

THE INTERPLAY OF OPPOSITES IN THE *TAO TE CHING*: WHAT MEANING DOES LAO TZU CONVEY?

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In this paper, I will discuss the ontology of opposites, their relationship and how Lao Tzu uses them. I will use D. C. Lau's (Lau hereafter) article, *The Treatment of Opposites in "Lao Tzu"*, as a starting point for this paper. I will also utilize Sung-Peng Hsu's (Hsu hereafter) article, *Two Kinds of Changes in Lao Tzu's Thought*, to discuss the opposites as Lao Tzu uses them in the *Tao Te Ching* (the Lao Tzu hereafter).

In his article, Lau discusses five main interpretations of the relationship between opposites in the Lao Tzu offered by different scholars, such as Feng Yu-lan, Yang K'uan, Yang Jung-kuo and Hu Shih. The first interpretation is that development and decline between opposites, from the lower opposite to the higher and from the higher to the lower respectively, form a circular process. Second, during conflict between opposites the lower or soft will overcome the higher or hard. Third, opposites are interdependent, have a relative and logical relationship. Fourth, the way of heaven does not favor and heaven will side with the good during conflict. Fifth, the higher begins from the lower and the process of development is gradual.

Lau begins his critique by using and building upon the most authenticated theory attributed to Lao Tzu; namely, one should value and abide by the soft. When applying the theory that development and decline forms a circle, one cannot exactly abide by the soft or even the hard. This is due to the fact that in a circular process the soft is regularly becoming hard and vice versa.

Lau then critiques the second theory to say that one cannot abide by the soft to be on the triumphant side during a conflict. When the soft wins, it eventually becomes the hard, which will be defeated by the soft that was originally hard. This will make Soft or lower and hard or higher just "empty terms" (Lau 1958: page 350). Thus, there is, in fact, no soft to abide by since the circular process is continuous.

Lau also critiques the claim that an opposite contains an inner contradiction where, for example, the soft would contain some hard attributes. Lau rejects this as foreign to the Lao Tzu altogether. The Idea of interdependence when abiding by the soft, for Lau, is paradoxical.

In short, Lau believes that when development reaches high enough there will, eventually, be decline. That which is declined, on the other hand, could develop if effort is present but there is no necessity for it. This does not necessitate a circular process. Furthermore, the idea of a circular process, according to Lau, is the result of the influence of similarities between the Book of Changes and the Lao Tzu.

Lau also critiques other views that show misunderstanding of the Lao Tzu. Such a case is where the opposites of good fortune declining to disaster and disaster developing

to good fortune. Lau believes that, here, there is no case of development nor decline. It's just a misinterpretation of the fact that the good fortune could be disguised as a disaster and vice versa. Lau also thinks that if one is to abide by the soft, development is to be arrested where there will be no decline because of the lack of reaching the extreme point prior to declining.

Another misunderstanding, Lau mentions, is how the opposites of victory and defeat between soft and hard are interpreted. His resolution is that the victory of the soft is a different type of victory, which is different from the commonly known victory. It could be called true victory where the soft is victorious in a manner that makes it preserved and everlasting. This is different from what takes place during a circular process where soft will win until it meets its match and be defeated by it.

As a resolution, Lau also reminds us that there is an important aspect of the Lao Tzu that has been overlooked by the professors who made the claims that he critiques. The Lao Tzu was written as a way of life and for preserving life. This is due to the turbulent times during which it was offered as a way of life. On the ethical side, therefore, it was to preserve the individual's life and teach an ethical conduct. On the political side, it is to preserve the state and lead to a successful political system. The individual and ruler, therefore, should be able to understand and know when to stop before reaching an extreme which could lead to decline and disastrous outcomes. Part of this, for example, is understanding how to be content and stop without going too far.

When encountering constant change of political rise and decline, for example, the one that possesses wealth, social and political importance to an extreme degree will not do well in a moment of decline. Not knowing how to be content, before it's too late, will most likely cause severe losses including the loss of one's life. Since this goes against the human nature of constantly wanting more, it is difficult for most to live by Lao Tzu's teachings even if they knew the meaning of his words. The sage, therefore, knows and understands when and how to be content and survive disasters. The same applies for the ruler who puts himself below the people and follows heaven's way.

Lau, in addition, thinks that when Heaven is mentioned, it's a way for the ruler. It's a representation of the political Tao. Abiding by it will preserve the individual and country. Heaven will side with the good and so is the ruler/sage.

Lau does not think that the relationship between opposites as logical is present in the Lao Tzu. In fact, such notion is sophisticated and is not "typical of Lao Tzu" (Lau 1958: page 360).

I agree that the relationship between opposites does not constitute a circular process; I agree that the relationship between opposites is not logical; I agree that certain Laoian concepts, such as heaven, victory, defeat, good fortune and disaster, have been misunderstood; I agree with Lau's resolution to such misunderstandings; I agree that abiding by the soft is the Laoian way; and I agree that Lao Tzu's ideology is a way of life ethically, politically and for preserving one's life. I, however, disagree and think that

opposites are interpolar when it comes to the Laoian view. I also believe that there is a higher understanding of the Lao Tzu that the mentioned scholars, including Lau, have overlooked. In order to reach such understanding, I will discuss opposites phenomenologically, ontologically and how they stand in relation to the *Tao* in which they are manifestations of.

There are many opposites mentioned in the Lao Tzu. Some are: being and non-being, difficult and easy, long and short. The list goes on. I think it would be very helpful to have all Laoian opposites listed and classified by type, but this is not the purpose of this paper.

Generally speaking, opposites exist both theoretically and/or tangibly. For example, love and despise exist theoretically and they are emotional opposites (Chan 1963: chapter 17). Good and evil also exist theoretically and they are moral opposites (Chan 1963: chapter 2). Mother and father exist tangibly and they are physical opposites (Wu 1989: Chapters 1, 4).

Laoian opposites exist as interpolarities. During a conflict, for example, abiding by the soft is advised because the soft will be victorious over the hard. According to Lau, this is due because this is true victory where the soft is victorious, not only in prevailing but also in being preserved (Lau 1958: page 356). The interaction between soft and hard and victory and defeat is not possible without interdependence. This also makes them interpolar, as we shall see next.

When we take the *taijitu* symbol of Taoism, we can see that the *yin* has some *yang* in it and vice versa. This is due to their manifestation from a higher oneness or unity; *Tao*. When we take a physical example, like a bamboo, the same can be realized. During a windy storm, the bamboo can be victorious because of its softness that yields to the storm and returns to its original erection after the storm passes. This softness is its actual enduring hardness that allowed it to be victorious in what seemed to be like a yielding defeat. In addition, this is the bamboo's way of not competing, but instead, it embraces the wind!

Chapter 22, similarly, amplifies the idea of this true victory and shows that Lao Tzu views opposites as interpolar. It is this noncompetitive true victory that is also the way of the sage:

To yield is to be preserved whole. To be bent is to become straight. To be empty is to be full. To be worn out is to be renewed. To have little is to possess. To have plenty is to be perplexed. Therefore the sage embraces the One And becomes the model of the world. He does not justify himself; therefore he becomes prominent. He does not boast of himself; therefore he is given credit. He does not brag; therefore he can endure for long. It is precisely because he does not compete that the world cannot compete with him. Is the ancient saying, "To yield is to be preserved whole," empty

words? Truly he will be preserved and (prominence and credit) will come to him (Chan 1963: chapter 22).

Chapter 11 also shows how interpolarities relate:

Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends. Clay is molded to form a utensil, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends. Doors and windows are cut out to make a room, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends. Therefore turn being into advantage, and turn non-being into utility (Chan 1963: chapter 11).

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub, it is the center hole that makes it useful. Shape clay into a vessel, it is the space within that makes it useful. Cut doors and windows for a room, it is the holes which make it useful. Therefore profit comes from what is there, usefulness from what is not there (Boisen 1996: chapter 11).

It is obvious, from the quotes, that opposites functionally co-exist. Being and non-being, for example, give rise to each other and co-constitute a higher unity that goes beyond them. They phenomenologically interplay in a structural manner of a more complex whole. Their distinctiveness can be understood and known cognitively as a phenomenological result. From an intuitive stand point, they are inter-polar. This inter-polarity is an intuitive realization of the whole.

To explain the relationship between opposites, I would like to borrow an idea from dialogal phenomenology. I would like to say that the relationship between opposites is reciprocal and not necessarily symmetrical (Strasser 1969: page 56). I take this stand against the idea that the relationship between opposites forms a circular process.

The idea that the relationship between two opposites is reciprocal and not necessarily symmetrical allow for the understanding of the dynamic nature of interplay of inter-polarities. This dynamic nature can only be harmonious if the interplay of inter-polarities follows *tzu-jan*. If not, the relationship between opposites becomes non-harmonious and the results can be devastating. This is because Tao, which opposites are manifestations of, is fully dynamic (Hsu 1977: page 2).

Chapter 25 of the Lao Tzu, as translated by Hsu, describes how things are during a harmonious state:

Man Models himself after Earth. Earth models itself after Heaven. Heaven models itself after *Tao*. *Tao* Models itself after *tzu-jan* (Hsu 1977: page 1).

Chan translates *tzu-jan* to “nature” (Chan 1963: chapter 25), Feng & English translate it to “what is natural” (Boisen 1996: chapter 25), Phan thinks of it as “that which is natural”

(Phan 2002: page 25), and Waley translates it to “self-so” (Boisen 1996: chapter 25). I like to think of *tzu-jan* as the innate authentic spontaneous way of being.

Tzu-jan, as the innate authentic spontaneous way of being, is not only what *Tao* models itself after, but it’s also a way of being of all things. Part of this way of being, for Lao Tzu, is *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei* is actionless action and it is the way of the *Tao* (Phan 2002: page 172). The Kollers describe it as follows:

Examining the workings of things in their natural conditions, Lao Tzu, observes that nonaction (*wu wei*) is what they inherit from the *Tao* as their function. He says, “*Tao* invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone” (chap. 37). What he means by “no action” is not straining and contriving to accomplish, but letting things be accomplished in a natural and spontaneous way (Koller 1998: page 273).

For Lao Tzu, the sage acts in accord with her/his *tzu-jan*, within the respectful understanding of everything’s *tzu-jan* and according to *wu-wei*. The first half of chapter 55 describes such a way of being:

He who possesses virtue in abundance May be compared to an infant. Poisonous insects will not sting him. Fierce beasts will not seize him. Birds of prey will not strike him. His bones are weak, his sinews tender, but his grasp is firm. He does not yet know the union of male and female, But his organ is aroused, This means that his essence is at its height. He may cry all day without becoming hoarse, This means that his (natural) harmony is perfect. To know harmony means to be in accord with the eternal. To be in accord with the eternal means to be enlightened (Chan 1963: chapter 55).

Unlike a human being who could have a choice, things are already naturalistically and ontologically following these functions of the *Tao* (*tzu-jan* and *wu-wei*). This includes the interplay of interpolarities. This, however, does not mean that during such interplay, non-harmonious events take place. This is mostly due to an inauthentic, non-spontaneous, unnatural human interference and way of being. The Lao Tzu repeatedly warns against such acts. Whether these acts are caused by desire, failure to live by *wu-wei* and/or ignorance of *tzu-jan*., the result will be the same:

To force the growth of life means ill omen. For the mind to employ the vital force without restraint means violence. After all things reach their prime, they begin to grow old, which means being contrary to *Tao*. Whatever is contrary to *Tao* will soon perish (Chan 1963: chapter 55).

When one desires to take over the empire and act on it (interfere with it), I see that he will not succeed. The empire is a spiritual thing, and should not be acted on. He who acts on it harms it. He who holds on to it loses it (Chan 1963: chapter 29).

From what has preceded, we can see that the phenomenological understanding of the distinctiveness and partiality of opposites is a cognitive act. To realize that they are interconnected as interpolarities and that there is an ultimate higher *Tao*, which they are manifestations of, is a realization of intuition.

As a result, we can see that the interplay of interpolarities can yield two results; namely, harmonious and nonharmonious. Harmonious results are naturalistically yielded by *tzu-jan* because of the innate authentic spontaneous way of being of interpolarities; their *Tao*, which is inherent as they were manifested of the supreme *Tao*. Nonharmonious results are due mostly to the interference of humans; *wei*. Only when humans act, according to *wu-wei* and based on *tzu-jan*, will disharmony cease and may not start at all.

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