckily, while it cannot be described, as I have just demonstrated, we can nevertheless derive meaning from the given statement.

This is the axiomatic foundation that we will build upon, just as euclidean geometry begins with several explicit axioms.

2 Relationships and Proportions

When you understand all things can you step back from your own understanding?

(Chapter 10 — Translated by McDonald)

The world depicted in Tao Te Ching is a world defined by mutual dichotomies and mutual interdependence, where something and nothing must necessarily and mutually give rise to each other, just as much as they give rise to themselves, and from this outgrowth, forms our reality.

Look for it, and it can't be seen.

Listen for it, and it can't be heard.

Grasp for it, and it can't be caught.

These three cannot be further described, so we treat them as The
One.

Its highest is not bright.

Its depths are not dark.

Unending, unnamable, it returns to nothingness.

Formless forms, and imageless images, subtle, beyond all understanding.

Approach it and you will not see a beginning; follow it and there
will be no end.

When we grasp the Tao of the ancient ones, we can use it to direct
our life today.

To know the ancient origin of Tao: this is the beginning of wisdom.

(Chapter 14 — Translated by McDonald)

This is like the model of our word, and just like any other model, you must describe how the model works. Yet Tao Te Ching seems like it circumvent the issue by avoiding the discrete in favor of indiscrete relations, and from these relations, it builds an axiomatic model that underpins the philosophy.

That is, this philosophy is given in terms of relations. Such as good and evil: good and evil mutually coexist, you cannot have one without the other.

They imply and define each other just as much as they define themselves, and therefore good and evil aren't standalone concepts, but relational concepts, you define one in relation to the other, and vice versa.

Analogously, when I was a kid I once drew something that was so good I never saw it until the end of the school year when I managed to get it back. From someone who isn't necessarily known for being good at such, looking back I've come to the conclusion that what enabled me to draw such an exceeding good portrait was my unwitting fixation on relations. As I divided the paper into grids, I never fixated on the individual details themselves, but in terms of relations between the details and the grid lines.

Just as I had captured a model in my drawing because I fixated on relational thinking. So too can Tao Te Ching perhaps capture the world in its pages, we just need need to step back from the individual details.

So therefore,

When you understand all things can you step back from your own
understanding?

(Chapter 10 — Translated by McDonald)

Is perhaps saying, can you step back and see the world in terms of their proper proportions?

3 Stillness and Flow

What we have discussed so far may be regarded as the cosmic universe of the Tao defined in terms of relations. But relational thinking isn't just how Tao Te Ching defines the world, but living within the world just as much as the world itself, and personally speaking this is where the utility of such becomes evident. For instance, do you ever feel lost? Have you, by your own intentions, muddied your own waters?

Who can be still until their mud settles and the water is cleared
by itself?

Can you remain tranquil until right action occurs by itself?

(Chapter 15 — Translated by McDonald)

This is where the aforementioned utility becomes obvious. Because you can forcefully intervene, but why go to the expense? If you have muddied your own waters, what use is it to further intervene? You will only make things all the more opaque. Rather, if you seek clarity, you must let things naturally disperse and dissipative into clarity by its own motions. Just as much as proper proportions manifest a more accurate picture of things.

4 Postscript

When the country falls into chaos, politicians talk about ‘patriotism’.

(Chapter 18 — Translated by McDonald)

Works Cited

Tanaka, Koji. (2004). The limit of language in Daoism. *Asian Philosophy*. 14. 191-205. 10.1080/0955236042000237417.

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