The Way of Lao Tzu by Wing-Tsit Chan: A Review

Although sixth century BC philosopher Lao Tzu left only one surviving short volume of verse, his philosophy has strongly affected Chinese culture and thinkers worldwide. In *The Way of Lao Tzu* (1963), Wing-Tsit Chan, a leading world scholar of Chinese philosophy and religion, attempts to give clarity to Lao Tzu's message and to show how and why it is important. The book is both detailed and well-structured and, being written by a native speaker of Chinese with the highest philosophical credentials, carefully conscious of the effects that translation can have on Lao Tzu's essay. With academic caution, precision and perspective, Chan provides the reader multiple alternative interpretations and translations of a text which, like the Bible, does not exist in its original but has been pieced together from several sources.

Chan is of course not the first to analyze and comment on Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. Chan tells us that the earliest commentators are Chinese philosophers from around 150 BC and that important contributions to what became known as Taoist philosophy were still being made as late as the 12th century AD. Wing-Tsit Chan describes the development of this philosophy and compares it occasionally with Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Western (Socratic) philosophy. His main reference for comparison, however, is with Confucianism, which developed side-by-side in China and was strongly influenced by Taoist thinking. Lao Tzu's concepts, life philosophy, principles of government and moral stance thus crept into not only Taoist but Confucian and indeed, general Chinese thought and culture. Through translations into Latin, German and English, among others, it has affected thinkers such as C. G. Jung. Many of these translations were inaccurate and Chan seeks to clarify and provide the best possible English translation, complete with translation notes as well as commentary.

Taoism is both a philosophy and a religion, often confused with each other in the West. In this book Chan is concerned only with Taoist philosophy. His purpose is to describe Taoist thought from its earliest origins in Lao Tzu's text and to show its importance in China and the world.

Lao Tzu´s origins, position in society and purpose in writing the *Tao Te Ching* are (perhaps like Shakespeare's background) shrouded in the fog of history. He probably was a contemporary of Confucius around 550 BC, serving as a librarian in a peripheral province of China. Lao Tzu was (and is) going against the grain of society when he advocated a simple, non-material life within small, peaceful communities, organized non-competitively and with little government involvement. He was apparently rebelling against the inequality, overindulgence, poverty, war and unrest of his time. The Axial Age in China, as in India and the West, was a time in which people competed with each other for power, fame and riches to build and keep empires using military strength to extract tribute and keep slaves. (One can easily see parallels to our society today). Lao Tzu was also a naturalist, believing that Nature takes care of itself, so it is in our best interest to let it do that by following Nature's principles (Tao) as best we can. These two threads, one the way of nature, the other the way of misguided man, are Lao Tzu's contrasting themes throughout the *Tao Te Ching*.

Lao Tzu and Confucius lived at the same time and had many ideas in common, for example, both sought harmony, but Lao Tzu followed nature's approach of letting things develop organically, holistically, and with little interference, while Confucius favored a strict hierarchical organization, central control and carefully following tradition and protocol. In China, the scientists and artists tended to be Taoists, while the bureaucrats more often followed Confucius. Confucius' philosophy was largely human-centered, Lao-Tzu's entirely based on nature.

Lao Tzu begins his essay with a key new concept, that of Nonbeing. Nonbeing is that from which Being is created and the source of everything. Being is all that we see and experience. Nonbeing is not an empty vacuum, but a realm of possibility. Creation follows its own logic, which is unknown and indescribable in words, but real, ever-active, organic and effective. This logic or principle he calls Tao (even though it is indescribable and unnameable) and encourages all to follow it, thereby being in harmony with all else in existence, and allowing creation to continue its natural course. The

universe has thus created and is creating itself, while following certain regular principles (or laws). Lao Tzu thus has no fickle, loving or revengeful gods guiding the show, but instead an ever-present force, that we might liken to gravity, that slowly, gently allows the flow of events to change reality from moment to moment, day to day, year to year, eon to eon, perhaps like a river flowing toward the sea, never quite the same. Nature and Tao are impartial to both man and all other things, i.e. not concerned with human fates nor striving for any particular goal or outcome.

This cosmology is commensurate with the modern, scientific view of the world, but radically different in its description of causality. In the contemporary Newtonian world view, fixed natural laws act at the lowest levels of the atom, particle or molecule to determine the behavior of the higher level molecule, organ, organism or collection of organisms, in a mechanistic manner. Causality is bound strictly by law and always bottom-up, the smallest element determining the behavior of the larger. When an organism or system fails, the cause of failure is sought in one of its components. This view of causality, called reductionism, is the prevailing method in science today.

In Lao Tzu's view, matter (Being) is not simply responding to other matter according to fixed laws, but also interacting with Nonbeing, according to a principle of creation he calls Tao. This principle, and this interaction in the moment, gives rise to ever unique circumstances in a constant flow of creation, rather than to the mechanical, repetitive, clockwork motion prescribed by the Newtonian view. In other words, Lao Tzu's scientific, non-deistic explanation for things allows for patterns and regularity, but at the same time, for constant newness, emergent behavior, and creation. In this way, Lao Tzu some 2500 years ago presaged modern ecologists and system scientists who today work with the ideas of self-organization, networks, catastrophe theory and non-linear (emergent) behavior (see footnote 1). New, entirely unique behaviors come about when the organism or system encounters changed circumstances, circumstances that it has never encountered before, but which are occurring all the time in the ever-changing universe described by Lao Tzu.

Besides this unique contribution to cosmology, we can see Lao Tzu, like Buddha, Christ and other saints and prophets, as an enlightened individual who gives us guidelines for a harmonious, healthy, safe and moral life. Lao Tzu's reference is always Tao, the principle of nature, that which has created us and all else around us. Lao Tzu advises us to seek to understand and follow Tao. Lao Tzu does not go into detail on how to know Tao, but repeatedly recommends contemplation, reflection, and above all a tranquil, non-busy life unimpeded by possessions and distractions. Lao Tzu is not advocating a monastic life, apart from the world, but a simple, reflective life within the world.

Lao Tzu's ”three treasures” (key virtues) are: love, frugality (simplicity) and non-competitiveness. Corollaries are: serve others, benefit *all* things (not just self), treat all fairly and justly, return evil with good, have few desires (egoistic desires) and be content.

In the arena of governance, Lao Tzu's ideal is the village community, self-organizing and self-sufficient, sharing, caring, and peaceful (i.e. following nature). How? Lao Tzu advises the wise ruler to rule by minimalistic, non-interfering government, by good example, by non-extravagance, by caring for all, by equal treatment and by non-military means using weakness rather than weapons. All of these are taken from observation of the (always successful) workings of nature.

In summary, Lao Tzu was perhaps the first modern scientist with a view of a naturally evolving universe not created or directed by deities but by an ever-present principle of creation that we today might call self-organization. He was a moral philosopher with a love and compassion for humans of all stature and particularly the downtrodden. He was an egalitarian with a view that included not only humans but all life in nature. Finally, he was a political philosopher whose ideas have shaped leaders, not least military strategists, around the globe.

Lao Tzu's entire philosophy is given to us compactly in a single essay (or poem) of about 5000 words that was later called the *Tao Te Ching* or The Classic on the Way and Its Virtue. Professor Wing-Tsit Chan does us great service in translating, explaining, clarifying and putting Lao Tzu's

sometimes cryptic essay into perspective for the English-speaking world. To delve deeper, read Chan's excellent book and/or the references below, keeping in mind that the language and terminology are highly dependent on the translator's purpose. From Wing-Tsit Chan's book as well as Professor Alan K. L. Chan's article (referenced below), one is left with the impression that Lao Tzu activates deep philosophical issues that are not easily resolved but whose study enriches our perspectives on life. Perhaps Lao Tzu was a rebel provocateur who, much like Socrates, aimed just as much to stir up discussion as to provide pat answers.

Lao Tzu's essay is remarkable in philosophical depth and practical applicability to daily life. In placing nature above all, not only as our single source but also as our greatest teacher, it provides a philosophy for human well-being and long term survival that is sorely needed today. Lao Tzu's insights can help us get back to our roots, in tune with nature and to find peace in our daily existence in this constantly changing world.

Archie Duncanson, Stockholm 13 September 2014
www.alternativ.nu/ecologybeginsathome
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Footnote 1: (to paragraph beginning ”In Lao Tzu's view,” on page 2)

For more on modern ecology and system science, see, for example, *A Third Window* by Robert Ulanowicz, 2007. Ulanowicz, a system ecologist, describes a new set of axioms for another world view (a ”third window”) to better describe reality and causality than either the Newtonian (mechanistic, reductionist) view or the Darwinian (history-dependent) view. Newton's and Darwin's ”laws” still apply, they are not broken, but they take a subservient rather than dominant role in creation. It is the *process*, the interaction between the parts, that becomes the causal agent, affecting the system itself as well as all subsystems and supra-systems. Ulanowicz calls this method of studying systems “*process* ecology” because it emphasizes the process rather than the objects (materia) in the system. In looking through the lens of process ecology, systems are ever-changing, they are never in stasis. And this was early Chinese philosophy and Lao Tzu's key insight into the nature of reality.

Further Reading:

Tao Te Ching, Derek Lin, 2006. By a Taoist life-coach, this book uses everyday language and interprets each chapter's key points for the individual seeking non-religious spiritual guidance and rules to live by. http://www.taoism.net/enter.htm

http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/, Alan K.L. Chan (20013). A scholarly article on Lao Tzu that gives updated background and links to other reputable sources. Professor Alan K. L. Chan, like Wing-Tsit Chan, delves deeply into Lao Tzu's concepts and attempts to find philosophical sources, links and common threads in Lao Tzu's 81 chapters. Sections 3-4 describe variations and uncertainties in the multiple source texts of the *Tao Te Ching*. Sections 5-7 delve deeply into key concepts (nonbeing, nonaction, virtue...) and discuss alternative interpretations.