ON LAO TZU'S IDEA OF THE SELF

by Kathleen Johnson Wu

"Tao" may be translated as "principle" or "way." In Chinese philosophy the term is often used to refer to the way of a sage. Lao Tzu gives it a different though related meaning: The way of a sage is not Tao but to act like Tao. But what is Tao? How does one come to act like Tao? I shall clarify the idea of the self that is implicit in Lao Tzu's answer to these two questions and relate his insights to some findings, attitudes, and problems of contemporary science.

That this can be done is seen in how Lao Tzu and some contemporary thinkers try to unify facts and values. Lao Tzu's understanding of altruism is a case in point: Genuine altruism is rooted in a primitive disposition to be useful, and thus it can be learned only through examples of symbiosis in nature. I shall discuss his views on altruism and egoism, and the relation between the individual and the natural environment and the man-made, and other issues of current scientific concern.

Background

The ancient Chinese had a simple religion and scant mythology but extensive historical records. Their imageless God, identified in a physical way at best only by pointing to the heavens above, neither spoke to nor could be spoken to directly by man. Only their ancestors, in spirit form after death, were thought to have the power to attain favors for them; and they were petitioned not by priests but by their own descendants. Indeed no institutionalized religion with a priesthood existed in ancient China.

For moral guidance the Chinese looked to man himself. This practice was rooted in a secure and self-confident outlook expressed in a number of ways in the *Book of Historical Documents*.[1] We find recorded there "God sees as the people see, God hears as the people hear," "the voice of God as the voice of the people," and "if one is sharp of seeing

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and keen of hearing, he becomes a great ruler." All of this is a way of saying that every man is endowed by God with an ability to perceive what is right and wrong and, in this respect, resembles God.[2] This does not mean that each individual's judgment is infallible in all matters or just as good as the next man's; it does mean that a man, when in doubt, can determine fairly well what ought to be done by considering the views and examples set by other men, including those from the past. Thus the ancient Chinese made and kept as a source of moral insights extensive historical records of the thoughts and actions of the common people as well as of their kings and ministers.

During the Spring and Autumn (722-481 B.C.) and the Warring States (480-221 B.C.) periods, the Chou dynasty declined and finally collapsed; the feudal states rose in power and belligerence; and severe disorder resulted in every aspect of life. As a consequence, confidence in the historical records and other long established guides to action was shaken. To the problem of understanding how to stop the disorder and violence, philosophy through systematic theorizing provided a new approach. Beginning in the sixth century B.C. and extending to the end of the Warring States period, numerous philosophic teachings developed and flourished. One of the last schools to emerge was the Legalist. It is credited with the blueprint by which the state of Ch'in reunited China. By implementing a totalitarian philosophy of conquest by force and rule by law, Ch'in brought both the Warring States period and the "golden age" of Chinese philosophy to an end.

The golden age of philosophy began with Lao Tzu and Confucius, philosophers of a very different persuasion from that of the Legalists. They believed that not law but only man at his best—in other words, a sage—could restore order to the people, and thus they gave first importance to the question of how to become a sage. Lao Tzu, who was keeper of the imperial archives in the state of Chou and is recognized traditionally as China's first philosopher, had a deceptively simple answer; that is, to become a sage, one must act as Tao acts.[3]

What is Tao?

Lao Tzu regards Tao as more primitive than anything in terms of which it might be explained and attempts positive description only through suggestive analogies, much as a physicist must describe light. In chapter 25 of the *Tao Teh Ching* he writes: "There is a nebulous formation, born before Heaven and Earth, remote and aloof, standing alone and never changing, circulating about and never ceasing; it could be the Mother of all things, but I do not know its name. I call it by courtesy Tao, and presume to describe it as Great."[4] In other words, although Tao is not a determinable object and has never even been thought of before, nothing is of greater significance. Prior to

heaven and earth, active, constant, inexhaustible, Tao could be the origin of all things, but is otherwise independent of them. Yet, as Lao Tzu makes clear in chapter 34, they are not independent of it: "The Great Tao overflows on every side, right and left. All things depend on it for their being, but without a word it sustains us all. It accomplishes everything, but asks for nothing in return. It feeds and clothes all creatures, but never sets itself up as master." That is, Tao without effort or purpose provides for all ceaselessly and impartially, without intruding, asking for anything, or even making itself known.

What one cannot help wondering about is how Tao accomplishes this. Lao Tzu gives this baffling answer: "Constantly, Tao does nothing, yet does everything" (chap. 37). What he means may be understood to some extent from the following lines in chapter 25: "Man learns from Earth; Earth, from Heaven; Heaven, from Tao. The ways of Tao are just natural." The ways of Tao are unlearned just so—they spring from its being what it is. Like a child who tells you he is doing nothing while occupied but with no particular purpose in mind, no effort exerted, not bothering anyone or anything, Tao does nothing. In order words, Tao does nothing constantly by doing only what is natural to itself, just as a newly hatched chick finds shade.[5] But what are the ways of Tao? And how through these can Tao be conceived of as doing everything? To understand this we must keep in mind that, for Lao Tzu, Tao is the basic reality, the source and foundation of as well as the model for all other realities: "Tao: As it is being used, it is being replenished—perhaps, it can never be full. Deep like unfathomable water, it seems to be the origin of all things. It blunts sharpness, resolves tangles, harmonizes lights, and shares in common the earthly dust" (chap. 4).

How Tao functions as the source of all other realities is not entirely clear to Lao Tzu. For him "it seems to be the origin of all things" for the following reasons. First, Tao is independent of all things, but they are not independent of it. In philosophical terminology, Tao transcends yet is immanent in all things. Second, Tao is not a determinate thing; it is nonbeing. According to one of the rules of the constant pattern discussed in the next section, opposites cannot exist without each other; therefore Tao gives birth to being (determinate things), as being is the opposite of nonbeing (Tao).

Third, it seems that Tao gives each thing its Teh. "Teh" may be translated as "virtue," "capacity," "faculty," or "true nature." The Teh of each being is what makes it distinctly what it is and yet different from all others. Consider, for instance, a fish: Its Teh or capacity or true nature is to swim, but in swimming—because of its Teh—it has a style of its own, which is individual and not transferable. Inborn, a living creature's Teh unfolds but cannot be improved or improved upon. In various respects it is like Tao: "It is born with you, but you

cannot possess it. It does things for you, yet it is not dependent upon you. It grows, but you do not know that it is your master. This is the primal Teh" (chap. 51). One's Teh comes from Tao, as it is only in acting as Tao acts that one fulfills one's Teh. Again and again Lao Tzu uses the image of a child following its mother; putting it bluntly, he writes: "The capacity of Teh is only to follow Tao" (chap. 21). Fourth, viewing Tao as the origin of the character of each thing also provides a way of explaining the interconnections between them. According to Alfred North Whitehead a theory of immanence (such as Lao Tzu's) requires that "the characters of the relevant things in nature are the outcomes of their interconnections, and their interconnections are the outcomes of their characters."[6] This calls for internal relations; and, of course, in Lao Tzu's theory all things are internally related to Tao.

Lao Tzu's appreciation of the uniqueness of living things is widely supported by scientific findings. Even motile microorganisms of the same species have been observed to be "solitary eccentrics in their swimming behavior."[7] His notion of Teh corresponds to some extent to certain contemporary views of genetic inheritance in being able to explain not only physical but also behavioral differences between species as well as individuals of the same species. Moreover, it seems that each thing gets its Teh from Tao through natural forces acting together very much the way that evolution may be thought of as giving each organism its genes, or more specifically its genetically based value-driven decision system, or inherited models of reality.[8] The similarities between the concept of Tao and that of evolution are quite interesting. For instance, like Tao, evolution—at least in a relative sense—may be thought of as the source of the forces which then define it.

How Tao functions as the foundation of being is somewhat less of a mystery. Tao is manifest in being as "the constant pattern," maintaining balance and symmetry among things. It is in this aspect of Tao that it "blunts sharpness, resolves tangles, harmonizes lights, and shares in common the earthly dust." This is done by Tao without intruding or interfering, as it is in the nature of all things to behave according to this pattern. Even Tao itself does. The rules of the constant pattern are discussed in detail in the next section.

These rules, as we shall see, establish a general order but are not fully deterministic. If things fail to fulfill their Tehs, a kind of lawlessness within these laws can be easily conceived. Thus a sort of Platonic "persuasion" is required. This function is filled by Tao's serving as a model for all not so much by what it does but by the way it does what it does, by being all embracing, self-effacing, never changing, and self-sustaining. In other words, Tao by setting up a symbiotic household with being serves as a persuasive model for all things to do the same in relation to one another. This is what Lao Tzu seems to mean by "man

learns from Earth; Earth, from Heaven; Heaven, from Tao." What is learned is the unlearned, what is "just natural," that is, to work together.

What then may be understood more prosaically by the statement that Tao "feeds and clothes all creatures" is that in conjunction with Heaven and Earth all creatures, in virtue of their Teh and in virtue of their following Tao, that is, being symbionts, feed and clothe themselves. Lewis Thomas clearly has a similar conception in mind when he writes that "the earth is a loosely formed, spherical organism, with all its working parts linked in symbiosis" and suggests that "all reflexive responses of aggression and defense [are] secondary developments in evolution, necessary for the regulations and modulation of symbiosis."[9] In writing on evolution in a similar vein Whitehead mentions that "there are its aspects of struggle and of friendly help."[10] It is the aspects of friendly help that Lao Tzu captures in his concept of Tao. This emphasis gives an entirely different ethical aspect to evolution from that popularized under the notion of the struggle for existence and natural selection.

Rules of the Constant Pattern

Lao Tzu neither names, lists, nor specifically states the rules of the constant pattern. They are rather presupposed: the hidden keys to understanding the *Tao Teh Ching* as they are for understanding Tao. I shall mention three which are important to understanding Lao Tzu's conception of the self. The first is that opposites cannot exist without each other not only as concepts but in reality as well. I call this the theory of thesis and antithesis.[11]

As Lao Tzu writes in chapter 2, "it is only because everyone recognizes beauty as beauty that we have the idea of ugliness. It is because everyone recognizes goodness as goodness that we have the idea of evil." The concepts give birth to each other; and so it is with all opposites. They are like two sides of one coin, inextricably linked. This rule has been given wide currency by Claude Lévi-Strauss, the structural anthropologist, who has gathered data indicating persuasively that thinking in terms of opposites is a universal structural organization of the mind.[12] For Lao Tzu, however, reality also functions in opposites. For instance, nonbeing (Tao) gives birth to being (all things). Furthermore, given any pair of contraries, Tao apparently has one if and only if it also has the other: Tao is never changing yet constantly in motion; Tao is all embracing yet remote and aloof; Tao does not set itself up as master, yet all things depend upon it for their being; Tao is as if it is and is as if it is not; and so on. According to this rule, everything ("thing" understood in the broadest sense) is double faced. Lao Tzu gives a number of telling examples. In

chapter 78 we read: "Of all things under Heaven, nothing is softer and weaker than water. Yet, when it comes to the matter of assaulting and wearing out the firm and strong, nothing can be more powerful."

Given the rule that opposites must coexist and therefore cannot be reduced to each other, what happens if such a reduction is attempted? According to the second rule, which I call the theory of Fan Fu (return and reverse), such an attempt will not only fail but also be counterproductive. If contraries are viewed as poles, the rule may be stated as follows: If anything is moving or being pushed toward one of two opposing poles, it will in the process reverse its direction and move naturally toward the opposite. Heraclitus may have had a similar rule in mind when he wrote: "The path up and down is one and the same."[13] Lao Tzu comes close to a clear statement of the rule in "To reverse, that is the movement of Tao" (chap. 40) and in these lines from chapter 25: "To be great is to push further, to push further is to go beyond; to go beyond is to become the opposite."

The theory of Fan Fu has a number of corollaries. One is that in many cases if a certain objective is sought it is better to achieve the opposite first; your original end can then be achieved with minimal effort ("If you wish to have something shut up, stretch it out first. If you wish to weaken someone, strengthen him first" [chap. 36]). The theory of Fan Fu also suggests restraint and moderation once you have achieved your end; otherwise it will be lost. Lao Tzu says in chapter 9: "To hold anything and exhaust its capacity—it is better to stop in time. To have a pointed tip and keep on sharpening—that is no way to keep it long. With a house filled with gold and jade, no guard can be adequate. Rich, high-positioned, and yet arrogant—this is to ask for trouble and blame. To withdraw oneself as soon as success is achieved—that is the way of Heaven." Lao Tzu's appreciation of the absurdity of stressing one value to the exclusion of its opposite is supported in a striking manner by artificial decision systems; experimentation with them has shown that to avoid nonsensical results no values can be either zero or infinite.[14]

The third rule, which I call the theory of Wu Yu (nonbeing and being), also deals with opposites. This rule is that what is there, what *is* rather than *is not*, provides something to work with, to adapt, to take advantage of, but its usefulness depends on what it is not. That is, the usefulness of anything depends on the relations it can have with other things, its potential for combining or working together with other things. This is its nonbeing. For instance, a cup may be made from pewter, paper, or porcelain; it is the emptiness, what is not, within the cup for which there is no substitute and on which its usefulness essentially depends. This principle (usefulness depends on the space within) is followed by Frank Lloyd Wright in designing his buildings.

In *The Natural House* he notes his surprise upon discovering that what he thought he had originated was, in fact, an ancient Chinese theory.[15] As Lao Tzu writes in chapter 11, "thirty spokes of a wheel converge upon one hub; because the hub is void, we have the usefulness of the cart. We mold clay into utensils; because the inner part is void, we have the usefulness of the utensil. We cut doors and windows to make a room; but the room is useful only because its inner space is void. Thus, advantage may be gained from whatever there is; but usefulness comes from whatever there is not."

What is remarkable about Tao—and Lao Tzu stresses this point often—is that its usefulness is inexhaustible. Unlike a bowl that is filled, it is always, so to speak, empty and ready to be used. This is true in its functioning as the origin, the foundation, and also the model for all things. How different Lao Tzu's conception of Tao is from Aristotle's God, who can perform only the highest activity—that of being absorbed in the contemplation of himself, neither knowing nor acting upon the world. For Lao Tzu heaven and earth are also inexhaustible. He describes them as functioning together like a bellows: "Although empty, it is inexhaustible; the more it is pumped the more it gives forth" (chap. 5). The reason he gives is that heaven and earth, like Tao, "do not live for themselves" (chap. 7); they work together. This is the Wu (what is not) on which their usefulness depends. The same is true of man: "Therefore, the sage places himself in a position behind, yet finds himself in the front; considers his body outside his concern, yet his body is kept away from harm. Why is this so? Is it not because he is selfless that his self-fulfillment is made possible?" (chap. 7). In fine, by being humble, unself-conscious, not withdrawn and fearful, but naturally ready to help others, the sage's (indeed any man's) usefulness in life is realized, his destiny fulfilled.

To Become Like Tao

But how does one become "selfless" and thus act like Tao? Lao Tzu states that if one acts only according to one's own Teh, one will be acting as Tao acts. But how does one come to act only according to one's own Teh? Although Lao Tzu, in his cryptic style, does not make this explicit, there seems to be—at least for the sage—two stages in the process. The first stage I call the valley; the second the uncarved P'u.

The objective of the first and preliminary stage is to be like a valley in one's relationship to others. To achieve this Lao Tzu advises: Although you may know how to assert yourself, retreat, strive against nothing; although you may know what is desirable, let someone else take it; keep only what is not wanted for yourself; although you may know what counts as a position of honor and how it can be attained,

do all the work for which no honor is given. In other words, do not be like a mountain peak that towers over the world, takes the sun and rain first, is greatly admired and honored; be like a valley, which strives against nothing, settles for what it gets, and indiscriminately nurtures life. That is, get rid of your preferences, your desires, not by trying to satisfy them but by actually doing the opposite. This is applying the rule of Fan Fu: If you do not satisfy your desires, you will forget them and be free.

In the process of becoming like a valley "the sage does away with what is excessive, what is luxurious, what is complacent" (chap. 29). He denies himself all unnecessary gratification and is alert to his own shortcomings, avoids self-deception as well as self-pride, thus getting rid of his material and psychological postures and props. He then becomes like water, one of the greatest symbionts: "The highest good is like water. Water makes use of everything, and does not strive against it. It stays in such lowly places, that are wanted by none. It approaches the concept of Tao" (chap. 8). In other words, like water, he disdains, attaches himself to, struggles against, or wastes nothing.

Once a person becomes like a valley he enters the second and final stage, that of the Uncarved P'u: "It is only when one becomes the valley of the world that one has fulfilled his constant Teh. This is returning to being an uncarved block" (chap. 28). Before the invention of paper, p'us, which are bamboo blocks, were used. A p'u is written on by carving characters into its surface. Lao Tzu's idea is that, just as a bamboo block loses its natural smoothness by being carved, man's true character is lost by being disfigured. In returning to being an uncarved p'u a person returns to "a state before any promises are shown, like an infant before becoming a child" (chap. 20). Such a person has no conscious preferences, no desire to master, no interest in being anything other than what he is for the moment. Like an infant, who functions through its symbiotic relationship with its mother, he takes for granted that his environment is essential to himself and has no "I," or ego, or personality separating himself from the things around him, so "he who values letting his self serve the world is capable of caring for the world; and he who loves making his self serve the world may be entrusted with the world" (chap. 13). The kind of valuing and loving meant here is, of course, not self-conscious but as natural and immediate as the complex interaction evidenced in mother-infant bonding.

Lao Tzu's sage is a person who cannot be taught and is without a purpose. He is without a purpose in the sense that he has no self-conscious goal; his behavior and mission in life are determined by his Teh, which is not his own creation but given to him by Tao. The idea that he cannot be taught is somewhat more difficult to explain and

seems to rest on a distinction made today between teaching transmitted organically and extraorganically.[16] Teaching transmitted organically comes through nature; that transmitted extraorganically comes through things that are man-made, such as tools, books, and social institutions. Lao Tzu writes: "If you study to acquire knowledge, you add to it everyday. If you study to acquire Tao, you subtract from it everyday. Subtract and subtract until there is nothing to subtract" (chap. 48). Then you get to the unlearned, the "just natural," what "man learns from Earth," that is, what he learns organically.

Indeed Lao Tzu regards man-made artifacts, pursuits, institutions, and relations as sources of disorder and misery: "The more restrictions there are the more impoverished the people feel. The more useful tools the people have, the more disorderly the state is. The better skills the people possess, the more passion-exciting things they produce. The more there are laws and regulations, the more abundant are robbers and criminals" (chap. 57). He recommends this solution: "Discard wisdom, expel knowledge, and the people shall benefit a hundredfold; discard humanism (jen), expel justice, and the people shall return to love of their kind, discard craft, expel profit, and robbers and thieves shall disappear. All things are useful only as ornaments—and they are not adequate at that!" (chap. 19). They fail to improve life fundamentally. They have no functional values, and, since they are counterproductive, they have no ornamental value either.

With his belief that man should preserve an infant's attitude toward the world and shun culture, it is not surprising that Lao Tzu also considers the earliest period of man's history as the best, as a time that man was in harmony with Tao, heaven, and earth and just lived without effort as he ought to live. He explains what happened between those early days and his own time: "When the Tao is lost, the emphasis is on Teh; when Teh is lost, the emphasis is on benevolence; when benevolence is lost, the emphasis is on justice; when justice is lost, the emphasis is on superficial propriety. The idea of superficial propriety is derived from the times when the sense of loyalty and integrity becomes very thin and confusion and disorder result" (chap. 38). In other words, when Tao is no longer followed, man nevertheless tries to express his true character. This can be done, however, only to the extent that he follows Tao. Selfishness develops as a result of not following Tao, and benevolence is taught in an attempt to maintain harmony. The teaching of benevolence is not adequate, so justice is taught. Finally the people, having lost their natural instincts for loving and caring for others, rely entirely on superficial proprieties as guides to actions, and these they manipulate to their advantage. This is possible because they are man-made con-

structs, like a knife, that can be used to help or harm equally. Certainly we have many laws and tedious regulations of this character today.

Lao Tzu's explanation of social disorder has its contemporary parallels. For example, George Edgin Pugh considers that the "history of human evolution suggests that most of man's innate motivating values were designed to operate in a primitive, preagricultural, hunting society" and that man's inability to realize these values in the social environment that he has created may be the very source of his discontent, frustration, and lack of fulfillment.[17] This problem of the incompatibility between a living being and its environment, which Lao Tzu appreciates so deeply, is illustrated tellingly by Biruté M. F. Galdika's reported experience in raising an orangutan as a human being from infancy to "an adolescenct who was not only incredibly curious, active and tool using, but one who killed."[18] An orangutan, one of man's closest living relatives and one of the most intelligent animals living on land, has never in the wild been observed to kill. Galdikas suggested just as Lao Tzu might have, that the orangutan had lost its original nature, having been raised by a human mother and exposed to human culture, and had out of jealousy killed infant orangutans she was then raising. It was a self-conscious, self-seeking, destructive act, which was engendered by an unsuitable environment.

Lao Tzu's Idea of the Self

What now may be said of Lao Tzu's idea of the self? Is it the same as his idea of Teh? The answer may be yes and no. If the self is that which tries to fulfill itself, then a man's self is not the same as his Teh. On the other hand, if the self is that which makes a man distinctly what he is, constitutes what he ought to be (i.e., his personal destiny, his call) and by not trying fulfills itself, then his self is the same as his Teh. As usual, Lao Tzu's language is paradoxical enough to provide grounds for both interpretations. In fact, he seems to have two concepts of the self. To avoid confusion I shall call the self which tries to fulfill itself the outer self and the self which is the same as the Teh the inner self.

There is no question which self Lao Tzu values more. His sage has no outer self but only an inner self. Indeed Lao Tzu considers all evils as springing from the outer self and advises: "Stop the sources, close the exits; one may go through the whole life without toil. Open the sources, hustle with affairs, and one's whole life is beyond rescue" (chap. 52). The sources include any influences that prompt man to abandon his Teh, that is, not to follow the dictates of his original nature. A man takes the exits when he acts under the influence of the

sources; and this is done quite simply, in Lao Tzu's view, once he tries to improve upon life.

According to Lao Tzu all things have unique natures with missions, none of which conflicts. In other words, he sees all things on earth ideally functioning together as a system: a structure of components that, as a group, function together by interacting to achieve a common goal. According to Thomas "no Darwin has yet emerged to take account of the orderly, coordinated growth and differentiation of the whole astonishing system, much less its seemingly permanent survival."[19] This is in effect what Lao Tzu attempts through his concept of Tao: Tao creates, coordinates, and is, in addition, the guiding (and preserving) principle of the system. The mission of each thing is to be a useful component of the system, not to disrupt it, as the common goal of each is the continuation of the system. Man disrupts the system once he has desires that cannot be satisfied by it and alters it to satisfy them. In remaking his environment he incorporates into it material artifacts, customs, rules and regulations, and the like. As a result the original system is distorted. The environment which is most favorable to the fulfillment of his Teh is lost. Moreover, the changes made influence man to make more and more changes in an attempt to satisfy new desires excited by the man-made environment. In other words, as man remakes his environment, he also remakes himself in the sense of developing an outer self: a set of impulses seeking satisfaction that multiply like a cancer. In fine, the outer self disrupts and is destructive of any environment in which it finds itself. Therefore with an outer self the inner self can never be fulfilled. Moreover, viewed as Lao Tzu seems to view it as a set of insatiable desires, the outer self cannot satisfy itself either.

The similarities between Lao Tzu's sage and Abraham H. Maslow's self-actualizing man are striking and may help throw further light on Lao Tzu's idea of the self. Maslow, recognized as having in this century "created a very original and influential theory of motivation," holds that each man has "needs, capacities, and tendencies that are genetically based" and constitute an inner nature.[20] Some of these are shared with members of his species, but some are uniquely his. A man is fully healthy, according to Maslow, if he is able to actualize his nature by letting it grow and mature on its own timetable without interference. Anything which modifies this process is pathological. Thus for Maslow what we call the "outer self" is unhealthy, and he associates it with neurotic needs which by their very nature cannot be satisfied. Basic needs arise out of the inner self and are satisfiable. The self-actualized man has no neurotic needs, just as the sage at the uncarved p'u stage has no desires. Maslow also makes a distinction between coping behavior and expressive behavior, which corres-

ponds very closely to the distinction Lao Tzu seems to be making when he contrasts action with nonaction or purposive action with action without a purpose. For Maslow coping behavior is learned, purposive, motivated, conscious, effortful and attempts to change the environment, whereas expressive behavior is none of these and simply arises spontaneously from the organism itself. Like Lao Tzu, Maslow discusses the suitability or unsuitability of certain environments for the development of the inner self. There are other interesting parallels. Maslow does not, however, emphasize the importance of man's usefulness in relation to his surroundings to the extent that Lao Tzu does. In other words, his analysis is more individual than system oriented.

Thus we can say that the outer self is a manifestation of disorder within the individual and within the Tao-given system, and each individual is a part of the system. The disorder may result in a killer orangutan or in the creation of a philosophical system such as Lao Tzu's. Indeed Lao Tzu might have himself provided this as an explanation of the origin of his own theory. Regardless of what is produced, it will not cure the disorder; in fact, he regards the result of any such effort as causing further trouble of its own. For him the outer self is egoistic and inevitably destructive no matter how "altruistic" its motives. It is interesting that recent results in experimental pathology have shown that many diseases are caused by an intervener and what needs to be done is "to reach in gingerly and simply extract the intervener."[21] This is Lao Tzu's solution: Get rid of the outer self by getting rid of the influences which foster it either by removing them from the environment or, as in the case of a sage, by becoming immune to them.

For Lao Tzu fulfillment of the inner self is not a task or a problem. Each man is born with a nature—his Teh—which develops of its own accord as long as he functions in a way that is useful to the Tao-given, not the man-made, system in which he is born. In doing this one does not live for himself but acts as Tao acts: "To be at one with Tao is to be enduring. Though his body may perish, he is beyond harm" (chap. 6). The idea is that, as Tao is manifest in all things through the constant pattern, a man's inner self should be manifest in his body through all of his actions. The only harm that can be done to the system is for a thing not to have its inner self manifest through it—in other words, for it not to function usefully within the system. A person who is at one with Tao is enduring not because he as an individual will be in any way immortal but because the system will be. Lao Tzu identifies the interests of the inner self with the interests of the system. What is beyond harm, if all are at one with Tao, is the system.

This may seem distasteful if not brutally totalitarian to some, but it provides a useful framework within which to understand the following phenomena. In a study of Gorganaceae it has been shown through a series of experiments that when two individuals of the same species are placed in too close contact the smaller gorgonian disintegrates.[22] Its destruction is regulated by a lytic mechanism entirely under its control. It appears that in these circumstances the gorgonian is genetically conditioned to end its own life at the moment its doing so becomes in the interest of preserving the system. In its last act it acts not for itself but for the system; and thus, in Lao Tzu's terms, it follows Tao and acts in accordance with its own Teh.

The following seems to be an analogous case: Charles Laughlin, Jr., and Eugene G. d'Aquili through their work in biogenetic structuralism have concluded that "depression results from the activation of an inherited (but usually latent) neurognostic structure that aligns 'self' to external reality in a negative fashion."[23] The negative alignment results in withdrawal of the depressed member from the group regardless of whether it is a motherless infant or an aging dominant primate; in the case of the infant it quickly dies. They comment: "Put in a rather brutal 'survival of the fittest' context, any animal whether infant, aging dominant male, or whatever, that cannot exercise some minimal degree of mastery over his environment is a hindrance to the primate groups."[24] And they conclude that depression is evolution's way of eliminating them. But this phenomenon, just like that of the gorgonians, may be viewed in a somewhat different light by following Lao Tzu. The depressed primate may be regarded not as lacking "some minimal degree of mastery over his environment" but rather as being unable, given his place within the system, to function usefully, that is, unable to establish a symbiotic relationship. This is true of the infant, as it can function only through a mother-infant bonding. In the case of others, they, as a result of depression, change their position in the group voluntarily so that they may become more useful. In reacting to their depressions they are all acting in the interest of the group but also according to their own natures. Their behavior is conditioned by their own genes or, as Lao Tzu would say, their Teh.

From this point of view a depressed primate is not sick or to be pitied any more than a disintegrating gorgonian but to be regarded as acting in accordance with its inner self. It acts not in the interest of its own survival or for the satisfaction of an outer self but in the interest of the group. Thus, in a very natural way, disintegrating gorgonians, depressed primates, and many other "pitiful" creatures should perhaps all be regarded as altruistic, as helping out and as fulfilling their inner selves with dignity and integrity rather than as ill treated or as parasites getting their just deserts.

Conclusion

Lao Tzu leaves the idea of God simple and vague, associating it with heaven as the Chinese were accustomed to doing; he develops instead the concept of Tao, attributing the optimal order, which the ancient Chinese believed to have existed, to man's resemblance to Tao, to man's acting as Tao acts. As keeper of the imperial archives, Lao Tzu had a better opportunity than perhaps anyone to study the historical records kept there; and it is reasonable to assume that he read them to seek solutions to the problems of his time. But, unlike Confucius, he concludes, in effect, that their usefulness is only in demonstrating their uselessness; he recommends letting "the people return to knotting cords for reckoning" (chap. 80). For Lao Tzu man as an infant follows Tao naturally and will continue to follow Tao if he can be taught only by actions and not words. Tao is a "doctrine without words" (chap. 2) manifest in all actions, whereas it is man's false constructions of reality expressed in terms of words that lead him astray. Thus neither the written word nor any other human construct is a source of insight into how to act; only action itself can be.

Lao Tzu writes of Tao that it is a "nebulous formation" and never defines it precisely. I certainly will not attempt to define it here but propose as perhaps helpful the following formula with which to replace the word "Tao": that which acts in the interest of being without intruding into the actions of being, or that which helps being without interfering with it. Tao, in the first place, acts in the interest of being by creating all things, assuming, as I think it is reasonable to assume, that being's existence is in its interest. Tao does this in compliance with an internal rule that opposites cannot exist without each other. Moreover, Tao through the rule of Fan Fu maintains a balance between opposites. In this rule Lao Tzu seems to want to cover responses of aggression and defense that are reflexive but required in order for the things in nature, including man, to keep working together in symbiosis. Tao through the rule of Wu Yu acts to preserve being by demonstrating that the usefulness of anything depends upon its being able to combine and work with something else. The usefulness of a cup depends upon its hollow; of a wheel, upon its having a place to fit an axle; of a room, upon its having space for living. Tao is useful in being able to set up a symbiotic household with being, in acting in the interest of being; and the same is true of everything else in nature. In working together and not against anything, everything works for the continuation of the system of being itself. Thus Tao through the rule of thesis and antithesis creates; through the rule of Fan Fu balances; and through the rule of Wu Yu educates and, as a result, preserves.

Tao, in giving all things a Teh, gives them an inner self that in expressing itself seeks symbiosis; this is reinforced by examples all around it. Man is an exception in nature in not seeking symbiosis but in seeking to exploit other things instead. Lao Tzu provides no explanation for why man first turned away from Tao other than that he failed to follow his teacher. Thus we can say for Lao Tzu that it is man's stupidity that has gotten him into trouble, his failure to perceive that in trying to get what appears to be in his own interest he is frustrating his basic need to be useful, deforming his inner self, and creating an outer self that can never be content. The movement away from Tao is accelerated by the changes man makes in nature in an attempt to satisfy his outer self; these changes prevent him from learning the rule of Wu Yu from nature by teaching him a very different lesson instead.

After studying Lao Tzu one is left wondering why Tao made man so stupid, so easily deluded by the fantasies of an outer self. Indeed "to speak right is like to speak the reverse" (chap. 78). Lao Tzu gives us a framework of analysis that is contrary to what was generally taken as common sense in his day, and his times are in many ways very similar to our own. His philosophy provides a new perspective on many attitudes that we take for granted. Consider, for example, the high value we place on our own self-interest. Or think of our present emphasis on rules and regulations or on culture and education. Lao Tzu asks us to take another look at all of these. But what is of greater importance is the framework his philosophy provides for the interpretation of scientific findings which support it. This is undoubtedly why scientists such as Thomas are thinking today very much the way Lao Tzu did twenty-five centuries ago.

NOTES

1. *The Book of Historical Documents* was edited by Confucius and contains documents from the time of Emperor Yao (third millennium B.C.) down to 624 B.C. The authoritative translation, completed in 1865, was made by James Legge.

2. The ancient Greeks also seemed to believe in a moral equation of sorts between man and the gods; but their gods, though immortal and physically more able and attractive, are morally no better than man. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, man, exiled from the Garden of Eden, needs God's intervention for his guidance.

3. The first authoritative history of China, the *Historical Records*, which was composed in the first century B.C. by Ssu-ma Ch-ien, indicates that Lao Tzu was an older contemporary of Confucius and keeper of the imperial archives in the state of Chou. It also tells us that, seeing the decline of Chou, Lao Tzu resigned his office and was going elsewhere when detained by an officer at one of the passes who insisted that he first record his thoughts. Thus under some duress he was supposed to have written his only work, consisting of about 5,600 characters and later called the *Tao Teh Ching*. This account is regarded as accurate by tradition but has been challenged and hotly disputed by some, claiming that there was no such man as Lao Tzu, or that the book was of a much later date, or that it was composed by more than one man. As those who disagree with or dispute the traditional account have not been able to agree on an alternative, the

weight of scholarly opinion is returning to the traditional account as the most reasonable. A very good case can be made for it, but this is not the place here.

4. This is Lao Tzu's only work, a small book consisting of eighty-one short chapters. References are to the chapters in Wang Pi's edition in which the lines quoted occur. These were translated with the help of Kuo-Cheng Wu.

5. David Hawkins, *The Language of Nature* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman & Co., 1964), p. 291.

6. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933), p. 144.

7. Lewis Thomas, *The Medusa and the Snail* (New York: Viking Press, 1979), p. 2.

8. For the concept of value-driven decision systems see George Edgin Pugh, *The Biological Origin of Human Values* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), and for that of inherited models of reality see Charles D. Laughlin, Jr., and Eugene G. d'Aquili, *Biogenetic Structuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

9. Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), pp. 104, 29.

10. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1925), p. 164.

11. For a contemporary view that is quite similar see José Ferrater Mora, *Being and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 6-13.

12. Laughlin and d'Aquili, pp. 105-6.

13. Heraclitus *Fragment* 69.

14. Pugh, pp. 66-71.

15. Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Natural House* (New York: Horizon Press, 1954), pp. 220-21.

16. Hawkins (n. 5 above), p. 275.

17. Pugh, p. 174.

18. Biruté M. F. Galdikas, "Living with the Great Orange Apes," *National Geographic* 157 (June 1980): 832.

19. Thomas, *Medusa and the Snail*, p. 16.

20. K. B. Madsen, *Modern Theories of Motivation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), p. 289; Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 340.

21. Thomas, *Medusa and the Snail*, p. 111.

22. Thomas, *Lives of a Cell*, pp. 9-10.

23. Laughlin and d'Aquili (n. 8 above), p. 183.

24. Ibid., p. 184.