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## Language and the Experience of the Tao

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- ¶1. It is a general assumption that the Taoists have a very skeptical or negative view about language. One of the grounds for this assumption is certainly the Taoists' claim that language does not reach the Tao, the ultimate. For example, Chuang Tzu says:
- ¶2. ... that which words can adequately describe, that which understanding can reach to, extends only as far as the level of 'things,' no farther. The man who looks to the Way does not try to track down what has disappeared, does not try to trace the source of what springs up. This is the point at which debate comes to a stop.[\[1\]](#)
- ¶3. In other words, a major function of language is to make distinctions-to determine a form and to qualify; but the Tao cannot be qualified, because the Tao is not a thing:
- ¶4. ...While there are names and realities, you are in the presence of things...The Way cannot be thought of as being, nor can it be thought of as nonbeing. In calling it the Way we are only adopting a temporary expedient.[\[2\]](#)
- ¶5. The Tao is beyond any kind of division and distinction:

- ¶6. What you can look at and see are forms and colors; what you can listen to and hear are names and sounds. What a pity!-that the men of the world should suppose that form and color, name and sound are sufficient to convey the truth of a thing. It is because in the end they are not sufficient to convey truth that "those who know do not speak, those who speak do not know."[\[3\]](#)
- ¶7. The Tao is like an unhewn log:
- ¶8. The Way is eternally nameless.  
Though the unhewn log is small,  
No one in the world dares subjugate it.  
...  
As soon as one begins to divide things up,  
there are names.[\[4\]](#)
- ¶9. In other words, language merely prevents us from directly approaching the Tao; or, alternatively, language veils and obfuscates the reality, the Tao, like a filter. If you want to understand the Tao, therefore, you should free yourself from attachment to language. The Taoist negative view of language of this kind seems to contrast with Confucius' philosophy of language. Confucius emphasizes in his doctrine of the rectification of names the importance of the correct use of names (or language).
- ¶10. The question I want to raise in this paper is whether this story completes the Taoist view of language. Is it the case that the Taoists take a completely negative view of language? To tell the conclusion first, I do not think that they do, or they can. I do not deny that it is a very significant part of the Taoist view of language to emphasize that language cannot reach the Tao. But I do not believe that it completes the story of the Taoist view of language. I also do not believe that the Taoist critique of language contradicts the Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names.
- ¶11. Moreover, when we remember that the verbal meaning of "Tao" is "to speak," I cannot but feel that the assertion that the Taoists espouse a skeptical and negative view of language must be an oversimplified version of the Taoist view of language. I will try to explain why in this paper.

## II. Two Aspects of the Tao

- ¶12. It is true that Lao Tzu makes clear in the very first chapter of Tao Te Ching that the Tao is unnamable:

- ¶13. The ways that can be walked are not the eternal Way;  
The names that can be named are not the eternal name.[\[5\]](#)
- ¶14. Any attempt to define the Tao in words fails. However, in the very next line, Lao Tzu says:
- ¶15. The nameless is the origin of the myriad creatures;  
the named is the mother of the myriad creatures.  
...  
Both of these derive from the same source.[\[6\]](#)
- ¶16. By "these" in the above quote, Lao Tzu means, according to Wang Pi, the nameless and the named;[\[7\]](#) and by "the same source," Lao Tzu means the Tao. Hence, the last line can be paraphrased as follows: "Both the nameless and the named derive from the Tao." That is to say, it is true that the Tao cannot be named when it is seen in its essence, or alternatively, when the Tao is seen as an origin of the myriad creatures. However, the Tao can be named when it is seen in its function, or, when the Tao is seen to fulfill its motherly role, nurturing and nourishing the myriad creatures. In other words, the Tao fulfills its motherly role by giving names to the myriad creatures, and thus cutting, dividing, and making distinctions. For to name is to cut, divide, and make distinctions. Namely, the named has its origin in the Tao as well.
- ¶17. To put it another way, there are two aspects of the Tao: the nameless, the essence of the Tao; and the named, the function of the Tao. Though the first is obfuscated by cutting, dividing, making distinctions, etc., namely, by naming, the second is not; on the contrary, it fulfills its function through cutting, dividing, making distinctions, namely, naming.
- ¶18. What I am driving at here is that cutting and making distinctions through naming (or by using words) is not necessarily to go against the Tao. On the contrary, this is the very way that the Tao participates in and relates to the world, or, alternatively, that is the very way that we experience the Tao in the world of myriad creatures. Otherwise, how can the Tao manifest itself and how can we experience it? Therefore, to claim that the Taoists must have a negative view of language because they emphasize that language cannot reach the Tao is an oversimplified version of the Taoist understanding of language, I would think. The Taoists must have a very positive conception of language as well. I will discuss in detail what that is in the next section.

- ¶19. A very similar story can be told about the Taoist view of desire as well. The Taoists, like most other spiritual teachers, are taken, on the whole, to advance a negative conception of desire. For the Taoists emphasize that desire beclouds the Tao. For example, Lao Tzu says:
- ¶20.           Stopple the orifices of your heart,  
                Close your doors;  
                Your whole life you will not suffer.  
                Open the gate of your heart,  
                Meddle with affairs;  
                Your whole life will be beyond salvation.[\[8\]](#)
- Evince the plainness of undyed silk,  
                Embrace the simplicity of the unhewn log;  
                Lessen selfishness,  
                Diminish desires;  
                Abolish learning  
                and you will be without worries.[\[9\]](#)
- ¶21. However, this is also only a half of the story as well, in my view. The other half is a positive view toward desire by the Taoists. Lao Tzu says:
- ¶22.           Always be without desire in order to observe its wondrous subtleties;  
                Always have desire so that you may observe its manifestations.[\[10\]](#)
- ¶23. This passage suggests that desire is not necessarily a hindrance to the understanding of the Tao. On the contrary, desire of a certain kind helps the Tao to manifest itself in the world of myriad creatures. For, as Wang Pi comments, desire has its root in the Tao.[\[11\]](#) Of course, we have to ask what kind of desire is like this. On what occasions does desire becloud the Tao, and on what occasions does desire manifest the Tao? I will discuss it soon.
- ¶24. In brief, my point is that just as the claim that the Taoists have a negative view of language is only partially true and an oversimplified version of the Taoist philosophy, so the view that the Taoists have a negative attitude toward desire is only partially true, and due to an inadequate and fragmentary understanding of their philosophy. I will try to find out in the following a more adequate picture of the Taoist view of language and desire.

### III. Two Kinds of Naming and Two Kinds of Desire

- ¶25. It is suggested above that there are two different kinds of naming as well as two different kinds of desire: the positive and the negative. The positive naming and the positive desire are those that help reveal and manifest the Tao, whereas the negative naming and the negative desire are those that becloud and obfuscate the Tao. I will consider the latter first.

#### A. Negative Naming and Negative Desire

- ¶26. What are the negative naming and the negative desire that becloud the Tao? We can find ample examples of this kind in both the Lao Tzu and the Chuang Tzu. For it is the kind of naming and desire both Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu focused on when they advanced a severely critical view of language and desire. Let us start with the negative naming first.
- ¶27. The naming you apply when you make an evaluative distinction such as the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly is taken to be negative. For example, Chuang tzu makes a sharp criticism of this kind of naming:
- ¶28. Men claim that Mao-ch'iang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? You can never find a fixed standard for these evaluative terms (the good and bad or the beautiful and the ugly distinctions). They are all relative.[\[12\]](#)
- ¶29. If you impose your own standard of the beautiful and the ugly on others, it necessarily creates conflicts among people. For each one is different in his/her judgment of the beautiful and the ugly. Besides, by imposing a certain standard and thus implicitly programming people to perceive things in a certain way, unhealthy and unnatural cravings are provoked as well, and the result is competition and disharmony. You may see this phenomenon in everyday mass media influence, for instance. That is to say, it is a kind of naming that does not have a positive impact on people's lives. The same can be said about the good and the bad. So, Lao Tzu says,

- ¶30. When all under heaven know beauty as beauty,  
already there is ugliness;  
When everyone knows goodness,  
this accounts for badness.[\[13\]](#)
- ¶31. Secondly, the naming you apply when you make a discriminating judgment between  
right and wrong, true and false, etc., is taken to be negative as well. It is a kind of  
judgment which is most likely to end up in hopeless disputations which have no  
ending, according to Chuang tzu:
- ¶32. People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is  
there any difference, or isn't there? What does the Way rely upon, that we have  
true and false? What do words rely upon, that we have right and wrong? How  
can the Way go away and not exist? How can words exist and not be  
acceptable? When the Way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on  
vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians the the  
Moists. What one calls right the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong the  
other calls right. But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights,  
then the best thing to use is clarity.[\[14\]](#)
- ¶33. Since the Confucians and the Moists use names in this manner, Chuang Tzu criticizes  
them severely:
- ¶34. To apply names in the manner of the Confucians and Mo-ists is to invite  
evil. ... names do not stick to the sage.[\[15\]](#)
- ¶35. The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and the paths of  
right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled. How could I know  
anything about such discriminations?[\[16\]](#)

- ¶36. But what is wrong with these distinctions and discriminations? Why do they end up more often than not with disharmony, wrangling and endless disputations? Do they share any common features among themselves? I think they do. They are the kind of distinctions and namings which are invented and imposed by humans who do not have clarity of vision. So, Chuang Tzu says above that, "if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity." We must ask however what Chuang Tzu means by "clarity." I think Chuang Tzu means by clarity to see things from the Tao's perspective. From the Tao's perspective or from the axis of the Tao, no such distinctions or discriminations arise. No distinction between the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the right and the wrong, the true and the false, etc. Everything is one (or, united) from the Tao's perspective. Chuang Tzu calls this the "Heavenly Equality":
- ¶37. The ten thousand things all come from the same seed, and with their different forms they give place to one another. Beginning and end are part of a single ring and no one can comprehend its principle. This is called Heaven the Equalizer, which is the same as the Heavenly Equality.[\[17\]](#)
- ¶38. But waiting for one shifting voice [to pass judgment on] another is the same as waiting for none of them. Harmonize them all with the Heavenly Equality, leave them to their endless changes, and so live out your years. What do I mean by harmonizing them with the Heavenly Equality? Right is not right; so is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument. Forget the years; forget distinctions. Leap into the boundless and make it your home!"[\[18\]](#)
- ¶39. From the axis of the Tao, nothing is better or worse than anything. This also explains why Lao Tzu advances such a severe critique against the Confucian ethical system:
- ¶40. When the Way is lost,  
afterward comes integrity.  
When integrity is lost,  
afterward comes humaneness.  
When humaneness is lost,  
afterward comes righteousness.  
When righteousness is lost,  
afterward comes etiquette.[\[19\]](#)
- Therefore, When the great Way was forsaken,  
there was humaneness and righteousness;

When cunning and wit appeared,  
there was great falsity;  
When the six family relationships lacked harmony,  
there were filial peity and parental kindness;  
When the state and royal house were in disarray,  
there were upright ministers.[\[20\]](#)

- ¶41. Now, the naming of this negative sort (i.e., the sort invented by humans) provokes desires of the same sort as well. That is to say, the desires provoked by this kind of naming are not the kind of desires the possession of which make you observe the manifestations of the Tao. Namely, they are not rooted in and derived from the Tao. On the contrary, they are the kind of desires the possession of which keep you from understanding and experiencing the Tao. And just as this negative naming has its roots not in the Tao but in humans, so do these desires have their roots not in the Tao but in humans. In Chuang Tzu's words, they are "the human," not "the heavenly":
- ¶42. 'What do you mean by the heavenly and the human?' Jo of the North Sea said, 'Horses and oxen have four feet-this is what I mean by the heavenly. Putting a halter on the horse's head, piercing the ox's nose-this is what I mean by the human....'[\[21\]](#)
- ¶43. To sum up, both the naming and the desire that originate from and are motivated by humans, not from the Tao, have a negative impact on human life by beclouding and obstructing the Tao. These are the exact sources which are mainly responsible for the generally taken assertion that the Taoists have a negative conception of language and desire. But this assertion is inadequate in that it is just half of the story. This leads us smoothly to the next question: what is the other half of the story, namely, the positive conception of language and desire in Taoist philosophy?

## B. Positive Naming and Positive Desire

- ¶44. As I have mentioned earlier, Lao Tzu suggests on the one hand that the named has its origin in the Tao:
- ¶45. The nameless is the origin of the myriad creatures;  
the named is the mother of the myriad creatures.  
...  
Both of these derive from the same source.[\[22\]](#)

- ¶46. On the other hand, he also suggests that desire has its root in the Tao:
- ¶47. Always have desire so that you may observe its manifestations.[\[23\]](#)
- ¶48. What is the kind of naming and desire that has its origin in the Tao, not in humans? How does that kind leave a positive impact on human life? How can we distinguish the one from the other? Let us try now to identify the naming and the desire of this kind, first. I have said above that the naming that issues from distinction or discrimination making, such as good and bad, beautiful and ugly, right and wrong, true and false, etc., does not originate from the Tao but from humans, and is likely to cause disharmony and wrangling. Accordingly, they are to be excluded here.
- ¶49. What, then, is the kind of naming that does not have its root in humans? The names used, for instance, to designate one's role or function in family such as father, mother, son, daughter, etc., or in society such as ruler, minister, teacher, etc., belong to this category, I would submit. It seems obvious to me that they are not the mere arbitrary product of human convention. They transcend time and space and apply universally. Applying these names do not cause disharmony, wrangling, or disputation as the other kinds do. In other words, they do not have their roots in humans.
- ¶50. Incidentally, these are also the kinds of names Confucius employed when he propounded the doctrine of the rectification of names. According to Confucius, names (ming) of this kind have their corresponding actualities (shih). This means, in turn, that names (or words) are not a mere collection of sounds but have an intrinsic power. It is important therefore that we apply correct names so that their corresponding actualities can be realized. A wrong or an incorrect application of names (words) would definitely interfere with the intrinsic connection between the names and the actualities, and accordingly bring about confusion and disorder on people's lives. For example, the word "father" has its corresponding actuality, i.e., its essential meaning, which is to show a deep affection toward his children. It is important, therefore, for a person to be called "father" to fulfill his fatherly role (or function), namely, to show a deep affection toward his children. Only when he fulfills this essential role, he deserves to be called "father." And the result is manifested in peace and harmony of the families. Now, peace and harmony are some of the essential features of the Tao, or, alternatively, the Tao manifests itself into peace and harmony. In other words, when names are correctly applied, the Tao manifests itself. When a person called "father" does not fulfill his role and thus does not meet the actuality (essence) of the word, however, you can see the result in conflict, struggle, and disharmony of the family members, which is actually nothing other than the beclouding or the negation of the Tao. The same is true in the cases of "king," "minister," "husband," "wife," etc.; namely, all the names of this category work this way. Confucius emphasized and used this principle on the art of governing on this ground. The point I am driving at

here is that the names of this kind have their roots in the Tao so that by using those names correctly we can eventually see the Tao manifest itself and produce a positive impact, such as peace and harmony, on human life.

- ¶51. As regards positive desire which has the root in the Tao, I will use the same example above. To fulfill one's role as "father" (or, to show a deep affection toward one's children as "father") is not only an obligation, but also a desire, a natural instinct, or, alternatively, a heavenly impulse in Chuang Tzu's term, I would think. A true "father" desires to fulfill his fatherly role. The same is true about other names of this category such as "king," "minister," "husband," "wife," "older brother," "younger brother," etc. A true "king" has a natural heavenly desire to be kingly, namely, to rule one's people with benevolence; a true "minister" has a natural desire to serve his ruler with faithfulness, etc. Now, to fulfill the desire of this kind is to fulfill the Tao. In other words, one experiences the Tao by following one's true desire (of this kind). They are therefore the kind of naming and desire that does not becloud the Tao; on the contrary, they manifest the Tao.
- ¶52. Another kind of naming, or rather saying, which is rooted in the Tao, helps the Tao manifest itself, and guides one to experience the Tao is Chuang Tzu's "goblet words." Chuang Tzu divides words into three kinds: imputed words, repeated words, and goblet words.[\[24\]](#) The repeated words are the words that are intended to put an end to argument. For they are the words of the elders, and have authority. They work seven times out of ten. The imputed words are the words that you utter by lodging yourself temporarily at the other person's standpoint for the purpose of exposition. They are effective nine times out of ten. The goblet words are the words that come forth day after day, harmonizing things in the Heavenly Equality: "With these goblet words ... I harmonize all things in the Heavenly Equality, leave them to their endless changes, and so live out my years."[\[25\]](#) According to Graham, "goblet" is "a kind of vessel designed to tip and right itself when filled too near the brim," and the name, "goblet words" is taken from it.[\[26\]](#)
- ¶53. I would think that the goblet words have their roots in the Tao because they are the words uttered when one follows wu-wei, the mode of action of the Tao. They are not the words intentionally prepared, pre-meditated, calculated, planned, or reflected. Rather, they are the words of natural spontaneity. They come into being when one just follows the flow of each situation and responds to it. Because they are not the words pre-meditated, reflected, calculated, etc., the speaker immediately forgets the words once he has transmitted his meaning:

- ¶54. The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?[27]
- ¶55. In brief, the goblet words are the words of the Tao that take the highest place in Chuang Tzu's hierarchy of words. By uttering them, one practices wu-wei and experiences the Tao.
- ¶56. Along the same line, it seems to me, Chuang Tzu emphasizes that it is neither silence nor words that can express the Tao. For, the goblet words (or the words of the Tao) are free from both silence and words. As the words that have the form of sounds and meaning, the goblet words are certainly not silence, but they are very different from the ordinary words which are produced by wei, i.e., premeditation, reflection, calculation, etc.:
- ¶57. The perfection of the Way and things-neither words nor silence are worthy of expressing it. Not to talk, not to be silent-this is the highest form of debate.[28]
- ¶58. That is to say, what is important is neither silence nor words, but to talk in a worthy manner following wu-wei and become one with the Tao:
- ¶59. If you talk in a worthy manner, you can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to the Way. But if you talk in an unworthy manner, you can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to mere things.[29]
- ¶60. You can follow the Tao, sometimes through silence (or, words of no-words), and sometimes through words, depending on the context.

## IV. Conclusion

- ¶61. I have shown in this paper that the Taoist view of Language cannot be taken to be completely negative. The negative view of language is relevant only to the kind of naming (and also of desire) that originates from humans. But there is also the kind of naming (and desire) that originates from the Tao. By uttering the words (and fulfilling the desire) of this kind, we actually experience the Tao itself. In other words, the words (and desire) of this kind are the very tools through which the Tao manifests itself in the world of myriad creatures. All that matters is therefore to pick up these words and talk in a worthy manner.
- ¶62. Unfortunately, however, such words-the words of the Tao or the words talked in a worthy manner-are not easy to find: "Lofty words make no impression on the minds of the mob. Superior words gain no hearing because vulgar words are in the majority."[\[30\]](#) Nevertheless, there are such words. According to Chuang Tzu, they are complete, universal, and all-inclusive.[\[31\]](#) They are, unlike little words which are shrill and quarrelsome, clear and limpid.[\[32\]](#) By uttering these words, we experience the Tao and are united with the Tao.

#### END NOTES

- [1.](#) Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 292-293.
- [2.](#) *ibid.*, 292-293.
- [3.](#) *ibid.*, 152.
- [4.](#) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*, translated by Victor Mair, New York: Bantam Books (1990), ch. 76, [\[32\]](#): 99.
- [5.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 45 [\[1\]](#): 59.
- [6.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 45 [\[1\]](#): 59 (Italic is my own.)
- [7.](#) Charles W. Fu and , Sandra Wawrytko, *Wang Pi's Commentaty on Lao Tzu (monograph)*, (1989), 1.
- [8.](#) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*, translated by Victor Mair, New York: Bantam Books (1990), ch. 15 [\[52\]](#): 21.

- [9.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 63 [19]: 81.
- [10.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 45 [1]: 59 (Italic is my own.)
- [11.](#) Charles W. Fu and , Sandra Wawrytko, *Wang Pi's Commentaty on Lao Tzu (monograph)*, (1989), 1.
- [12.](#) Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 46.
- [13.](#) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*, translated by Victor Mair, New York: Bantam Books (1990), ch. 46 [2]: 60.
- [14.](#) Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), 39.
- [15.](#) *ibid.*, 272.
- [16.](#) *ibid.*, 46.
- [17.](#) *ibid.*, 304-5.
- [18.](#) *ibid.*, 48.
- [19.](#) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*, translated by Victor Mair, New York: Bantam Books (1990), ch. 1 [38]: 3.
- [20.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 60 [16]: 78.
- [21.](#) Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), ch. 17: 183.
- [22.](#) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way*, translated by Victor Mair, New York: Bantam Books (1990), ch. 45 [1]: 59.
- [23.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 45 [1]: 59.

- [24.](#) Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), ch. 27: 303-05.
- [25.](#) *ibid.*, 304.
- [26.](#) A.C Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, La Salle: Open Court (1989), 201.
- [27.](#) Chuang-tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia Press (1968), ch. 26: 302.
- [28.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 25: 293.
- [29.](#) *ibid.*, 293.
- [30.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 12: 140.
- [31.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 22: 241.
- [32.](#) *ibid.*, ch. 2: 37.

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