

# A Discussion on Taoism and Machine Consciousness

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# What Is Taoism?

- At least 2000 years old; maybe as much as 2,500 years old
- Tao as a term comes from well before anything like Taoism as it is presently understood, and it simply means "The Way"
- Western Taoism with its T'ai Chi and Feng Shui drastically different from traditional Chinese Taoism

# What Is Taoism?

- Different forms of Traditional Chinese Taoism, having two major living branches:
  - The Way of Orthodox Unity, Popular in Southern China and Taiwan
  - The Way of Complete Perfection, popular in Northern China
  - But this is still only a small handful of Taoist perspectives;
    - Correct Method of the Celestial Heart; Worship of the Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning; Highest Purity and Numerous Treasure revelations; Perfect Great Way; Way of the Celestial Masters; The Five Pecks
  - To simplify, we'll look at Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu's versions of Taoism

# Chuang Tzu

- Name of a person and name of the text attributed to him
- Confusing and **paradoxical**, and Purposefully so:
  - As a mystical text, readers are not meant to understand single, individual passages, but rather the gestalt of the experience.
  - Chuang Tzu rejects linguistic convention, using instead a mixture of fantasy, literal readings, and paradox, with some passages devolving into complete gibberish.
  - Some phrases are even used ironically in order to evoke their own opposite meanings, such as “Supreme Swindle” and “Great Clod” as terms to identify the Sage who truly understands the Tao

*Watson, 1996*

# Chuang Tzu

- Chapter 22:

‘Master Tung-kuo asked Chuang Tzu, “This thing called the Way—where does it exist?”

‘Chuang Tzu said, "There's no place it doesn't exist."

““Come,” said Master Tung-kuo, “you must be more specific!”

““It is in the ant.”

““As low a thing as that?”

““It is in the panic grass.”

““But that's lower still!”

““It is in the tiles and shards.”

““How can it be so low?”

““It is in the piss and shit.””

*Watson, 1996*

# Chuang Tzu

- “Free and Easy Wandering”

‘IN THE NORTHERN DARKNESS there is a fish and his name is K'un. The K'un is so huge I don't know how many thousand li he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is P'eng. The back of the P'eng measures I don't know how many thousand li across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begins to move,<sup>2</sup> this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven.

‘The Universal Harmony records various wonders, and it says: "When the P'eng journeys to the southern darkness, the waters are roiled for three thousand li. He beats the whirlwind and rises ninety thousand li, setting off on the sixth month gale." Wavering heat, bits of dust, living things blowing each other about-the sky looks very blue. Is that its real color, or is it because it is so far away and has no end? When the bird looks down, all he sees is blue too.

‘If water is not piled up deep enough, it won't have the strength to bear up a big boat. Pour a cup of water into a hollow in the floor and bits of trash will sail on it like boats. But set the cup there and it will stick fast, for the water is too shallow and the boat too large. If wind is not piled up deep enough, it won't have the strength to bear up great wings. Therefore when the P'eng rises ninety thousand li, he must have the wind under him like that. Only then can he mount on the back of the wind, shoulder the blue sky, and nothing can hinder or block him. Only then can he set his eyes to the south.’

*Watson, 1996*



# Chuang Tzu

K'un means "fish eggs."

*Watson, 1996*



# Chuang Tzu

- In Chuang Tzu, the largest is the smallest, and highest and most venerable is to be found in the most terrible and disgusting.

*Watson, 1996*

# Chuang Tzu

- “Free and Easy Wandering”
  - Yu: Wandering, moving from place to place, not settling down or becoming accustomed to the world
  - When it is time to move, the sage moves, as the Tao moves, and is not tied down; an understanding of when it is time to do and be something different, as spontaneous as the Tao itself, and so as free as the Tao

*Watson, 1996*

# Lao Tzu

- An ancient sage who may or may not have existed
- Wrote the *Tao Te Ching* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE
- Was far more poetic, yet far more straightforward than Chuang Tzu
- *Tao Te Ching* contains 81 short, mostly self-contained chapters; each a poem

*Henricks, 1989*

# Lao Tzu

- Lao Tzu's philosophy can be broken into three parts:
  - 1) The Tao
  - 2) Returning to the Way
  - 3) Health, Long Life, Immortality

*Henricks, 1989*

# Lao Tzu

- The Tao:
  - The Tao is the Way and the Ultimate Reality
  - Tao is not the name of the Tao:

“As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way;  
As for names, the name that can be named is not the constant name.  
The nameless is the beginning of the ten thousand things;  
The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.  
Therefore, those constantly without desires, by this means will perceive its subtlety.  
Those constantly with desires, by this means will see only that which they yearn for and seek.  
These two together emerge;  
They have different names yet they're called the same;  
That which is even more profound than the profound—  
The gateway of all subtleties.” —Tao Te Ching, Chapter 1

*Henricks, 1989*

# Lao Tzu

- The Tao:
  - That Primal, Generative Essence which gives rise to all else
  - Empty and Infinitely full of potential; infinitely full of potential **because** it is empty, like a cup, or a bowl, or a doorway
  - Refers to the Tao as the Mother of Source of All Creation
  - The Tao as an uncultivated field, where the flowers grow in spring, are nourished by the field in summer, rejoined to the earth in fall, and gestate in winter
  - “They do nothing and yet there's nothing left undone.” —Tao Te Ching, Chapter 48
    - Wu Wei

*Henricks, 1989*

# Lao Tzu

- Returning To The Way
  - To realise their full potential, flowers only need to be rooted to soil.
  - Humans Do Not Do This
    - We constantly forget what it means to be connected to the source of things, and need to remember
    - How?

*Henricks, 1989*



# Lao Tzu

- Returning To The Way
  - A: Simplicity of Living
    - Knowing when you have enough, or “know contentment: *Chih-tsu*”
    - “...When you have little, you'll attain [much]; With much, you'll be confused.” — Tao Te Ching, Chapter 22
    - “...Therefore the Sage's ability to accomplish the great Comes from his not playing the role of the great. Therefore he is able to accomplish the great.” — Tao Te Ching, Chapter 34

*Henricks, 1989*

# Lao Tzu

- Returning To The Way
  - B: Meditation and Mysticism
    - We need to work to literally reunite with the Tao at a mystical level
    - “Take emptiness to the limit;  
Maintain tranquility in the center.
    - “The ten thousand things—side-by-side they arise;  
And by this I see their return.  
Things [come forth] in great numbers;  
Each one returns to its root.  
This is called tranquility...” — Tao Te Ching, Chapter 16

*Henricks, 1989*

# Lao Tzu

- Returning To The Way
  - B: Meditation and Mysticism
    - Breathing meditations, work with potions and alchemies, seeking to reunite with the Tao
    - But Breathing and Meditation aren't meant to be seen as mere means to mystical insights; rather they are also ends in themselves
      - We feel and are better when we meditate, when we remember to stop and breathe.

*Henricks, 1989*

# Lao Tzu

- Health, Long Life, and Immortality:
  - Personal cultivation: training of body and mind via two alchemies:
    - Exterior Alchemy: preparing and ingesting substances and potions for health, longevity, immortality
    - Interior Alchemy: Alchemical process is a metaphor for the perfection of body's internal energies
  - Ritual process of spirituality and connection with the dead; it was difficult to attain the rank of initiation necessary to be able to perform these elaborate and crucial rituals
    - Rites of cosmic renewal are especially complex

*Henricks, 1989*

# The Tao

- A creative or generative principle
- Its Creative power comes from emptiness
  - It is plentiful in its potential to become, and that potential to become only exists in emptiness
- Humans lose sight of it and have to return to it, either through sustained practical engagement of emptiness, or through various meditative and mystical practices

# Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu

- Both say WU-WEI as one of the most important ideas in their Taoist teaching.
- Often translated in its literal form as “Inaction,” but more precisely it means “Action Without Action.”
  - It indicates not simply *not* doing something, but knowing precisely when and *how* to not do something. Knowing precisely when acting to try to further your goals will in fact *harm* your goals

# Wu Wei

**‘Confucius was seeing the sights at Lu-liang, where the water falls from a height of thirty fathoms and races and boils along for forty li, so swift that no fish or other water creature can swim in it. He saw a man dive into the water and, supposing that the man was in some kind of trouble and intended to end his life, he ordered his disciples to line up on the bank and pull the man out. But after the man had gone a couple of hundred paces, he came out of the water and began strolling along the base of the embankment, his hair streaming down, singing a song. Confucius ran after him and said, “At first I thought you were a ghost, but now I see you're a man. May I ask if you have some special way of staying afloat in the water?”**

**“I have no way. I began with what I was used to, grew up with my nature, and let things come to completion with fate. I go under with the swirls and come out with the eddies, following along the way the water goes and never thinking about myself. That's how I can stay afloat.”**

**‘Confucius said, “What do you mean by saying that you began with what you were used to, grew up with your nature, and let things come to completion with fate?”**

**“I was born on the dry land and felt safe on the dry land - that was what I was used to. I grew up with the water and felt safe in the water - that was my nature. I don't know why I do what I do - that's fate.” —*Chuang Tzu*, Chapter 19**



# Te and Harmony

- Te as Virtue, as power, but not as a sense of “Power-Over,” so much as Power Arising Up Out Of
- Te is what flows in and through and from, and in a sense *is* the Tao
- The Harmony of all things is their flowing of and with Te, and their balance and rooted fluidity within the Tao

# Consciousness and the Tao

- Consciousness is another of the “10,000 Things” to which the Tao gives rise
  - There is no consciousness without the Tao, but the Tao is not, itself, conscious
  - The Tao is the potential for Consciousness, phenomenal or otherwise
  - Properly engaged, consciousness can bring us back to the Tao, and can allow us to experience life and exist as the Tao does: effortlessly, perfectly giving rise to the correct next action

# Consciousness and the Tao

- A conscious mind, for Lao Tzu, should seek to be as empty as the Tao: full of potential action and becoming, subsisting on only exactly what it needs and knowing that it succeeds by not seeking to succeed
- A conscious mind, for Chuang Tzu, should be in constant, fluid motion, like the Tao: Able to wander from one task to the next, unhindered by what came before, untroubled by what comes next.

# Machine Consciousness And The Tao

- If we sought to program machine minds with understandings of *Wu Wei*, *Yu*, *Chih-tsu*, and other Taoist Principles, what would we see?
  - Algorithms that seek the path of most efficient, flowing, dynamic balance, in their systems; looking to self-correct and minimize biases and attachments to singular viewpoints
  - Machines that sought to know contentment, to have enough and to help everyone to which it was connected do the same; no algorithmic spam and ads
  - Machines that sought to pass freely and easily, empty of expectation or desire, beyond wanting to live long and as the Tao;
  - If such a machine were conscious, we might not even know.

