

NON-BEING AND BEING IN TAOIST AND WESTERN TRADITIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This essay will focus on the concepts of non-being and being in the Tao-tê Ching and Chuang-tzŭ. It will be suggested that non-being is both the most exemplary characterization of Tao and also the criterion for coherence within its various levels of expression. More specifically, I will argue that it is non-being (*wu*) which provides coherence for a natural order of relativism and flux (yet within which can be discerned certain "invariables") and man's response to that order: "non-action" (*wu-wei*). Such a notion as *wu-wei* only becomes possible in the context of Tao that is non-being.

At the conclusion of this analysis a number of comparisons will be made with Tillich's concept of being-itself. While the thought of Lao-tzŭ and Chuang-tzŭ may not represent a philosophical theology in Tillich's sense, I will urge it is not inappropriate to understand their thought as a blend of the mystical with speculative metaphysics that is in some ways very similar to Tillich's. This sense of the mystical is one which allows them to be at once ecstasies and empiricists.¹ Also, while I do not claim Tillich's concept of being-itself is necessarily the most typical representation of the Western notion of God, it is certainly among its more important possibilities. It is my hope that this deliberately comparative approach will be mutually illuminating.

A general assumption which will be made in the paper is this: although there are differences in emphasis in Lao-tzŭ and Chuang-tzŭ, the fundamental conceptions of Tao and Tê, nevertheless, remain essentially the same.² This is justified by the fact that at certain points it is clear that Chuang-tzŭ is expounding on passages of Lao-tzŭ.³ The paper, then, will have the particular form which results from concentrating largely on what Lao-tzŭ and Chuang-tzŭ have in common. Where I make remarks based on what differences lie between them, I will also indicate how Chuang-tzŭ builds and innovates upon what Lao-tzŭ, and, ultimately, Yang Chu has done.⁴

The analysis of these works will proceed on the following basis. It is part of the concept of Tao that it becomes manifest at many levels. With that in mind, I will focus on three: (1) the notion of undifferentiated Tao, (2) Tao in the natural order, and (3) Tao in man. These divisions are purely formal ones, it should be noted, since Tao is equally manifest in all — embraces all in such a way that one level never excludes another.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Aside from the obvious problem of the inaccessibility of the original Chinese — one cannot in any strict sense "exegete" this material — there is also the problem of the wide variety of translations. For Lao-tzŭ I have used primarily Chan, but also Waley; for Chuang-tzŭ I have used Giles.⁵ Legge has served as an occasional back up. In these choices, a desire for flexibility overrode the advantages of using one translator consistently throughout.

NOTE ON HISTORY AND DATING

One of Lao-tzŭ's speculative innovations was an attempt to penetrate the world of appearances and ask how it came to be.⁶ But there were also changes in 4th century China itself that helped cause the kind of absoluteness of qualities attributed to things outside oneself to break down: these included a materially developing culture and a widening view of the world.⁷ Lao-tzŭ precedes Chuang-tzŭ, but no precise dating is agreed upon. Waley dates Lao-tzŭ ca. 240 B.C. Perhaps the best that can be said is that they come from late 4th or early 3rd century B.C. China, putting them in the late Chou dynasty, according to Welch's chronology. There may have been some delay in their acceptance, for Fung Yu-Lan points out that the ideas of Lao-tzŭ became widespread during the early part of the Han dynasty while only during the latter part of the Han dynasty did those of Chuang-tzŭ become popular.⁸ Also, much of Chuang-tzŭ may have been written after his death. Fung Yu-lan indicates that the first seven chapters are generally considered most authentic and that Chapter XXXIII is particularly important because it is an early criticism written by a Taoist writer of some of the philosophical schools of the Warring States period.⁹

(1) UNDIFFERENTIATED TAO¹⁰

In its non-metaphorical sense (the metaphorical sense of Tao being the more commonly understood notion of a way or path, sometimes *the way*), Tao is that about which one can say nothing at all. It is the "Nameless" reality to which no predicates can be meaningfully attached — pure, undifferentiated reality which, all the same, is the source and ground of all being.

1. The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao:
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

(Chan, 139)

14. Its name is The Invisible ... The Inaudible ...
The Subtle (formless) ...

(Chan, 146)

The nature of the Tao that cannot be named is not made the subject of any systematic metaphysical speculation by Lao-tzŭ. Rather, one is merely given a series of fleeting, and not always consistent, glimpses of *representations* of this reality. But like petals fallen to the ground, they may be more or less revealing of some *particular* flower according to the sensitivity and wisdom of the observer.

To say Tao is nameless, then, can mean many things — but primary among them is the sense in which it has no being (is non-being) with respect to its not being a *particular* object. In Aristotelian terms, that is, Tao does not fall under the category of substance.

Objects can be said to be Being (*yu*),¹¹ but *Tao* is not an object, and so may only be spoken of as Non-being (*wu*). At the same time, however, *Tao* is what has brought the universe into being, and hence in one way it may also be said to be Being. For this reason *Tao* is spoken of as both Being and Non-being. Non-being refers to its essence; Being to its function.¹²

The "names" (14. above), therefore, are not names at all for they do not *name* something. At best — for those whom their hearing elicits some response — they can become transparent, functioning as indices which point beyond themselves to a reality that cannot itself be designated. Tao, then, is not a mere zero or nothingness.¹³ However, even if such terms as The Invisible or The

Subtle can be said to "point beyond" themselves, they do not point to something transcendent in the Western sense. Tao is at once an intrinsic aspect of the nature of everything, but also the all-embracing principle by which all things are produced.

1. The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Named is the mother of all things.
(Chan, 139)
40. All things in the world come from being.
And being comes from non-being.
(Chan, 160)
42. Tao produced the One.
The One produced the two.
The two produced the three.
And the three produced the ten thousand things.
(Chan, 160)
21. For the way is a thing impalpable, incommensurable . . .
Yet latent in it are forms;
(Waley, 170)

XII. At the beginning of the beginning, even Nothing did not exist. Then came the period of the Nameless.

When One came into existence, there was One, but it was formless. When things got that by which they came into existence, it was called their virtue [*te*]. That which was formless, but divided, though without interstice, was called destiny. Then came the movement which gave life, and things produced in accordance with the principles of life had what is called *form*. When form encloses the spiritual part, each with its own characteristics [*te*], that is its *nature*. By cultivating this nature, we are carried back to virtue; and if this is perfected, we become as all things were in the beginning.

(Giles, 143-4)

Particularly in Chuang-tzŭ XII one can see an elaboration of how Tao becomes manifest in the empirical world. Tao is prior to existence — one could even say prior to the distinction of existence and non-existence — but there are also present the outlines of a kind of cosmogony. Tao is not a Creator, in any personalistic sense; nevertheless, Tao is the reality from which the phenomenal world emerges. Moreover, while there is one sense in which *that reality* from which phenomena emerge is simply the undifferentiated background conceptually inferred from actual objects which exist (i.e., "stand out" from that background), the image of Tao as "the mother of all things" (Lao-tzŭ, 1), if not explicitly personal, *does* suggest a birth motif.¹⁴

The concept of being coming from non-being (Lao-tzŭ, 40) is perhaps the most perplexing aspect of Tao for Western theism, for even where God is not conceived as a personal creator, God is still clearly a plenum — a fullness of being and not a universal, all-pervading, indestructible emptiness. Although, as I will discuss shortly, Tao is both being and non-being, it is the latter that predominates in the conception. This, apparently, goes far back to the old popular religion of the Shang dynasty from which Taoism emerged. Here there are suggestions of an ancient water goddess who gives birth to all beings and takes them back after death — a movement from non-being (water) to being (matter) to non-being (water) again. Subsequently, this goddess may have been

replaced by a more formalized concept of the undifferentiated background from which existence arises, stands out, and to which it ultimately returns.

For an answer to the question 'how does such a concept arise' one can point to the kind of grammatico-metaphysical argument one sees, e.g., in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* where relationships of linguistic complementarity are used as the basis for metaphysical claims. In this case, it is the notion that existence can only become manifest over against the background of its polar opposite, non-being. This kind of move appears in Lao-tzŭ, 2, for example:

2. When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,
There arises the recognition of ugliness.
When they all know the good as good,
There arises the recognition of evil.
Therefore:
Being and non-being produce each other;

(Chan, 140)

The *complementarity* of being and non-being established here, however, is combined with the *priority* of non-being in other passages:

11. Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,
But it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.
(Chan, 144)
40. All things in the world come from being.
And being comes from non-being.
(Chan, 160)

While these two aspects of Tao (non-being and being complement each other; non-being is prior to being) may seem inconsistent with one another, the Taoist does not see them as so. It is an inconsistency, I will later suggest, not unlike that which attaches to Plato's theory of ideas and which is shared by Tillich's notion of being-itself.

The simplest way of expressing the kind of move made here is to point out that if Tao is understood to be, in some sense, the basis or ground or source of being, then it cannot itself *be* being and therefore must be non-being. (The Platonic strains of excluding classes should be felt here.) It perhaps helps but also deepens the perplexity to add that Tao, as non-being, is not a mere nothing but contains the *potentiality* of all being (that is, Tao as *undifferentiated* being, the formless). Tao as non-being, then, should be understood as meaning *unformed* being in contrast to formed being. One would *like* to be able to say it means this *instead of* the contrast between non-being as nothing vs. something, but it is not so obvious one can rule this interpretation out, and here arises the severest conceptual problem for the Western philosopher. To simply identify Tao with sheer nothingness would seem incoherent. On the other hand, as the formless (cf. Lao-tzŭ 14: "shape without shape") — that is, Tao as itself unchanging but containing all potential change — the concept of Tao is not terribly clear either, because considerable problems arise when the use of the modality of possibility amounts to the claim that Tao is "the potential being" in which all possibilities are universally contained. The consequence of distinguishing Tao from both "a something" and "nothing" in this way is that Tao appears to wind up being identified with "everything that is." Tillich's concept of God as being-itself, in particular, is also not immune from this problem.

The imagery in Lao-tzŭ 11 is taken from the practical, empirical world (the spokes of a wheel, the utility of the carriage), and in many respects, this is the better way to proceed in trying to comprehend Tao as non-being. That is, the

notion of Tao as non-being derives as much from the practical "strategy" of *wu-wei* as that strategy is the conclusion of any philosophical speculation or ecstatic mysticism. Its origin is empirical, not metaphysical, and it is at this point that the non-metaphorical sense of Tao merges with the metaphorical sense of a way of being in the world.

In its metaphorical sense of "the way" Tao clearly has a positive function. What is harder to see is how, in its non-metaphorical sense of non-being, Tao also has a positive function. Nevertheless, it would seem it does, as the following passages suggest:¹⁵

21. The all-embracing quality of the great virtue follows alone from the Tao.

(Chan, 150)

14. These three . . . [The Invisible, Inaudible, Subtle] . . . merge into one.

(Chan, 146)

Perhaps the clearest description of the Tao as a positive first principle occurs in Lao-tzŭ 39, where Tao is identified as the steadfast order of the universe, at work everywhere. Tao is universal ("There is nowhere . . . where it is not . . .").¹⁶ It is eternal and invariable ("It has existed without change from all time . . .").¹⁷ But above all, as Lao-tzŭ 14 suggests, it is "the One" — a cosmogonical unity in which physical (e.g., up and down) and moral (good and evil) contraries are reconciled and disappear.

Tao being the all-embracing first principle through which all things are brought into being, Tao's actions are the actions of all things. At the same time it is through *Tao* that all things are enabled to be all things.¹⁸

The notion of the principle of unity as non-being is ambiguous but intriguing. In the history of Western theology, where God is identified with Being, the problem of its unity arises in the following manner. The conjunction of the concept of God as pure being with a doctrine of creation raises the issue of in what sense there is implicit within that Being the existence of *beings*. That is, within the primordial One there is implicit a plurality. This problem is perhaps most fully elaborated in the Gnostic speculation — e.g., Valentinus — where the emanations from the primordial Being result in a pre-cosmic Fall out of which the created order is formed. From this general structure (primordial unity; created plurality), then, the religio-historical problem becomes how to get created existence back within the domain of the primordial Unity — how to reunite the Creator and the created. Doctrinally, the issue revolves around the question of how to preserve God's sovereignty and uniqueness while at the same time allowing a relation between God and the finite, created order.

What is perhaps so intriguing about a first principle identified as non-being — where non-being has the sense of the undifferentiated primordial substance of the universe prior to the development of interstices¹⁹ — is that the producer of being does not stand over against the universe so clearly as the concept of a God which is identified as a singular existing individual. One might say that the very undifferentiatedness of Tao which "enables all things to be all things" and whose "actions are the actions of all things" makes the question of its unity one that does not really arise. In Western theology the unity of being is a unity within differentia — in which differentia stand in tension with the primordial One. Tao is a unity within differentia, but it is a unity in which the tension of differentia disappears. Tao is self-sustaining, it "exists by and through itself."²⁰ But it is also all-embracing, a unity that is the absence of differentiation, of opposites, thus becoming the principle of order and invariability in the natural world.

2. Being and non-being produce each other;
Difficult and easy complete each other;
Long and short contrast each other;

(Chan, 140)

1. Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety,
And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome.
The two are the same,

(Chan, 139)

The concept of being and non-being *producing* each other is one, frankly, to which I cannot attach a great deal of sense.²¹ Its logical extension in the natural order is perhaps somewhat clearer: viz., the tendency of any action to produce its opposite — "reversion". To achieve X, one starts out by trying to do its opposite. I will return to this doctrine of *wu-wei* in the next section.

The most sympathetic rendering of "being and non-being producing one another" is to see it as pointing to a sense of unity in which differences disappear, and to understand that fully comprehending this demands a viewpoint in which one is looking at things *sub specie aeternitatis*. From such a position there is *nothing* which is valuable or worthless.²²

VI. To Tao, the zenith is not high, nor the nadir low . . .

(Giles, 76)

(2) TAO IN NATURE

Before commencing discussion of the appearance of Tao in the natural order, I want to re-emphasize that these three levels of analysis are neither exclusive of one another, nor are they intended to constitute a hierarchy. Thus, the term "level" will designate nothing more than increasingly confined frames of reference.

In the natural order, the perception of Tao, put most simply, is the perception that there are certain operations and patterns in nature that can be discerned and that represent the order of Tao. Tao *is* that natural order. It is at this point that one runs into one of the more clear cut differences in emphasis between Lao-tzŭ and Chuang-tzŭ. As Chan indicates:

In Lao Tzu, the major notes are constancy and eternity while that of change is but a minor one. In Chuang Tzu, however, change is a main theme. He conceives of the universe as a great current in which one state succeeds another in an endless procession, and in which things are in a perpetual flux.

Life goes on "like a galloping horse". Things not only develop from the simple to the complex as in Lao Tzu (42), but acquire an evolutionary character. . . .²³ Fung Yu-Lan also suggests this emphasis on change in Chuang-tzŭ: "The forms of things, however, are not forever changeless, remaining always as they were when they were created. According to Chuang Tzu, there is never a moment when things in the universe are not in a process of change."²⁴ Thus, in Chuang-tzŭ XXVII we read: "[Things] undergo change from one form to another . . . This is called the Evolution of Nature (*t'ien chun*)."

As I did in the analysis of undifferentiated Tao, I want to argue it is the notion of non-being which provides the coherence of the action of Tao in the natural order. For Tao's "action" in Nature is really "no-action". Tao accomplishes everything by "not-doing" anything.

But if Tao does not *do* anything, how then does it constitute the perceptible order of nature?

34. Great Tao is like a boat that drifts;
It can go this way; it can go that. (Waley, 185)
40. Reversion is the action of Tao. (Chan, 160)
43. The softest things in the world overcome the hardest . . .
Non-being penetrates that in which there is no space. (Chan, 161)
16. Being one with Nature, he is in accord with Tao. (Chan, 148)

In the first place, the order is that of absolute relativism. Tao is this; and it is also that. It is not any more one thing than it is another. There is no intrinsic value to one thing's being long as opposed to another's being short. Tao is non-being; and it is also being. Tao is everywhere. It is in all things: and it is in all things *equally*. This seems to be at least part of what is meant when it is said that the "this" also produces the "that", and the "that" produces the "this", or that non-being produces being and being produces non-being. This reciprocity of action, called "reversion", is the order which permeates the natural world.

Of all the laws underlying phenomenal changes, the greatest is that if any one thing moves to an extreme in one direction, a change must bring about an opposite result.²⁵

Now while this very flux, this reciprocal action, designates a natural order that is always in motion, it is itself, nevertheless, a kind of constant.

Running through the phenomenal change of the universe, the Lao-tzu maintains, are to be found certain principles which may be called 'Invariables' (ch'ang).²⁶

These invariables are the manifestation of non-being and being continually producing each other.

Such a view of the natural order suggests two things about the relationship with man who discerns these invariables. First of all, the perceiver is one who is intimately bound up with the natural order, highly dependent on the regularity of its processes and cycles. Hence, for example, the title of Chuang-tzu XXVII: "Autumn Floods" and its reference to the annual rising and falling of the Yellow River and an agricultural economy more or less set by this natural rhythm. Of course, the imagery of nature abounds in both Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. Second, the co-equal co-production of being and non-being suggests a relationship of mutuality in which nature is neither man's servant nor is he nature's. It is this mutuality that allows the natural to exist at the cosmic level. For while the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of stewardship creates a condition which entails man's superiority and rule over the natural order, Nature, man and Tao exist all on the same level. "Being one with Nature, he is in accord with Tao."

The invariable in nature is not simply its constant flux and reciprocity of motion, then: it is also Tao in its eternal and unchanging aspect. The natural rhythm of reversion (*fan*), also called "return" (*fu*),²⁷ plays an important part in enlightenment in which there is an overcoming of self-hood and a return to the primordial state of undifferentiated Tao, where the opposites of good and evil are reconciled. Thus, the Tao discerned in nature becomes the pattern for man's own life. The invariable of reversion in nature forms the basis of the doctrine of *wu-wei*. This aspect of Tao is that by which Tao does not *strive* to accomplish its operation of the natural world.

The quality which most impressed Lao-tse in the orderly operations of nature was that they are accomplished without effort or purpose. The Tao does everything without doing anything. It is the way of Heaven not to strive, yet it overcomes. It produces and sustains all, yet claims nothing to itself.²⁸ The natural rhythm that does not strive to complete its cycles is identical with the Tao that guides the practice of human affairs. As the producer of the natural order — the source from which the universe springs — Tao has a kind of "agency" in that order. But Tao is also a destroyer of order: more precisely, it is the non-being to which everything will return. Thus, Tao is the power or law that lies behind the possibility of both differentiation or undifferentiation in the universe.

Generally, Tao is taken to be a pre-eminently *impersonal* kind of law:

[Tao] is the laws of nature, the God that exists by the argument from design; not identical with the universe and yet at work everywhere within it. Tao is impersonal, "unkind", and beyond the reach of prayer. It is real, but no more real than the universe it governs. Here are two important contrasts with other mystical traditions. In the West, mystics generally regard the universe as real and God as personal, while most Eastern traditions regard God as impersonal and the universe as illusory.²⁹

What makes me somewhat uneasy with this rather "tidy" analysis is not simply worries about the *comparability* of Tao and God. Rather, I think one should be hesitant to assign complete impersonality to Tao.

Consider Lao-tzu 16: "Being one with Nature, he is in accord with Tao." Man and nature are identified on a cosmic scale by the very principle of Tao. But the possibility of making any such identification must presuppose some mutual sharing of qualities. Being one with nature, man must share the attributes of nature: he must be able to respond to its spontaneity and its impersonal natural cycles. In this sense, man himself is *conditioned* by the impersonal. But oneness is an identity in more than just a single direction. Thus, if man is one with nature, nature must also, in some sense, share the attributes of man. If it sounds odd to think of nature as conditioned by man, one should perhaps remind himself that it is only our Western point of view that makes a radical separation between man and nature, in which personality is assigned to man and impersonality to nature in an exclusive way. But the Taoist does not make so radical a separation. Man is, for him, a part of nature, and nature a part of man.

It is in this sense, then, that one *can* speak of nature as personal, and since the identity is a consequence of the principle of Tao, one must equally speak of a "personal" quality in Tao as well. Part of the awkwardness of this for us is our inclination to think that "the personal" must connote *a* person. But Tao, of course, is not a person. It is not an individual thing in the world at all. Yet while Tao is not *a* person, it is the ground of anything personal. This distinction qualifies any statement which implies that Tao is personal.

For example, while Tao has a kind of agency, certainly Tao is not itself a "willing" agent; it is not a Lord of Creation, exerting a sovereign will over its creatures. Indeed, the way of Tao is precisely one of *not exerting* will over against man and the natural order at all. However, it does not follow from this that Tao is impersonal in a mechanistic sense. Tao is the Invariable; but it is not the mere repetition of patterns. It is the pattern of *this* (human-natural) existence, and that gives it the peculiar character it has. Man "attunes" himself to Tao and to its manifestations in nature, and becomes *one with* Tao. Enlightened man in a sense *is* Tao, but this is possible only because Tao embodies the personal. Tao is

not itself a person, but *is manifest* in persons, and the response of persons to this principle is evidenced in the conduct of human lives.

It is not my intention to gloss the important differences between *Theology* and *Taoism*, but only to point out that those differences are not, primarily, the ones between personal and impersonal. In fact, it is *just because* Tao does not stand over against the world as an objectified Divine Person that allows its appropriation by persons who do not understand themselves as standing separate from the natural world. The differences between *Taoism* and *Theology* mean only that what *counts* as personal in *Taoism* must have its own peculiar mode of expression.

Now some may question the validity of using the category of the personal in an analysis of *Tao* at all. On the other hand, it can be pointed out that the "personal" is not really a category of analysis, but designates the conditions presupposed by all categories. Even if *Tao* is not obviously personal this does not mean, necessarily, that it is "impersonal." It means only that it is something *other* than personal. In any case, it is clear that *Tao* is *not* some impersonal order of nature — some objectified process mechanistically conceived. For this reason it is a mistake to think of *Taoism* as the metaphysical impersonalism it is generally taken to be without first qualifying what "personalism" entails. For *Tao* the personal and impersonal exclude one another no more than do being and non-being. *Tao* is at once personal and non-personal, because from the viewpoint of *Tao* itself, that distinction falls away.

(3) TAO IN MAN

The relativism in the natural order is also present at the level of man's moral and ethical relations. Here perhaps most clearly it is the concept of *Tao* as non-being that underlies and gives coherence to man's activity with man. *Wu-wei* is non-being manifest in man.

Because of the link between man and the cosmic sphere, one cannot take *wu-wei* to be simply the absence of action, a pure passivity, or zero behaviour, as it were. Rather, it must be understood in a positive (or neutral) sense to mean undifferentiated activity; i.e., activity that is in tune with the natural order of relativities — activity that responds to the world of opposites and contrasts by seeking not to obliterate them, but to reconcile them through their profound acceptance.

II. The objective emanates from the subjective; the subjective is consequent upon the objective. This is the *Alternation Theory*.
(Giles, 18)

VIII. Therefore every addition to or deviation from nature belongs not to the ultimate perfection of all [*Tao*] . . . For just as a duck's legs, though short, cannot be lengthened without pain to the duck, and a crane's legs, though long, cannot be shortened without misery to the crane, so that which is long in man's moral nature cannot be cut off, nor that which is short be lengthened . . .

Intentional charity and intentional duty to one's neighbour are surely not included in our moral nature.
(Giles, 101)

Particularly the second passage illustrates how this relativism in man parallels that which exists in the natural order. The same is true of the notion of reversion. "Since phenomenal change is governed by underlying laws . . . the man who knows the Invariable and is enlightened knows that to live in any particular manner, he must begin by living in a manner exactly the opposite."³⁰

What is assumed by this relativism in the moral realm is that everything is right and good with respect to itself; everything has its own inherent goodness. With a relativism as complete as this, one can hardly have set opinions, for one can just as easily take another's as his own. If truth and goodness exist only subjectively, then another's criteria of truth and goodness must be as valid as his own. All, in a sense, are truth tellers, and any deed can be both right and wrong at the same time.³¹ Yet while, for the Taoist, truth is subjective, it is not without reference to a larger sphere in which the contrast between subjective and objective drops out. While *Tao* is individual subjective truth, that is, it also embodies all subjective truths.

2. Therefore the sage manages affairs without action
And spreads doctrines without words . . .
He acts but does not rely on his own ability.
He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it.
It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him.
(Chan, 140)
37. *Tao* invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone.
(Chan, 158)
40. Weakness is the function of *Tao*.
(Chan, 160)
- II. . . the true sage rejects all distinctions of this and that . . . When subjective and objective are both without their correlates, that is the very axis of *Tao*.
(Giles, 18)

These passages display the interpersonal mode of man's response to the world of relativities: *wu-wei*. The concept of *wu-wei*, for example as expressed in *Lao-tzu* 40, often appears deliberately paradoxical. But it would be mistaken to assume from this that there is an inherent irreconcilability, even irrationality, within the concept. Only with respect to those who are unable to discern the manifestations of *Tao* in the world at all is it contradictory. Consider the claim that *Tao* is at once non-being and being. One ever present manifestation of this is the phenomenon of water: simultaneously pliant, fluid, yet strong and powerful. Now it is the ability to apprehend this perfectly ordinary substance in that way which gives universal coherence to *wu-wei*. One can, of course, fail to see those features of water entirely.

In the relations of men, the use of force only defeats itself, since every action produces a reaction. To yield, however, is to be preserved whole. One succeeds by being, rather than by doing; by attitude rather than act; by attraction rather than compulsion. *Wu-wei* means not avoiding all action, but, rather, aggressive action. It means doing nothing unnatural or unspontaneous.³² It is not an attitude or doctrine which can be expressed either in the imperative (thou shalt do . . .) or in the conditional (if one wants . . . one must). Rather, to achieve a certain end, one rejects that very end that initially attracted. One ceases to care whether the world yields to him or not; and for just that reason it will yield.³³

Wu-wei gains its end by not seeking it. It becomes attractive by not striving, by remaining motionless. Psychologically, the idea has the aura of a strategy: without highly delineated expectations it is often the case that one has a better chance of gaining his ends. Expectations and the necessity to *do* something can get in the way and become a barrier to spontaneous and freely motivated action. In fact, the belief that there is always a requirement to do something — so much a

part of the Protestant ethic — is often merely a cover for compulsive guilt. In many instances, the *hardest* thing to do is nothing. But it would be wrong to think of *wu-wei* as nothing more than a strategy.

"Perfect activity leaves no track behind it . . ." ³⁴ quietly, subtly expresses the beauty of an entire mode of being of "not claiming credit for what one does." For the Taoist, a man passes over the earth. He lives there for a time. But he does not disturb the order that he finds there. He becomes one with that order. There is no need or desire to change it, for the patterns of all possible change already exist within it. To change the order is to have lost attunement with it. His part in a civilization that is not static is a motion already set by Tao. He does not die; he vanishes into the order from which he came.

The extension of the non-discrimination of *wu-wei* in the political realm is an implicit criticism of any form of government. If all ways of desiring order and peace are equally valid, then the rule of any government is necessarily artificial and forced. But wherever there is artificiality, the happiness that comes from being in tune with the natural is lost. ³⁵

Another side to the implicit criticism of *wu-wei* against the artificial is emphasized especially by Chuang-tzŭ's distaste for the methods of argumentation in settling what is right and what is wrong. It is impossible to select just one point of view from all there are in the world as the right one. ³⁶ His use of dialogue in his stories continually pokes fun at those formal uses of language. The sage spreads his doctrines without words.

Enlightenment, discerning the patterns of Tao in the natural order, is the pre-eminent mode of man's apprehension of Tao.

16. To return to destiny is called the eternal (Tao).

To know the eternal is called enlightenment . . .

(Chan, 147)

Enlightenment is the inward state in which all distinctions disappear; thus, it is pure consciousness in the barest sense.

Through enlightenment, the cosmic principle of Tao becomes for man an inner law. ³⁷ It is not a state of ecstasy or desire, nor the rejection of desire. It is a return to non-differentiation. It is a pure consciousness in which everything phenomenal has ceased. In this sense, it is consciousness of non-being. ³⁸ If one wants to call this mysticism, one must be careful to add that it is not mysticism of a miraculous or super-sensory sort. ³⁹

The return to attunement with one's own nature in enlightenment is also a state of harmony with nature called "the happiness of Nature." ⁴⁰ Sometimes this state is expressed as a return to a primordial stage of history:

IX. And so in the days when natural instincts prevailed, men moved quietly and gazed steadily . . . For then . . . all creation was one. There were no distinctions of good and bad men. Being all equally without knowledge, their virtue could not go astray.

(Giles, 107-8)

The image here is of a state of "blessed ignorance" in some mythical time before man became caught up in the workings of artificial ethical codes. Man's nature, which was originally kind and mild, has become aggressive in reaction to the *force* of legal and moral codes. ⁴¹ Insofar as self-hood has come to be *defined* by morality, there is implicit in his desire to return to this original state, through enlightenment, a strong element of anti-nomianism. At the same time, this is tempered somewhat by an equally strong strain of tolerance, and an almost Stoic-like acceptance of the way things are.

XVII. The life of man passes by like a galloping horse, changing at every turn, at every hour. What should he do, or what should he not do, other than let his decomposition go on? . . . Those who understand Tao . . . must necessarily apprehend the eternal principles . . . Consequently, they do not suffer any injury from without.

(Giles, 209-10)

The way to Tao begins and ends in harmony with, not rebellion against, the fundamental laws of the universe. ⁴² As Holmes Welch puts it: "To follow nature means being ready to accept her support and her cruelty as one. Gentle rains or spring floods, the havoc of a landslide or the beauty of mountain mist — all are parts of the whole to which the Sage himself belongs." ⁴³

CONCLUSION: TAO AND BEING-ITSELF

In the course of this descriptive analysis of Tao in Lao-tzŭ and Chuang-tzŭ I have argued that although Tao is claimed to be both being and non-being, there is a certain primacy in its identification with non-being. I have also argued that it is misleading to regard Taoism as simply a metaphysical impersonalism — that because of the unity of Tao with both the natural and human orders, Tao must be understood as in some sense personal.

This identification of non-being with an essentially abstract entity that retains a thin sense of personalism has suggested a number of affinities between Tao and Tillich's notion of being-itself. I would like to conclude this essay by making these affinities explicit and comparing Tao and being-itself in terms of six specific theses. ⁴⁴

<i>Being-Itself</i>	<i>Tao</i>
(1) Objects "exist", but being-itself is not an object. Since God is identified with being-itself,	(1) Objects have being, but Tao is not an object.
(1a) therefore, God does not "exist".	(1a) Therefore, Tao can only be spoken of as non-being.
(2) God has created all that exists i.e., being-itself is the ground and source of all being.	(2) It is Tao that has brought the universe into being; Tao is the source of all being.
(3) Therefore, God <i>is</i> being-itself. (Being-itself must be.)	(3) Therefore, Tao is also being.

It might be noted, at this point, that there is a distinct similarity between these three theses and those attributed to Plato's theory of Ideas. This can be briefly sketched as follows: (1) An Idea is never one among the individuals participating therein. (Being-itself, Tao are not objects, do not — in that technical sense — "exist".) (2) But something is F because it participates in the Idea of F. (Being-itself, Tao are the source and ground of all being.) (3) The Idea of F-ness is also itself an F. (Being-itself, Tao themselves must be — "exist" in a non-technical sense.) ⁴⁵ Theses (1) and (3) constitute mutually excluding classes and generate the contradiction for which Aristotle criticized Plato in *De Sophisticis Elenchis*. This similarity can be observed in our primary analysis of being-itself and Tao as well.

(4) Being-itself simultaneously must have being yet does not "exist"	(4) Tao is spoken of as both being and non-being. From the standpoint of Tao, the two are the same.
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- (4a) Being-itself is prior to any question of its existence or non-existence. This is established by Tillich through an epistemology in which being-itself is made the presupposition of all thought.
- (4b) Being-itself is generally treated as a transcendental property inherent in everything that is. Nevertheless, there is also a residual sense in which Tillich regards it as a singular existing individual.
- (4c) Because it is at once transcendent and immanent, all affirmations of being-itself are necessarily in the form of paradox.
- (5) In Tillich's theology, 1a (God does not exist) is the most characteristic representation of God's nature. Tillich believes it is entailed by the doctrine that God's essence and existence are identical, which is what Tillich means by "God is being-itself".
- "God does not exist" is a paradoxical statement about God's nature, not a negative existential.
- (6) The concept of being-itself is primarily abstract and impersonal, but Tillich also feels the personal is necessarily retained insofar as being-itself illuminates the existential, not just the philosophical, side of religious belief.
- (4a) Tao is prior to any question of existence or non-existence. This is established through a cosmogony in which Tao is first identified as the undifferentiated reality prior to the distinction between being and non-being.
- (4b) Tao is formless, undifferentiated primordial substance, part of the nature of everything, but it also retains a residual sense of singularity as the One — the cosmogonical unity.
- (4c) Tao is the "nameless". Hence, all positive statements about Tao are paradoxical.
- (5) The identification of Tao with non-being is the primary example of the paradoxical nature of all statements about Tao. It is not a negative existential. 1a is thus the most characteristic representation of Tao.
- (6) Tao is primarily impersonal, but some qualities of the personal are necessarily retained in the unity of the human and natural orders.

The comparison of Tao and being-itself on these six points gives an indication, I think, that the two concepts share some significant features in common. Perhaps one of the most striking discoveries is not just that both concepts are, in important respects, paradoxical, but that there is considerable similarity in the way they are paradoxical. Clearly there is warrant for further exploration, and the fact that the analysis of such similarities crosses vast historical and cultural boundaries only suggests the need for some kind of deliberately comparative approach in the study of world religions. At the same time, it would be quite misleading to assume that what Tillich has *in mind* is anything like that of Lao-tzū. What we have pointed to is the formal or

structural similarities of two concepts, and any further speculations about the compatibility of minds would have to be shown. That is a question of hermeneutics — just as it has to be *shown* that what twentieth century believers have in mind by the Christ is the same as the writers of the New Testament. In the case of concepts of Tao and being-itself, it is hard to imagine someone intending to identify them as a matter of belief. At best one should discover that it *turns out* that way — and only *in certain respects*. Nevertheless, even the discovery of purely formal resemblances should do something towards breaking down the assumptions we have made about the incomparability of the concepts of Eastern and Western religious traditions.

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1. See Holmes Welch, *Taoism. The Parting of the Way*, (Revised ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 59, where he discusses Lao Tzū's peculiar blend of the mystical and speculative metaphysics.
One might more easily use the term philosophy for Confucius, who uses some methods of Western philosophy, e.g., dialectic.
2. See Fung Yu-Lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. by Derk Bodde (2nd ed. in English; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 175 and p. 223 for a discussion of this.
3. As, for example, the cosmogony in chapter XII of Chuang Tzū (Giles, 143-4) seems to do with chapter 1 of Lao Tzū (Chan, 139).
4. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-3 suggests that Lao Tzū and Chuang Tzū each take Yang Chu one step further.
5. The 2nd edition (1926) would have been preferable but was unavailable.
6. George Foot Moore, "China" in *History of Religions*, Vol. I. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913, p. 50.
7. Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1934), pp. 52-3.
8. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, p. 174.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 410.
10. Cardinal numbers will be used to represent the chapters of Lao Tzū; Roman numerals will represent the books of Chuang Tzū. For convenience, references to translator will be listed by last name and page number under each citation.
11. Chinese characters will be left out of quotes.
12. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, p. 178.
13. cf. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
14. See Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 55 for an outline of this cosmogony.
15. Positive in the Western sense since *wu*, for the Taoist, was quite definitely a positive conception.
16. Herbert Allen Giles (tr.), *Chuang Tzu. Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1889), p. 285.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
18. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, p. 178. cf. also Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
19. cf. Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
20. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, p. 223.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
22. cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-4.
23. Wing-Tsit (tr.), *The Way of Lao Tzu*, (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), p. 20. Chan also feels that Chuang Tzū represents a great advance over Lao Tzū in epistemology and metaphysics; however, I feel one should be hesitant about that judgment.
24. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 180-1.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
28. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
29. Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
30. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, p. 183.
31. Welch, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21 and pp. 33-34.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 44.
34. cf. *Ibid.*, p. 79 in chapter 27 of Waley's translation of Lao Tzu.
35. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
37. cf. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
38. Welch, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-68.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
40. Fung Yu-Lan, *op. cit.*, p. 228.
41. Welch, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.
42. cf. Waley, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
43. Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
44. I am assuming sufficient familiarity with Tillich to make elaborate text references unnecessary. The reader who desires this, or discussion of these claims about Tillich, is referred to my several recent articles on Tillich's concept of being-itself. The most directly relevant to the theory of Ideas is "Tillich and Plato", *Sophia*, Vol. XV, No. 3 (October, 1976), 26-29.
45. In case what is meant by "technical" is not clear, in what I have called the technical sense, the meaning of "... exists" is arbitrarily restricted to connoting the properties of being a finite, concrete spatio-temporal object. That connotation is not part of the meaning of "... exists."

Translations

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CONFIGURATIONS OF JAVANESE POSSESSION EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The cases of trance, possession, and psychosis outlined here will remain no more than stark sketches of the experiences referred to. Description has been compressed so that only muted suggestion touches the powerful emotive substance within them; only brief comments acknowledge dimensions which ought to resonate throughout each case. Within the limits of this essay I can neither hope for the poetic description which might make the cases palpable nor pretend to comprehensive analysis. Instead my aim is simply to elicit suggestions which may strike chords for others engaged in exploring the interplay between experience, conception, and society. My preoccupation lies in that dialectic rather than with dense ethnographic description.

Despite substantial variation in both context and interpretation, all three cases involved possession — at least inasmuch as most Javanese observers viewed events in those terms. The most common Javanese terms are *kesurupan*, literally "to forget", and *ndadi*, which means not only to "trance" but also simply to "become" or to "happen". None of the instances I am dealing with lent themselves to the relatively straight-forward resolution traditional ritual and shamanic procedures have provided. In each case the ineffectiveness of established therapeutic techniques can be linked to conceptual ambiguity, to the presence of several rather than dominance of one cultural framework. The cases also illustrate the Javanese maxim that "insanity is mysticism without *ngelmu*" (science or discipline). Those possessed revealed special insights into rather than lack of consciousness of ordinary reality. The experiences cannot be characterized by terms like "delusion" and "hallucination" so much as by disjunctive interactions with social reality. The problems were generated by the difficulty of communicating profound insights to an audience unwilling or incapable of acknowledging them.

The first case is one of ritual possession in a village context within which everyone shared a relatively clear and homogeneous set of assumptions: that the ritual functioned to propitiate potentially dangerous spirits which might otherwise disrupt communal harmony. Excepting a few Islamic elements, the cultural framework was that of Javanism (*kejawen*), the ageless peasant animism which is rooted in cults of the guardian and ancestral spirits. The second case is more complex. It lies imbedded within the persistent tension between Javanist and Islamic forces. Paradoxically, the ostensible agents of Islamic purism acted in Javanist terms; those apparently representing Javanism adhered to quintessential Islamic practice. In the final case, two Westerners echoed an earlier experience which had been termed psychosis, but not within an Indic-Javanese framework of spiritual quest.

Before introducing the essential features of Javanese spirit belief which