

Chang Chung Yuan

THE NATURE OF MAN AS TAO*

According to Chinese Taoist philosophy the highest attainment of man is the identity of man himself with the reality of things. This identity is not a concept of mediation nor a rational synthesis of the subjectivity of man and the objectivity of things. It is the direct, spontaneous, unimpeded, mutual solution which takes place in the absolute moment. Identity, here, is no longer a principle or a statement about identity. It is, as Professor Martin Heidegger says, and as I noted previously, „a spring into the essential origin of identity”.¹ This „essential origin of identity” is conceived by Taoist philosophers as the real nature of man.

In our daily life we are constantly drawing distinctions between things. There is movement and quiescence, high and low, life and death, yin and yang, and so forth. These polarities are infinite in number. Taoist philosophers traditionally ask in what way are these opposites related and whether there is any possibility of unity within their diversity. To answer these questions, Lao Tzu in his work, *Tao Te Ching*, says the following:

When beauty is universally affirmed as beauty, therein is ugliness. When goodness is universally affirmed as goodness, therein is evil.²

This idea of mutual opposition also has been pointed out by Hegel: „In every distinguishing situation each pole is for itself that which it is; it also is not for itself what it is, but only in contrasting relation to that which it is not.” „Position and opposition contain both their mutual affirmation and negation. Each finds itself in

* George F. Mclean (ed.): *Studies in Metaphysics*. Volume I. *Person And Nature* (Washington: University Press of America & The International Society for Metaphysics, 1988), p. 139–147.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 40.

² Chung Yuan Chang, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 7.

its opposed other.”³ This „opposed other” formulated by a thing itself, is maintained also by Lao Tzu, who says:

Being and Non-being are mutually posited in their emergence. Difficult and easy are mutually posited in their contemporaries. Long and short are mutually posited in their positions.
...⁴

Although the dialectics of Hegel and Lao Tzu seem to be one and the same, the goals of the two dialectic processes are different. In *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, T. R. V. Murti says that the movement of Hegel’s dialectic is a passage from a lower concept with lesser content to a higher concept with a greater content. It begins with the idea of pure Being which has least content and culminates in the idea of the concrete absolute which is „the most comprehensive unity of all”.⁵ In Lao Tzu’s dialectic there is no elevating movement towards the fixed goal of a comprehensive, rational absolute. Rather, there is a further step which Professor Kitaro Nishida, a leading philosopher of Japan, calls „the selfidentity of contradiction”.⁶ In „the self-identity of contradiction,” the opposites: Being and Non-being or beauty and ugliness are mutually identified within themselves and not in any higher synthesis. Thus, there is no progression toward an absolute beyond all contradictions, but contradiction exists simultaneously with identity. Nishida illustrates this in his work *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*:

At the depth of life there is something which is both negation-qua-affirmation and affirmation-qua-negation. We usually think that something to be physical matter, but mere physical matter can only have the significance of negation in opposition to life. If we understand the ground of life to an ultimate point in such a sense, we must conceive that there is an ab-

³ G. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, trans. by G. E. Mueller (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 118.

⁴ Chang, *Tao*, p. 7.

⁵ T. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1970), p. 302.

⁶ Kitaro Nishida, *A Study of Good*, trans. by V. H. Viglielmo (Japan: Printing Bureau Japanese Govt., 1960), p. iii.

solute affirmation-qua-negation and absolute negation-qua-affirmation in the very depth of life.⁷

This absolute affirmation-qua-negation indicates the simultaneous occurrence of difference and identity. In the second chapter of „Identity of all things,” in the work of the 4th century B.C. philosopher Chuang Tzu, we have:

Construction is destruction. Destruction is construction.⁸

Between construction and destruction there is a difference, but simultaneously construction and destruction are identified. This idea is further developed in the philosophy of Chou Tun Yi, the pioneer of Neo-Confucianist philosophy of the 11th Century.

When moving it is without quiescence and when quiescent there is no movement, such are material things. When moving yet it has no movement, when quiescent, it yet has no quiescence, such is the spiritual reality. But movement which thus lacks movement and quiescence which thus lacks quiescence does not mean non-movement or non-quiescence. For whereas material things do not interpenetrate one another, spiritual reality is the most wonderful of all things.⁹

Therefore to see movement as movement, and quiescence as quiescence is to see the one-sided aspect of nature. But when we see movement in quiescence and quiescence in movement, this is to see the deeper nature of things.

The deeper level of nature is not limited to the identity of opposites; it also applies to the transitional process of affirmation and negation within the polarities, which is a continuous sequence of continuity and discontinuity. As Nishida says, the world of reality contains self-negation within itself. It is the world of reality which both affirms and negates itself, and it is this true world which contains the continuity of discontinuity. In Chapter 18 of his work, Chuang Tzu applied this

⁷ Kitaro Nishida, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy*, trans. by David Dilworth (Tokyo: Sophia Univ., 1970), p. 204.

⁸ *The Works of Chuang Tzu*, Chuan 2.

⁹ Chou Tun Yi, *Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*.

idea of dialectic transition to a rough sketch of a theory of biological evolution. He points out that there is a constant transition in the origin of living things from the germ to plants, from plants to animal creatures, with man finally emerging. Whether this is any real scientific contribution to the theory of evolution need not be discussed here. The illustration does indicate, however, an awareness of the development of living things in nature through the constant dialectic process of affirmation and negation. Thus the real world is the constant continuity of discontinuity.

The dialectic process of constant interaction of continuity and discontinuity was originally conceived by Lao Tzu as a creative one. As he says in Chapter 42 of the Tao Te Ching:

From the Tao, One is created; From the One, Two; From the Two, Three; From the Three, ten thousand things.¹⁰

The numbers used here are simply to indicate the creative process of affirmation and negation or the continuity of discontinuity. To see creativity result from the dialectic process of affirmation-negation is to see nature in action, says Lao Tzu.

For Taoists, nothing in nature exists isolated by itself. Rather, all things are interdependent. Thus, no phenomenon in nature can be truly understood by separating it from other things. However, the interaction of these things as we have pointed out previously is not limited to polar entities. Taoists also apply their organic concept of unity and multiplicity, or oneness, to all things. In Chapter 25 of the work of Chuang Tzu, it states: „When we point to see different parts of the horse’s body, we don’t really have a horse. But when we conceive the integration of all parts of the body, then we have a horse in front of us.”¹¹ This organic concept of unity illustrates the formation of the whole through the interrelation of all the parts, that is, discordant parts unite to form an harmonious whole. When all the parts unify themselves into an organic whole, each part breaks through its shell and interfuses with every other part, each identifies itself with every other one. Thus, one is in many and many are in one. In this way, all particularities dissolve into

¹⁰ Chang, *Tao*, p. 118.

¹¹ *The Works of Chuang Tzu*, Chuan 25.

one and all the parts of the whole disappear into every other part of the whole. Each individual merges into every other individual; it is through this unity in multiplicity that the interfusion and identification of each individuality senses its function in the creation of the whole. This idea has been illustrated by Lao Tzu in Chapter 11 of his book.

Thirty spokes joined at the hub. From their non-being arises the function of the wheel. Lumps of clay are shaped into a vessel From their non-being arise the function of the vessel.¹²

The wheel is the unity of the spokes, and the vessel is the unity of the clay. In Lao Tzu's sense, the wheel can function as a wheel due to the organic relationships among the spokes. In other words, the interfusion and identification of the parts create a functioning wheel, a whole.

The Taoists, however, did not stop there. Although they applied this organic concept to the construction of things, they also went a step further and entered into a realm of the pre-ontological experience through a dialectic negation. As Chuang Tzu once said:

Heaven and earth and I live together. And therein all things and I are one.¹³

This oneness is the product of his pre-ontological experience, which is invisible and unfathomable. This invisible and unfathomable oneness is called the realm of the great infinite. Here there is neither space nor time. It is, in fact, the realm of non-being, which is absolutely free from limitations and distinctions. We have Chuang Tzu's own description of the realm of non-being:

Being is without dwelling place, continuity is without duration. Being without dwelling place is space, continuity without duration is time. There is birth, there is death. There is issuing forth, there is entering in. That through which one passes in and out without seeing

¹² Chang, *Tao*, p. 35.

¹³ *The Works of Chuang Tzu*, Chuan 2.

its form—that is the Gate of Heaven. The Gate of Heaven is non-being. All things spring from non-being.¹⁴

Non-being is the highest unity of all things. In Heidegger's expression this is "the Being of beings in its unconcealedness and concealment".¹⁵ This Being of beings is in the Eastern sense Non-being which is the invisible and unfathomable absolute reality of all potentialities and possibilities of the universe. Therefore, Lao Tzu calls it great, which means infinite, boundless and immeasurable. When we think of this immeasurableness, it gives us some sort of insight into the timelessness of time and the spacelessness of space. It is the absolute moment which opens the secret to the existence of all things, and frees us from previous rational conditioning and limitations. When Lao Tzu called Tao the mother of all things, he referred to the realm of non-being as the primordial source of every beginning, the ultimate reality from which all birth issues forth. Thus Heidegger says in his essay „What is Metaphysics”: „We assert: 'Nothing' is more original than the Not and negation.”¹⁶

However, this primordial non-being cannot be conceived of as one-sided. Its highest affirmation is both absolute negation and absolute affirmation. It is both non-being and being, and, as such, is self-determining both as particularity-qua-universality and as universality-qua-particularity. This basic concept of Taoist philosophy can be illustrated by the notion of creativity and sympathy. When all the potentialities of the absolute realm of non-being or infinity penetrate into every diversity, one embraces all particularities and enters into each. Such a process indicates the great creativity. On the other hand, when all the potentialities of every diversity unite into one, each particularity embraces all the other particularities, together penetrating into the realm of non-being. This process indicates the activity of the great sympathy. From the point of view of sympathy, we see Tao as the synthesis of infinite possibilities and potentialities. This is the unity of particularities or multiplicities. From the viewpoint of creativity, we see Tao as a radiative disper-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Chuan 23. See also C. Y. Chang, *Creativity and Taoism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 35.

¹⁵ M. Heidegger, *On Time and Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 79.

¹⁶ M. Heidegger, *Existence and Being* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1949), p. 331.

sion into the infinite multiplicities and particularities. Thus, creativity goes in the opposite direction from sympathy. In short, „sympathy moves from all to one, creativity moves from one to all. Without sympathy there is no ground for fulfillment of potentialities to support creativity. Without creativity there is no means of actually revealing sympathy.”¹⁷ Since sympathy and creativity move hand in hand, each represents an aspect of the process between one and all, which is the fundamental phenomenon of Taoist organic philosophy.

The metaphysical structure of this sympathy is revealed in the realm of absolute reality in which everything breaks through the shell of itself and interfuses with every other thing. All the multiplicities and diversities of the universe interpenetrate with one another and enter into the realm of absolute reality. In the Taoist ideal community, man makes no artificial effort toward morality, but his self is merged with other selves and all other selves are, in turn, merged into his self. Neither the individual nor the group is consciously aware of, or purposefully directed toward, this. Chuang Tzu’s description of this manner of living appears in Chapter 12 of his work:

They loved one another without knowing that to do so was benevolence. They were sincere without knowing that this was loyalty. They kept their promises without knowing that to do so was to be in good faith. Thus, their actions left no trace and we have no record of their affairs.¹⁸

What Chuang Tzu means by „no trace” is an explanation of the character of identification in the realm of non-being. Men in the realm of non-being maintained their original nature. As he says further:

In the days of perfect nature, men were quiet in their movements and serene in their looks. They lived together with birds and beasts without distinctions of kind. There was no difference between the gentleman and the common man. Being equally without knowledge, nothing came between them.¹⁹

¹⁷ Chang, *Creativity*, p. 77.

¹⁸ *The Works of Chuang Tzu*, Chuan 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Chuan 9.

This world of perfect nature is a world of free interfusion and unification among men and between men and all things. Between all multiplicities and diversities there existed no boundaries, men could work with men and all could share spontaneously. Each identified with others and all lived together as one. Man lived an innocent and primitive life, yet there was no conceit nor selfishness. In this simplicity and purity we see the free movement of the real nature of man. We cannot expect this in a world of artificial morality and intellectuality, full of distinctions and differentiations. Only in the world of absolute free identity does there exist the great sympathy, the universal force of nature which holds together man and all things.

When we regard the realm of non-being as the pre-ontological basis for the fulfillment of the great sympathy, it is to see Tao as the interfusion and identification of infinite potentialities and possibilities. Thus, the realm of non-being serves as the unification of multiplicities and diversities. However, when we approach Tao from the reverse direction, we see Tao as having penetrated into infinite multiplicity and into the manifold diversities of existence. Thus, it is the dispersion of potentialities and possibilities from universality to particularity, and fulfillment of the process of the great creativity. In the process of creativity each particularity reveals the potentiality of all universalities. Chuang Tzu illustrates the idea for us accordingly:

Those who rely upon the arc, the line, compass, and the square to make correct forms injure the natural construction of things. Those who use cords to bind and glue, to piece together, interfere with the natural characteristics of things. . . . There is an ultimate reality in things. Things in their ultimate reality are curved without the help of arc, straight without lines, round without compasses, and rectangular without right angles.²⁰

When inner reflection takes place, it fulfills the process of manifesting ultimate reality in nature. The process is direct, immediate, and spontaneous. The curve simply reflects its curves, the line its straightness. The flower blooms in the Spring and the moon at night shines upon the lake. To see unity within multiplicity is to see infinite potentialities manifested in each particularity. This insight is the Taoist

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Chuan 8.

contribution to the understanding of creativity. Chuang Tzu gives us an illustration of this idea in his example of the centipede. From the relative point of view, the insect, of course, does have its hundred or so different legs. But from a higher point of view, there is a unity of multiplicity. The coordinated movement of all the legs is a manifestation of unity. From this unity we see the centipede as a whole creature. All has penetrated into one and the movement of all, the legs, is an interpenetration of the one into all.

Lao Tzu says:

Obtaining the One, Heaven was made clear. Obtaining the One, Earth was made stable. Obtaining the One, the Gods were made spiritual. Obtaining the One, the valley was made full. Obtaining the One, all things lived and grew.²¹

The One which is possessed by Heaven, Earth, the Gods and all things is the same One, the Tao. In other words, they all embrace the same One, the Tao; and the same One, the Tao, embraces and pervades them all. What is this Tao? According to James Legge, the first English writer who endeavored to give a distinct account of Taoism was Archdeacon Hardwick, while he held the office of Christian Advocate in the University of Cambridge. He thought that „the center of the system founded by Lao Tzu had been awarded to some energy or power resembling the ‘Nature’ of modern speculation”.²² However, according to tradition we often contrast nature with man. Nature in one sense is conquered by man and in another sense conquers man. The dichotomy of nature and man implies their opposition (and mutual destructiveness). Yet, according to Taoist philosophy, while separating himself from nature, man is identified with nature. Instead of considering man objectively in opposition to nature, the Taoist task is to make man retreat into himself and see what he finds in the depths of his being. Thus, the problem of nature is to search for the truth within man himself. In Chuang Tzu’s expression it is the return to *p’o* or the uncarved block. He says: „It is because they had the quality of the uncarved block that they did not lose their original nature. In this uncarved

²¹ Chang, *Tao*, p. 109.

²² James Legge, *The Texts of Taoism* (New York: Julian Press, 1959), p. 59.

simplicity we see the free movement of nature.”²³ In the remote past in China there was an old poem which may serve to illustrate this:

*When the sun rises I work in the field.
When the sun sets I have my rest.
I dig a well and I drink.
I till the soil and I eat.
What has the imperial power to do with me?*²⁴

The author of this poem is unknown, but things with him are just as natural as the water murmuring in the stream and the wind passing through the trees. His experience of pure objectivity is pure subjectivity; they are totally identified. As Nishida says:

To experience means to know events precisely as they are. It means to cast away completely one's own inner workings, and to know in accordance with events. Since people usually include some thought when speaking of experience, the word 'pure' is here used to signify a condition of true experience itself without adding the least thought or reflection. . . . Thus pure experience is synonymous with direct experience.²⁵

This kind of direct experience may be related to a traditional Chinese Buddhist saying:

Do not think of good, do not think of evil, when no thoughts arise, let me see your primary face.²⁶

This primary face indicates the mind before the emergence of the dichotomy of good and evil. It is pure subjectivity, free from the duality of active and passive. It is called the „original mind” by Chinese Buddhists and Neo-Confucianists. When one is aware of one's original mind, one sees one's own nature, or in Chinese: *ming hsin chien hsing*. To be aware of one's original mind and to see one's own nature

²³ *The Works of Chuang Tzu*, Chuan 9.

²⁴ Chang, *Creativity*, pp. 171-72.

²⁵ Nishida, *A Study of Good*, p. 1.

²⁶ Hui-neng, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*.

has been the task pursued by Chinese philosophers for more than a thousand years. Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Ch'an Buddhism, once said:

The person who sees into his own true nature is free when he stands as well as when he does not stand. He is free both in going and coming. There is nothing which retards him, nothing which hinders him. Responding to the situation he acts accordingly, responding to the words, he answers accordingly. He expresses himself taking on all forms, but he is never removed from his self-nature. . . . That is called seeing into one's true nature.²⁷

What has been said by Hui-neng, that we are to see the nature of man through self-identity and contradiction, also is, as I have pointed out in this lecture, the real essence of Taoist philosophy.

NOTES

The essence of Tao was first discussed by Lao Tzu (6th century B.C., China), in the Tao Te Ching or Canon of the Way and its Attainment. This ancient Chinese script was first introduced to the Western world in 1788. This was in the form of a Latin translation which was brought to the Royal Society in London. In 1816, when Hegel lectured on the History of Eastern Philosophy he mentioned that he himself had seen the text of the Tao Te Ching in Vienna. According to him the meaning of Tao 'is nothing, emptiness, the altogether undetermined, the abstract universal, and this is called Tao or Reason . . . it is the highest existence, all determinations are abolished, and by the merely abstract Being nothing has been expressed excepting this new negation only in an affirmative form.' (Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 124, translated by E. S. Haldane) Hegel's interpretation of the meaning of Tao was based upon the Western philosophical tradition, according to which Tao is Reason or abstract Being. In this paper the interpretation of Tao is different from that of Hegel. This paper is a further development of the meaning of Tao which was originally presented at the *International Congress of Philosophy* in Venice and later expounded in my works, *Creativity and Taoism* and *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*, both of which are published by Harper and Row.

²⁷ *Ibid.*