

Encounter with mystery essay



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Part I

This passage is the first chapter of the first book of the Tao-te Ching of Lao Tse (604 – 531 BCE). The word Lao means “ teacher” and Tse means “ old man.” Some say that Lao Tse was a man named Li Erh, born in the state of Ch’u, employed as a curator in the court of the Chou dynasty, and well known for his philosophical ideas. Lao Tse grew disillusioned with the misanthropic ways of the dynastic Chinese society and so decided to retire a hermit in the mountains. However, the unenlightened gatekeeper of the kingdom refused to let Lao Tse pass until he had written down his philosophical realizations, as he would never be seen again. So, legend says, Lao Tse sat down and wrote the Tao-te Ching in one sitting, using only 5, 000 characters (Kramer).

Lao Tse is named in scrolls from around 400 BCE, but his life’s details were not recorded until a biography of him was written in about 100 BCE. Some believe that Lao Tse was not an historical figure, but rather a mythological figure. Others believe that the work attributed to him is actually the work of three sages who lived 200 years apart. Studies of the linguistic qualities of the earliest rendition of the Tao-te Ching date it to the third or fourth century BCE. The oldest version was found in 1993, written in Zhuan Chu script in scroll format on bamboo strips and dated to 300 BCE (Henricks).

The poetic text, spare verbiage and ambiguity of the Tao-te Ching leave much room for interpretation when read in its original language. When translated, the margin of arbitrary or erroneous misinterpretation is huge. Even the meaning of its title is call for speculation. Tao can mean the way

ahead; te can mean virtue; Ching can mean scripture. So, the title could be translated as “ The Classic of the Way and the Power,” “ The Great Book of the Way” or “ The Doctrine of the Path and its Virtues.” In the D. C. Lau translation anthologized in our text, the first lines read, “ The way that can be spoken of / Is not the constant way.” In Ursula K. Le Guin’s version, the lines read, “ The way you can go / Isn’t the real way.” In the interpretation of Philip J. Ivanhoe, it reads, “ The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao.”

It is the problem of translation and limit of language that is the point of the first chapter of the Tao-te Ching. Lao Tse is saying that the true meaning of the Tao (the Universal Truth? the Divine Reality?) cannot be expressed in words. Words are not to be mistaken for that which they represent. “ The moment an internally grasped conception gets outside as a verbal expression, it loses plentitude or constancy” (Longxi).

In chapter 70 of the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tse says, “ My words are very easy to know, and very easy to practise; but no one in the world [...] is able to know and able to practise them” (Legge). Our desire to name the Tao, which may spring from our inherent fear of the unknown, keeps us from understanding it at all, and the point of our very existence is to understand the Tao. The Tao, the nameless Way of understanding, transcends naming, as it is the source of all existence and so cannot be spoken of in terms of (other) existence.

Desire itself is necessary, but blinding, says Lao-tse. When we are motivated by our desires, we can see only what we want, the outward manifestations of the Tao, the effect but not the essence. When we are desire-less, we can

perceive the true un-manifested essence of the Tao. Yet, we must “ have desires in order to observe its manifestations” (Fisher, Bailey). Lao Tse says that the manifest and unmanifest Tao “ are the same / But diverge in name as they issue forth.” The divergence that occurs when we abase the Tao with words marks the “ gateway of the manifold secrets.” Beyond, or before, the gateway is the “ mystery of life” (Fisher, Bailey), understanding without words of the source of existence itself, the Tao.

Part II

The concept of Tao and the need to perceive it is central to the religious/philosophical ideology of Taoism. The dualistic nature of Tao is illustrated in the figure of Yin and Yang. It is the combination and relationship of the two opposing forces that produces and operates the universe. Instead of embracing a single aspect of the universe (the good rather than the evil, the light rather than the dark) Taoists embrace the whole. It is in balancing the two forces that virtue lies. As Lao Tse says in Chapter 1, “ being the same they are called mysteries” (Fisher, Bailey). The mystery of the universe is the mystery of the potential in balancing the forces that create and propel it.

The teaching of Taoism works to produce certain behaviors in its followers. The Tao is the effortless way of the universe, which creates and destroys spontaneously. In adherence to Taoism, humans must live spontaneously, emulating the natural universe, ceasing all desiring and striving. Humans must not want anything other than what is, not seek to better their lives nor gain purchase over their neighbors’. Individuals must transcend the state of

desire entirely, becoming incapable of even being associated with or named in reference to desire at all.

This cessation of desire and refusal to act against the given circumstance is wu wei, not doing (Fisher). The individual must practice refuse to act in any way that will create disharmony with the Tao. In not doing any more than is required, not dominating the world around him or striving for more, the individual may attain virtue. In realizing the need for balance between yin and yang and accepting what is natural, the individual can practice enlightened non-action, wu wei.

Taoists seek to live instinctually. The universe functions according to the dynamic order that is the universe, not according to an external system imposed on it. Therefore, attempts to modify human behavior with governmental codes of discipline throw the natural state of man out of balance. The initial effects of strict social order may seem beneficial, in that people are conscious of the lawfulness of their behavior in relation to other people. When threatened with punishment, humans act virtuously out of fear, not out of natural disposition. They qualify their behavior in terms of the human law, not in terms of what is natural. Again, the problem of language is present. In naming behavior, defining it by moral codes, our essence of is further twisted.

Part III

As someone who often has trouble interpreting the empirical data I attempt to process on a daily basis, it is easy to support the idea that the essential truths of the universe are beyond my capacity of (language-based) reason.

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The prospect is both appealing and unappealing. It is appealing in that the responsibility for enlightenment does not rest on my feeble intellect. It seems that Lao Tse instructs the individual to stop thinking and naming in order to observe the underlying, unmanifest Tao. But, he says to be sure to think and name in order to observe the Tao's earthly manifestations so as to develop the desire to know the true essence of it.

I have had moments of a similar awareness of the divine. On occasions when I've witnessed extraordinary beauty and grace, I've been unable to articulate my reaction to and yearning for it. I've witnessed a similar reaction from audiences in the moments after a particularly moving musical performance. These moments are not filled with immediately roaring applause but rather are filled with silence. To me, that silence is a more awesome respect because it does not become skewed with imperfect articulation.

As a recovering addict, I can understand Lao Tse's instructions regarding desire. He suggests, "Hence, always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets." When I was actively engaged with my addiction, I had no perspective on the relationship between my desire and me. So, I had to divorce myself of it. I couldn't go through the process of recovery without admitting my addiction and my powerlessness over it. Simply ignoring the desire would not have granted me reprieve from it. Lao Tse instructs, "But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its manifestations" (Fisher, Bailey).

In contrasting Taoism with Christianity, the concept of desire seems a salient point. Whereas Lao Tse teaches the individual to identify, embrace and allow

desires, Jesus teaches his followers to abandon theirs. He instructs us to leave everything we love, to abandon our lives and follow Him. Jesus taught His followers to pray to God for a release from desire with the words, “ Thy will be done.”

Lao Tse’s uses the image of a gate, the “ gateway of the manifold secrets” (Fisher, Bailey) to illustrate the boundary between human and divine realization. Jesus also used the image of a gate as a boundary through which we can pass from earth to heaven. Saint Peter is often depicted as guarding the pearly gates to heaven.

In Chapter 143, Verse 42 of the Aquarian Gospel, Jesus is quoted as having said, “ The paths of carnal life do not run up the mountain side towards the top; they run around the mount of life, and if you go straight to the upper gate of consciousness you cross the paths of carnal life” (Internet Sacred Text Archive). This language is reminiscent of Lao Tse’s writing, and its sentiment seems remarkably similar.