

Preliminary Research on Tao

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Abstract

The understanding and explanation of Tao is not easy since there are various understandings of Tao according to different people, especially when there are differences between language and culture. It is of great significance to do some research on cultural concepts that embody the features of a country's culture most. A reasonable choice of perspective and the quality of analysis are decided greatly by the researcher's cultural awareness, thinking and creativity. In this paper, a series of ideas inspired by Tao, the Chinese philosophy, will be discussed, trying to cast some enlightenment on further and related research on culture and classics.

Keywords: Tao, definition, existence, name, philosophy

1. Introduction

What is the Tao? How should one define the Tao, or does the Tao elude any possible definition? If it exists, what is it like? What are its properties? Is it something real or is it a mere fantasy -- a figment of the imagination? Many scholars have dwelt on this problem in their books or articles.

In the well known incident of the Master who when asked, "What is the Tao?" replied, "Your everyday mind". Some may ask, "If the Tao is nothing more than one's everyday mind, why call it the Tao; why not simply call it one's everyday mind?"

This question is extremely difficult to answer logically. According to Raymond, he thinks, in the first place, it a mistake to interpret the statement "The Tao is your everyday mind" as "The Tao is nothing more than our everyday mind". He hardly thinks that in the statement "The Tao is your everyday mind" the word "is" is meant to equate the two concepts "Tao" and "Everyday mind". He would rather say that the Tao is your everyday mind *and more*. Indeed, in the Book of Tao it is said that the Tao antedates heaven and earth. Now then, does your everyday mind antedate heaven and earth? Maybe it does. At any rate, he finds the statement "The Tao is your everyday mind" extremely enlightening provided, of course, it is not taken too literally (Raymond, 1977, p. 16).

2. Is the Tao Definable?

If the Tao is simply one's everyday mind, why not call it one's everyday mind rather than the Tao? And, for that matter, just what *is* the Tao; how should one define the Tao?

Due to its profound and abstruse connotations, the definitions of Tao are various. In *Dictionary of Classic Chinese* published in 2002, there are 13 definitions of Tao. In *A Chinese-English Dictionary* published in 2008, there are also 13 definitions of Tao. In *A Dictionary of Classic and Contemporary Chinese* published in 2000, there are 25 definitions of Tao.

Some definitions for Tao from these Chinese-English dictionaries are: way, road, path, method, course, channel, guide, lead, doctrine, rule, principle, Taoism, Taoist, line, say, talk, speak, think, suppose, measure word, etc. Explanations about Tao can be also found in English dictionaries published in the West.

In the second edition of *Random House English Dictionary*, Tao refers to, "a. (in philosophical Taoism) that in virtue of which all things happen or exist; b. the rational basis of human activity or conduct; c. a universal, regarded as an ideal attained to a greater or lesser degree by those embodying it."

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In *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of Tao is, “Taoism a. the unitary first principle from which all existence and all change in the universe spring; the unconditioned unnamable source of all reality that transcends being and nonbeing by order of the universe; b. the eternal order of the universe.” It is also defined as, “among the sentences [of Lao Kium] there is one that is often repeated...Tao, says he, or Reason, have produces one, one have produced two, two have produced three, and three have produced all things.”

Some people believe that the real meaning of a term is the sum total of all the uses and all the associations one has with the term. How can these all be captured in one short definition? Therefore, if you really want to find out the meaning of a word like *Tao* -- as meant by the Taoist writers who have used it -- you cannot possibly expect any shortcut like a “definition” to tell you. To understand the true meaning of the term “Tao” one must sample hundreds and thousands of cases in which the term is actually used. And, to understand the concept of Tao, one must also be thoroughly familiar with Taoist poetry and painting (as well, perhaps, as calligraphy) in which Taoistic feeling has found its most concrete and vivid embodiment. In short, to understand the meaning of “Tao” one must be thoroughly steeped in the whole philosophy and arts of Taoism (Raymond, 1977, p. 17).

3. Does the Tao Exist?

Does the Tao Exist? Is it an experience of something real or something existing only in the imagination? Since the Taoists make no claim that the Tao exists, it saves them a world of trouble in trying to prove that the Tao exists. This is really Chinese common sense at its highest (Raymond, 1977, p. 5). As it is shown in the following verse:

*The Tao is above existence
and non-existence.
Existence is for men who
use words
But the Tao does not use
words.
It is as silent as a flower.
Words come from the Tao--
the Tao produces words,
But it does not use them.*

The Taoist is not like the Western agnostic who grants that either God exists or he doesn't, but doesn't know which. The Taoist sees the matter quite differently. He does not “suspend judgment” as to whether or not there is a Tao; the question of the existence or nonexistence of the Tao simply does not occur to him, or if someone presents it to him, he regards it as vague, meaningless, somehow irrelevant and sort of odd.

In this respect, he is strangely like the Western logical positivist, though perhaps for different reasons. If you asked a logical positivist whether or not the Tao exists, he would declare the question “meaningless”. He would first want the word “Tao” to be clearly defined. If the question really has no meaning, as the positivist says, then I would be quite happy, since I can then reply, “If there's no meaning in it, that saves a world of trouble, as we needn't try to find any” (Raymond, 1977, p. 7). And, analogous questions on existence have been asked in other areas and are equally futile.

We might similarly approach the problem of the existence of the Tao. There are perhaps those who would deny the use of the word “Tao” as a noun; they would refuse to believe in the existence of some “entity” called the Tao, but they would nevertheless accept as quite meaningful the adjective “Taoistic”. It certainly should be obvious to all students of Chinese art and thought -- even those with absolutely no metaphysical commitments of any kind--that certain works are more Taoistic than others (Raymond, 1977, p. 9).

Some might say that the Tao is nothing more than the physical universe. But this would seem to miss the crucial point in much the same way as it would to say that a melody is nothing more than a group of sounds. Rather it might be said that the universe bears the same sort of relation to the Tao as the group of notes of a melody bears to the melody itself (Raymond, 1977, p. 20).

4. The Tao Has No Name

When some Taoists say the Tao has no name, then even the one -- with all his Eastern philosophy -- is far too Western not to register a protest. Of course the Tao has a name! Its name is obviously “The Tao”. “If I heard the phrase ‘The Tao is nameless’ rather than ‘The Tao has no name’ was heard, I would have reacted differently”, said Raymond (1977, p. 24).

What is the logical difference between saying the Tao has no name and the Tao is nameless? Logically speaking, there is no difference, but there is a considerable psychological difference. The first statement “The Tao has no name” seems more precise, and insofar as it is precise, is clearly wrong. The second statement “The Tao is nameless” suggests to people something more vague, and insofar as it is vague, it allows all sorts of pleasant and interesting interpretations. In some contexts a good precise statement is called for; in others, a vague statement. It really should be borne in mind that a precise statement, though it often has its place, has only one meaning, whereas a vague statement may contain a multitude of interesting and fruitful meanings (Raymond, 1977, p. 25).

What does the highly suggestive, mysterious, poetic and beautiful statement “The Tao is nameless” mean? It seems that it has all sorts of interesting meanings. Does it mean that the Tao has no name? No, it has already been ruled out. It turns out that the Tao not only has a name, but a perfect one at that!

Indeed, if we identify the Tao with the universe as a whole, this must be the case, for the act of naming the universe is itself an event in the universe, hence the universe is not quite the same after as before the event. A better and more poetic way of looking at it is this: They say the Tao is like a mirror. Well, the act of looking into a mirror certainly changes its state, does it not? When you look into a mirror, it reflects you; when you don't, it doesn't. Would it not be difficult indeed to look into a mirror and see it as it would be if you were not looking into it?

And so it is with the Tao! When you name it, it cannot be the un-named Tao which exists when you don't name it. And this unnamed Tao is perhaps more serene, *more truly itself* than the named Tao. In this sense, the true Tao, the unnamed *Tao* is nameless.

Incidentally, some Taoists have made a distinction between the nameless Tao and the Tao which can be named,

*Nameless, the Tao is the source of
heaven and earth
Named, it is the Mother of all beings.*

In line with this interpretation, it might be more appropriate to refer to the true Tao as unnameable rather than nameless. It is unnameable because it changes in the very process of naming it. Suppose instead of naming the Tao we merely think about it; does that also change it? I suspect it does! Doesn't the universe change whenever we think about it? Of course it does! When one thinks about the universe, the universe contains one who is thinking about it; when no one is thinking of the universe, the universe contains no one who is thinking of it (Raymond, 1977, p. 27).

5. The Tao is Everywhere

Those who think of human beings as somewhat “superior” to ants, grass, and the other things would regard the following passage of Chuangtse as somehow unflattering to the human race.

Tung-kuo Tzu asked Chuang-Tzu (Chuangtse), “Where is that which you call Tao?” “Chuang-Tzu said, “Everywhere”. Tung-kuo Tzu said “You must be more specific”. Chuang-Tzu said, “It is in this ant”. “In what lower?” “In this grass”. “In anything still lower?” “It is in tiles”. “Is it in anything lower still?” Chuang-Tzu said, “It is in ordure and urine”. Tung-kuo Tzu had nothing more to say (Creel, 1970, p. 31).

But one could alternatively interpret Chuangtse's passage not as a deglorification of humans, but as a glorification or beautification -- or even beatification -- of these other things. At least that is the way I reacted to it. Also, In Raymond's view, he does not believe the philosophy of the passage represents a “tough-minded” “view of the universe; rather he believes that it will appear to do so *in the eyes of the tough-minded!* The truly tender-minded will love this passage and see it as beautifully tender-minded. Thus the tough-minded will see it as tough-minded, the tender-minded as tender-minded. Which shows that Chuangtse, being a true sage, is like a mirror -- everyone sees in him his own qualities! (Raymond, 1977, p. 36)

6. Conclusion

There are many concepts like Tao in traditional Chinese culture as well as in other cultures. How should one define the cultural concepts? It is believed that the real meaning of such cultural term is the sum total of all the uses and all the associations one has with the term. How can these all be captured in one short definition? As it is stated in this paper, if you really want to find out the meaning of a culturally-loaded word like *Tao*, you cannot possibly expect any shortcut like a “definition” to tell you.

To understand the true meaning of such term, one must sample hundreds and thousands of cases in which the term is actually used. In this regard, the so-called “definition” of the cultural terms should never be regarded in absolute terms. Therefore, it is important to aim at complete consideration of expression and have a thorough understanding of both languages and cultures when researching on these concepts filled with cultural connotations. This paper is only a preliminary research on the understanding and philosophical thinking of Tao with cultural considerations. It is believed that further research on Tao and more related explorations are still necessary.

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