

1

1. Tao that can be spoken of,
Is not the Everlasting (*ch'ang*) Tao.
Name that can be named,
Is not the Everlasting (*ch'ang*) name.

2a. Nameless (*wu-ming*), the origin (*shih*) of heaven and earth;
Named (*yu-ming*), the mother (*mu*) of ten thousand things.

Alternate,

2b. Non-being (*wu*), to name (*ming*) the origin (*shih*)
of heaven and earth;

Being (*yu*), to name (*ming*) the mother of ten thousand things.

3a. Therefore, always (*ch'ang*) without desire (*wu-yü*),
In order to observe (*kuan*) the hidden mystery (*miao*);
Always (*ch'ang*) with desire (*yu-yü*),

In order to observe the manifestations (*chiao*).

Alternate,

3b. Therefore, by the Everlasting (*ch'ang*) Non-Being (*wu*),
We desire (*yü*) to observe (*kuan*) its hidden mystery (*miao*);
By the Everlasting (*ch'ang*) Being (*yu*),

We desire (*yü*) to observe the manifestations (*chiao*).

4. These two issue from the same origin,
Though named differently.

Both are called the dark (*hsüan*).

Dark and even darker,

The door to all hidden mysteries (*miao*).

General Comment

This chapter sets forth in a nutshell the entire project of the text: (1) and (2) on the nature of Tao, (2) and (3) on how Tao evolves and becomes the world, and (3) and (4) on how we may return to Tao. Ho-shang Kung gives it a fitting title: "On the Substance of Tao" (T'i Tao).

Detailed Comment

1. In its opening statements the *Tao Te Ching* points out the limitations of language, spoken or recorded, in conveying to us the nature of ultimate reality. Language, as Bergson points out, is invented to express and deal with the determinate and immobile (1929: 275). The everlasting, transcending all determinations, cannot be spoken or named.

All religious traditions speak of the Absolute as beyond speech and name. The *Tao Te Ching*, however, is unique in the reason why Tao is beyond speech and name. The everlasting transcends the finite not because it is "a being than which no greater can be conceived" (Anselm), but because it is a cyclical movement or becoming. The everlasting (*ch'ang*) Tao is thus a verb, not a noun. When forced to give it a name, the sage calls it Tao, the Way or Path (ch. 25.2). We shall see that Tao is the everlasting rhythm of life, the unity of the polarity of non-being and being.

2. These lines and those in (3) can be read in two different ways. The traditional reading (2a, 3a), found in the Ho-shang Kung, Wang Pi, and Ma-wang Tui texts, holds that *wu* (non-being, nothing) and *yu* (being, having) are adjectives modifying the characters following them. The Ho-shang Kung commentary understands Tao from two aspects. As formless, Tao is nameless; as heaven and earth giving rise to all beings, it is the named. The named is not Tao as such, but heaven and earth that give rise to all beings: "The nameless is Tao. Tao being formless cannot be named. The named refers to heaven and earth, which having forms, positioning *yin* and *yang*, and containing the yielding and the firm, have names." The modern reading (2b, 3b) treats *wu* and *yu* as nouns standing by themselves. Modern commentators like Ma Hsü-lun, Kao Heng, Yen Ling-feng, and Duyvendak believe that the traditional reading is wrong. According to them these lines say that Tao, which strictly speaking cannot be named, can be given two names, non-being (*wu*) and being (*yu*), depending on how we look at it. If we regard Tao in itself, prior to heaven and earth, Tao is named non-being. If we look at Tao in its relationship to the world, as giving birth to all beings, Tao is named being.

The traditional reading, taking Tao to be both nameless (*wu-ming*) and named (*yu-ming*), is well supported in the text. Tao is said to be not only nameless (*wu-ming*, chs. 32.1, 37.2, 41.2), but impossible to name (*pu-k'o ming*, ch. 14.2), and having no name (*pu ming-yu*, ch. 34.2), though at the same time Tao is also the name that never goes away (ch. 21.3). Also, Tao is characterized by the negative, *wu*, in all sorts of manners. It is not only nameless (*wu-ming*), but desireless (*wu-yü*, chs. 34.3 and 37.2), without action (*wu wei*, ch. 37.1), without partiality (*wu-ch'in*, ch. 79.3), without limit (*wu chi*, ch. 28.2), etc.

The same cannot be said of the modern reading. Non-being (*wu*) and being

(*yu*) as independent concepts appear only in one instance in the text (ch. 40.2). In chapter 2.2 we read: "Being (*yu*) and non-being (*wu*) give rise to each other." Here being and non-being are parallel to the difficult and easy, long and short, etc., i.e., complementary opposites in the realm of finite beings. They are not names of Tao as the *arche* and mother of all beings.

The modern reading, however, is superior in conceptual clarity. Yen Ling-feng points out that it brings out more sharply the aspect of pure negation in Tao, while the traditional reading gives only particular aspects of Tao's negative nature, e.g., its namelessness or desirelessness (1959: 14-15). Whichever reading we adopt there is a progression of thought from (1) to (2). The everlasting Tao or Name as the process of becoming is seen in its dipolar aspects as non-being and being, or the nameless and named. As *arche* Tao is non-being or nameless. As giving rise to the world of ten thousand things and mothering them Tao is being or named. We move from fundamental ontology to cosmology.

3. Here we move to religious psychology. There are two postures a person may take in relation to Tao and the world. He may either view the world in its hidden aspect in Tao, or he may view Tao in its visible aspect as the world.

Depending on whether you follow the traditional or modern reading in (2), you will take the traditional or modern reading in (3). In the traditional reading, *wu* (to have not) and *yu* (to have) not only modify the noun following them, they are also preceded by the character *ch'ang*, in this context meaning not "the everlasting," as in (1), but "always," hence "always without desire" and "always with desire." This is the reading in Wang Pi, and Ho-shang Kung, as well as in both versions of the Ma-wang Tui silk manuscripts.

The hidden Tao is desireless (ch. 34.3), while the world is the realm of desire. From the small (*miao*) and hidden, things grow to become the manifest and great (*chiao*). To desire is to desire being; it is to belong to the world of being and having. On the other hand, to be desireless, empty of any content in either mind or possession, is not to dwell in the realm of being and having. When one enters the desireless state, one observes the hiddenness of things; when one is in the state of desire, one observes their manifestation. The traditional reading, equating the hidden with the desireless and the coming out of ten thousand things with desire, may point to some esoteric spiritual practice: by conditioning oneself psychologically in the desireless or desiring state, the Taoist can attain a vision of things either in their hiddenness in Tao, or in the fullness of their coming out process.

In the modern reading (*wu* and *yu* as independent concepts standing for Tao) the ontological significance of the character *ch'ang* as "the Everlasting" is fully preserved. The Everlasting Tao or Everlasting Name in (1) is divided into

the duality of Everlasting Non-Being (*ch'ang-wu*) and Everlasting Being (*ch'ang-yu*). The psychological condition of the Taoist, his desire or lack of it, does not occupy center stage. The issue is how to grasp Tao as the Everlasting (*ch'ang*). As the Everlasting Non-Being (*ch'ang-wu*) Tao is hidden, as the Everlasting Being (*ch'ang-yu*) Tao's creativity overflows and becomes the world. By projecting ourselves to Tao as the Everlasting Non-Being, we transport ourselves to a stage before creation when all beings are still hidden in Tao. By projecting ourselves to Tao as the Everlasting Being, we witness Tao coming forth to become the manifest world.

Kuan, translated as "to observe," is also the title of one of the *Four Texts of the Yellow Emperor* unearthed at Ma-wang Tui. Joseph Needham interprets *kuan*, composed of the radicals "bird" and "to see," as a method of divination: One predicts omens by observing the flight of birds (II: 56). This interpretation may not be accurate. From its etymology *kuan* may well mean to see the world as the birds do, i.e., from on high. A Taoist temple is called *kuan*. The identity of *kuan* with Taoist temples began relatively late in Chinese history (Yang Lien-sheng: 58; Sun K'o-k'uan: 127). Originally *kuan* meant an imperial building or palace with a tower on it (ch. 26.2). In the *Tao Te Ching* *kuan* connotes transcendence or rising high to attain vision into the truth of things (ch. 16.1).

4. This concluding stanza leads us back to the first. Names in the coming out process belong to the conscious. They do not lead to Tao. In the return process they serve as portals to the dark, mysterious, unconscious Mother, the root of heaven and earth (ch. 6.2). While the Everlasting (*ch'ang*) Tao cannot be said or named, the duality that issues from it can. Non-Being and Being are the primal pair of opposites issuing from the Everlasting Ground. Through them we are again led back to the hidden secrets of Tao.

Hsüan, usually understood as the dark color of water, originally meant the dark color of the sky (*hsüan t'ien*). The dark color of water is a reflection of the sky or heaven, since water comes from the sky. When the *Tao Te Ching* says "*hsüan chih yu hsüan*," it refers to heavenly hydraulics, as De Santillana says of the water of Thales. *Hsuan* as the darkness of heaven is the depth of heaven from which all things come. As the color of heaven it is contrasted to *huang* (yellow), which is the color of the earth. In the *I-ching* we read: "Black (*hsüan*) and yellow (*huang*) are heaven and earth in confusion. Heaven is black and earth yellow" (R. Wilhelm: 395). The Chinese call themselves the children of *hsüan* and *huang*, meaning the children of heaven and earth, and their first ruler was called Huang Ti, The Yellow Emperor (literally, the ruler of the earth).

In other texts of the *Tao Te Ching* *hsuan* also appears as *yüan*, a cognate. *Yüan* means the original or primal principle. It has a more positive connotation than *hsüan*. As the first metaphysical principle *yüan* is equivalent to the Greek

arche. The line "*hsüan chih yu hsüan*" (the "dark and even darker"), if read as "*yüan chih yu yüan*," would mean "the primal of the primals," "the origin of origins," or "the *arche* of *archai*." Though both readings are acceptable, we consider *hsüan*, the negative and mystic way, the older and superior version. Both versions of the Ma-wang Tui texts, the Ho-shang Kung Text, and most other texts have *hsüan* in chapters 1, 6, 10, 15, 51, 56, and 65. The Wang Pi text in different editions, has both *hsüan* and *yüan*.

Hsüan connotes the dark and mysterious, a descriptive term for something which is strictly speaking indescribable and ineffable (ch. 10.3). The vision of the dark is obviously the language of the mystics. Moving backward to the dark and darker or the origin of origins we enter the door to all hidden secrets.

2

1. When all under heaven know beauty (*mei*) as beauty,
There is then ugliness (*o*);
When all know the good (*shan*) good,
There is then the not good (*pu shan*).

2. Therefore being and non-being give rise to each other,
The difficult and easy complement each other,
The long and short shape each other,
The high and low lean on each other,
Voices and instruments harmonize with one another,
The front and rear follow upon each other.

3. Therefore the sage manages affairs without action,
Carries out (*hsing*) teaching without speech (*yen*).
Ten thousand things arise and he does not initiate them,
They come to be and he claims no possession (*yu*) of them,
He works (*wei*) without holding on,
Accomplishes (*ch'eng*) without claiming merit.
Because he does not claim merit,
His merit does not go away.

General Comment

This chapter stamps the *Tao Te Ching* as pro-nature and anti-culture. Value distinctions cause the very ills they are supposed to cure, but natural opposites complement and enhance each other. If the sage in governing human society imitates nature's way, converting moral opposites into natural opposites, peace and prosperity will reign in human society as it reigns in nature.

Detailed Comment

1. *Mei*, the beautiful, is the desirable or attractive, and *o*, the ugly, is the repulsive or abhorrent (ch. 31) to our senses and sentiments. Wang Pi says that the beautiful or the ugly pertain to the human heart (*hsin*) and its emotions and feelings—what arouses pleasure or pain in us so that we move toward or flee from it. In the same way the good and not good are what we judge to be right or wrong, fitting or not fitting. They pertain to our conscience and our sense of justice. Both the beautiful and ugly, the good and not good, have a psychological origin, being products of human consciousness and valuation, but the very consciousness and pursuit of beauty and goodness as values are accompanied by the consciousness and presence also of the ugly and not good as disvalues. Opposites, including moral and value opposites, issue from the same ground and always accompany each other. According to the *Tao Te Ching* human awakening to moral and value consciousness, which marks the so-called advancement into culture, is in truth a declension from the harmony and oneness in nature. Consciousness of the beautiful and the ugly, the good and not good, splits the world into two without hope of reuniting them.

2. If value opposites war against each other, natural opposites are inseparable. They arise together, depend on each other while they exist, and perish together, as illustrated by the six pairs of natural opposites mentioned here.

The first pair, being (*yu*) and non-being (*wu*), are not to be equated with the *wu* and *yu* in chapters 1 and 40. There *wu* and *yu* represent the duality within the unity of the Primal Principle, with *wu* preceding and giving rise to *yu*. In this chapter *yu* and *wu*, ranking with the easy and difficult, long and short, high and low, etc., do not stand for the dual principles in Tao, but describe a duality in the realm of finite beings.

Since *yu* commonly means to have, and *wu* means to have not, Marxist philosophers in China have interpreted them to mean the propertied and propertiless classes (Hou Wai-lu, 1946). The same line would then read "the haves and have-nots live by one another." This interpretation is refreshing and quite acceptable within the chapter's context. Just as the long and short, high and low, and voices and sounds (from musical instruments) support each other, the rich and poor or strong and weak also sustain each other. Did

not Aristotle maintain that slavery was in the interests of both master and slave (*Politics*, Bk. I, ch. 6, 1255b12)? The *Tao Te Ching* was also written at a time when the mutual dependence of masters and slaves was taken for granted.

The *Tao Te Ching*'s position, of course, is decidedly not Marxist. For the *Tao Te Ching* all opposites depend on each other, including the haves and have-nots, and the good and not good. Though it complains of the injustices of human laws (ch. 77.2) it proposes no revolutionary ideology to eliminate the rich, for that would also mean the elimination of the poor. Instead, it proposes we treat the unnatural opposition between rich and poor like natural opposites: If human laws do not help the rich become richer, the imbalance between rich and poor will be naturally taken care of by the way of heaven, which takes from the rich to give to the poor. Marxism preaches the necessity of class struggle to abolish the opposition between rich and poor, and thus operates within an intense value system quite alien to the spirit of the *Tao Te Ching*.

The last line, "The front and rear follow upon each other," is given a Confucian twist by Ho-shang Kung to mean that inferior persons follow superior persons, conjuring the image of a court procession. In this line the front and rear are purely natural opposites with no value distinctions as to which is superior.

3. The first line, managing without action, parallels the second line, teaching without speech¹. The basic ideas from line 3 on are repeated in chapters 10.7, 34.2, and 51.4. They describe the presence of Tao in the world as an absence of power and coercion. The sage, imitating Tao, also practices non-action. Shedding the values and moral consciousness of humans, the sage personifies the creativity of nature that allows all to come to be and fulfill themselves.

The modern version of the third line reads: "Ten thousand things arise and he does not decline them (*pu tz'u*)." Our translation follows the ancient version *pu wei shih* (he does not initiate them, Chu Ch'ien-chih: 6-7), which brings out the spontaneous character in all beings. The point here is not that the sage cares for all beings (he does not decline them), but that all beings arise by themselves without his planning or design. In the same way the sage does not claim any credit, since all things happen on their own accord. This reading, which is confirmed in the B version of the Ma-wang Tui texts, would also justify Kuo Hsiang's interpretation in his *Commentary on the Chuang Tzu*: "Then by whom are things produced? They spontaneously produce themselves, that is all." (Chan, 1963a: 328)

1. Duyvendak, following Ma Hsü-lun, moves the first two lines in (3) to chapter 43, and the rest of (3) to chapter 51. This is unwarranted. Without (3), which sums up and unifies (1) and (2), the chapter is incomplete and aimless.

3

1. Do not honor (*shang*) the worthy (*hsien*),
So that the people will not contend (*cheng*) with one another.
Do not value (*kuei*) hard-to-get goods,
So that the people will not turn robbers.
Do not show objects of desire (*k'o yü*),
So that the people's minds (*hsin*) are not disturbed.
2. Therefore, when the sage rules:
He empties the minds (*hsin*) of his people,
Fills their bellies,
Weakens their wills (*chih*),
And strengthens their bones.
Always he keeps his people in no-knowledge (*wu-chih*) and no-desire
(*wu-yü*),
Such that he who knows dares not act.
3. Act by no-action (*wu-wei*),
Then, nothing is not in order.

General Comment

This chapter applies the insights of chapter 2 to society. The role of the ruler is again to revert value opposites, which separate and cause strifes among the people, to natural opposites, thereby restoring them to the ease of instinctual living.

Detailed Comment

1. *Hsien*, which appears also in chapter 77, means the able, wise, and prudent. According to Hou Wai-lu, the appearance of the worthy person (*hsien jen*) from the ranks of common people in ancient China was a relatively late event (1979: 282-314). Honoring the worthy (*shang hsien*) was an important teaching in the Confucian school as well as in the Mohist canon (Watson, 1963a: 18-33).

Wang Pi, with his Confucian background, found it hard to accept literally what is said here. He therefore softens its tone by saying that the Taoist sage

uses and gets the services of the worthy but does not lavish praises upon them, lest the people become jealous, and that the sage uses rare goods but does not publicly show his fondness for them, lest the people want to steal them, etc. To Wang Pi, the Taoist ruler makes distinctions but does not openly profess them. This makes the Taoist ruler a hypocrite. According to the *Tao Te Ching*, however, the struggle for superiority or worthiness is not conducive to peace and unity among humans. Intellectual and moral achievement foster pride in those who possess them, encourage hypocrisy in those who don't (ch. 18.2), and, in general, intensify competition among individuals. When the government elevates the worthy among its citizens, it encourages its people to contend (*cheng*) with one another for advancement, thus to become petty-minded and selfish.

In the same way when the government sets high values on rare objects, it is tempting the people to become robbers and criminals. Given the severity of the ancient penal code, in the end their lives are mutilated or lost. The multiplication of sensual desire does not lead to peace and contentment but only disturbs the hearts and minds of the people (ch. 12.2). Out of compassion for these errant individuals, the *Tao Te Ching* speaks out against those leaders who, by valuing hard-to-get goods while promulgating harsh laws, create the conditions for crime and punishment (ch. 57.2).

2. These lines, smacking of devious tactics employed by dictators to control the people, have made many commentators uneasy. Some take these statements as representing the legalistic position (Creel, 1970: 37-47). Duyvendak, on the other hand, grasps the spirit of these lines when he says: "in its political application Taoism may be said to be anti-cultural." These radical statements must be understood in the light of the *Tao Te Ching's* primitivism in which the highest value is life, not thought. The mind is the knowing and discriminating faculty as opposed to the belly, the seat of instinct. To the extent that thought negates life, the *Tao Te Ching* is against mind (*hsin*) and its executive power, the will (*chih*). The belly and bones represent the body with its instinctual life while mind and will are perceived as forces detrimental to the smooth functioning of life (ch. 55.3). The mind controlling the vital force is the will, a will to struggle, to contend, and above all, to power. The Taoist does not have a strong will; his is a will to live and let live. The sage therefore empties the minds and weakens the wills of his people, while he fills their bellies and strengthens their bones. Kao Heng is right when he says: "By weakening the will (of the people) is meant that the people do not contend, do not rob, do not create disorder, that they act by no-action."

For Anaximander (frag. 1) all beings commit transgressions against one another by the very fact that they come to be. According to the *Tao Te Ching* nature without the evaluating mind knows no transgressions. It is mind with its

value distinctions and desire that leads people to acts of transgression. Desire (*yü*) here does not mean the natural desires of the body represented by the belly. It refers to the unnatural desires that arise with the awareness of the self and the development of value consciousness. Mind stirring up selfish desires prompts the will to dominate and conquer. To ensure peace in society the ruler empties the minds of his people. In the *Chuang Tzu* chapter 4, this emptying of the mind and weakening of the will is fine tuned to become the mystic's discipline called "fasting the mind" (*hsin tsai*) (Watson: 57-58).

3. With no-knowledge (*wu-chih*), no-desire (*wu-yü*) and no-action (*wu-wei*), we have a complete program of the Taoist art of government. Knowledge leads to desire, which leads to action, which disturbs the peace of society. When peoples' minds are empty, their desires are few. Under such a condition even if some few have ideas that lead them to agitate society, they would not dare do so, for then, as chapter 74.1 points out, they would be easy to arrest and execute. When the people are so rooted in nature and so lethargic in their minds, those with knowledge cannot lead them astray. By not leading the people onto the paths of knowledge (*chih*), desire (*yü*), and action (*wei*), and by keeping them in the simplicity of nature, the Taoist ruler allows the peace of nature to pervade society.

4

1. Tao is a whirling emptiness (*ch'ung*),
Yet (*erh*) in use (*yung*) is inexhaustible (*ying*).
Fathomless (*yuan*),
It seems to be the ancestor (*tsung*) of ten thousand beings.

2. It blunts the sharp,
Unties the entangled,
Harmonizes the bright,
Mixes the dust.
Dark (*chan*),
It seems perhaps to exist (*ts'un*).

3. I do not know whose child it is,
It is an image (*hsiang*) of what precedes God (*Ti*).

General Comment

In chapter 1 we witness the bifurcation of the everlasting Tao and name into the duality of non-being (*wu*) and being (*yu*). In chapters 2 and 3 we are given the distinction between natural opposites that arise together and complement each other and value or moral opposites that break up the unity of nature and vitiate human life. In this chapter we see how opposites, which issue from Tao, become again identified when they return to Tao. Tao is the dark womb that pours out (1) and receives back (2) all beings. Its unceasing fecundity is due to its unceasing activity, blending and preparing all that have returned to it for their reemergence into the light of existence. As this unceasing creativity Tao hardly seems to exist, yet it is prior to God or the Lord on High.

Detailed Comment

1. Depending on how we interpret *ch'ung* (the empty), *yung* (to use), and *ying* (the full), the first two lines can be read in a number of ways. *Ch'ung*, according to Fu I (555-639), is written *chung*, which means an empty vessel. As the empty, *ch'ung* is the opposite of *ying*, the full (chs. 22.1, 39.1, 2). Thus interpreted, Tao is compared to a magic jug which, though empty, pours out (ch. 34.1) to fill everything. The first two lines would read: "Tao is like an empty vessel (*ch'ung*), yet when used (*yung*) there is nothing it does not fill (*ying*)."

It is not clear whether the character *yung* (to use) means to pour out from the empty vessel, or to pour into the empty vessel. Always seeing the return of all beings to Tao, Wang Pi adopts the latter meaning. Also, he interprets *pu ying*, not filled to the full, to mean *pu i*, not to brim over. Ordinary vessels can be made to brim over. Tao absorbs the sharp, entangled, bright, and dusty; indeed, it absorbs all the world's beings and still does not brim over. For Wang Pi this shows the impassivity and ineffability of Tao. Wang Pi interprets both *ch'ung*, the empty, and *yung*, to use, in the passive sense so that Tao is the empty receptacle or bottomless pit that can never be filled. Following Wang Pi's interpretation, the first two lines would read: "Tao is like an empty vessel (*ch'ung*), yet when used (*yung*) it is not filled (*ying*)."

Kao Heng argues that if we are to follow Wang Pi, taking *pu ying* to mean not full or still empty we have a mere repetition of *ch'ung*, the empty vessel. But the grammatical structure of the line with the character *erh* at the beginning indicates a change of mode or meaning. According to Kao Heng, these lines say that although Tao is empty, its use in pouring out to become all beings is

inexhaustible for it is the origin of all beings. If this is the case, *ying* should be read *ch'eng* or *ch'ing*, meaning "to be exhausted" or "depleted." Thus *pu ying* would mean "not exhausted."

Kao Heng's reading that Tao is an empty vessel that when poured is inexhaustible is confirmed and supported in many chapters (chs. 5.2, 6.3, 35.3, 45.1). Chapter 45.1 almost repeats the first two lines: "Great fullness (*ying*) appears empty (*ch'ung*), its use (*yung*) is inexhaustible."

Kao Heng also quotes the *Shuo Wen* on *ch'ung* as meaning to shake or agitate. This dynamic interpretation of *ch'ung* (the empty) indicates an even more dynamic reading of these two lines. In chapter 42.1 *ch'ung* is used in the line: *ch'ung ch'i i wei ho* (Activating the airs to reach harmony), as a verb meaning the activation, confrontation, resolution, and harmonization of the dual airs *yin* and *yang*, resulting in the coming to be of all things. Thus, it seems clear that *ch'ung* does not describe Tao passively as an empty vessel receiving back all things, as Wang Pi interprets it. This chapter describes Tao throughout as the dynamic self-diffusive creativity (1) as pouring out all beings and (2) as receiving back all beings. Tao as a dynamic emptiness is not a thing determined (ch. 1.1): It is the whirling vortex whose motion is ceaseless. This same dynamic character of Tao as ever pouring out is also portrayed in the next two chapters, 5.2 and 6.3. Our translation of the first two lines adopts Kao Heng's emendation of *ch'ung* and *ying*.

The Sung scholar Wang An-shih (1021-1086) said that *ch'ung* indeed means the *ch'ung-ch'i*, the empty whirling vortex revolving between heaven and earth. A dynamic whirling vortex, however, could no longer be the ultimate principle of the world to a Neo-Confucian who elevates immobility above change. Typical of the Neo-Confucian exaltation of the unchanging, Wang An-shih thought that movement has to issue from the unmoved. In his commentary, this *Ch'ung-ch'i* (the Agitating Air) becomes subordinated to *Yüan-ch'i* (the Primal Air), which is immobile and gives rise to the *Ch'ung-chi*. In the *Tao Te Ching* there is no *Yuan-ch'i* beyond the *Ch'ung-ch'i*. Tao is *ch'ung* and the *Ch'ung-chi* is the original dynamism of the world.

The last two lines of chapter 4.1: "Fathomless (*yüan*), it seems to be the ancestor (*tsung*) of ten thousand things," parallel the last two lines of 4.2 "Dark (*chan*), it seems perhaps to exist." *Ch'ung*, the agitating, *yüan*, the fathomless, and *chan*, the dark, all have the water radical: *ch'ung* is the sound of rushing water, and *yüan* means abysmal water, while *chan* is the dark color of deep water.

2. These lines describe the functions of Tao as the receptacle of all beings. In its bosom sharp things are blunted, entangled parties are untied, glaring differences are softened, and all that come from the dust return to the mixing bowl to become one again.

These first four lines of 4.2 are repeated in 56.2 as describing the psychologi-

cal state of the Taoist. By withdrawing into himself he receives and harmonizes all things into his own unified ground (*yüan t'ung*). The oppositions and conflicts of the many are resolved as they melt in the ground.

If we take Tao's dark emptiness as a whirling vortex, then the return to the ground is not what Whitehead calls a return to sleep. This blunting, disentangling, harmonizing, and mixing activity is the activity of what the next chapter calls a bellows or blasting furnace preparing for new beings emerging into light. The moving away (*shih*) process is a preparation for reappearance (ch. 25). Things return to the bottomless pit not to sleep or disappear forever, but to provide ingredients for future becoming. The old renews itself by resolving conflicts into harmony. Tao as pure becoming provides the ground for this process of renewal.

The last two lines of 4.2 in the Ho-shang Kung text reads *chan hsi, ssu jo ts'un* which has the same meaning as *mien mien jo ts'un* in chapter 6.3. Most commentators interpret this to mean that Tao is the everlastingly existing. According to the *Shuo Wen*, however, *chan* means to be hidden or submerged under water. Also, Wang Pi has *chan hsi, ssu huo ts'un* and he interprets the line to mean, "dark, it seems perhaps to exist," i.e., Tao's existence is questionable. Wang Pi's interpretation here is more consistent with the overall position of the *Tao Te Ching*. Tao as the ground, dark (*chan*), empty (*hsü* or *ch'ung*), and non-being (*wu*), gives rise to beings that emerge into the light of existence with determinate features. When these cease to exist they are reabsorbed into the dark ground that, as the ground of what exists, only seems to exist. The Wang Pi text is happily confirmed by the Ma-wang Tui silk manuscripts.

3. Christian sinologists were perplexed with the idea that Tao is even before Ti or God (Carus, 1909: 13; Maclagan: 77). The character Ti meaning God or Lord of Heaven appears in the oracle bones and in the *Shou Wen* as the picture of a flower. Its homonym *ti* means the fruit or the bud. Ti, or God, thus is either the flower, the beginning state of the flower, or the fruit that results from the flower, all symbols of life and fertility. Tao is beyond Ti, being the hidden root giving rise to the flower that bears the fruit. Ti originally meant the first ancestor in the Shang dynasty, the first progenitor of the ruling house who as ancestor is now the Lord on High (Kuo Mo-jo: 13-16, 23). Wang Pi comments on Ti as the Lord of Heaven. Ho-shang Kung says: "Tao is prior to the Lord of Heaven. This means that Tao exists prior to heaven and earth." As the first ancestor and Lord, Ti marks the beginning of life and being (*yu*), but Tao is the non-being (*wu*) that gives rise to being (ch. 40.2).

The dark, hidden *Urgrund*, the mother of all, itself is motherless and fatherless. Indeed it is nameless. The name Tao is only an image (*hsiang*) of the unnameable *Urgrund*. Wang Huai says that Tao is not verifiable by experience

but is posited by the mind as prior to all being (23). Han Fei explains the connection between *hsiang* meaning image, and *hsiang* meaning elephant when commenting on chapter 14 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Men rarely see living elephants (*hsiang*). As they come by the skeleton of a dead elephant, they imagine its living according to its features. Therefore it comes to pass that whatever people use for imagining the real is called "image" (*hsiang*). Though Tao cannot be heard and seen, the saintly man imagines its real features in the light of its present effects. Hence the saying: "It is the form of the formless, the image of the imageless."

(Liao: I: 193-194)

The choice of the character *hsiang* (image) points to the concreteness with which the ancients grasped Tao. Tao is not the Kantian ideal of reason nor an empty concept. It is the fruit of an act of imagination in an effort to capture this prior as the dynamic creativity whose effects are all the beings that ever come to be.

God (Ti), the greatest and most powerful being, is not the source of all. God is rooted in Tao whose existence is in question.

5

1. Heaven and earth are not humane (*jen*),
They treat the ten thousand beings as straw dogs (*ch'u kou*).
The sage is not humane (*jen*),
He treats the hundred families as straw dogs (*ch'u kou*).

2. Between heaven and earth,
How like a bellows (*t'o yo*) it is!
Empty and yet inexhaustible,
Moving and yet it pours out ever more.

3. By many words one's reckoning (*shu*) is exhausted.
It is better to abide by the center (*shou chung*).

General Comment

The central theme running through chapters 4, 5, and 6 is not the providence of heaven and earth, but their unceasing creative activity. In chapter 4 all beings returning to Tao return to the melting pot that prepares them for reemergence. In chapter 6 we shall see Tao as the mystical female pouring out ever more. In chapter 5.2 heaven and earth are compared to a world bellows or blasting furnace that absorbs all beings back to itself when their life functions are over. From the creature's perspective the return to the blasting furnace means the tragedy of perishing.

Detailed Comment

1. To detractors of the *Tao Te Ching* these lines are the most damaging evidence against it as a deeply spiritual tract. In openly declaring that heaven and earth are not humane (*jen*), that is, they are unkind, these lines have puzzled its ethically-minded Confucian admirers. Recently they have also provided grounds for attack by Christian critics (Lo Kuang: 72-74). Wei Yüan's (1794-1856) comment on these lines is typical of the Confucian effort to divest the *Tao Te Ching* of this offensive trait and color it with Confucian sentiments:

Lao Tzu saw that in a time of chaos the lives of the people were precarious. Thus touched at heart he said: "Ah! How unkind are heaven and earth at times, treating the ten thousand things like the grass underfoot, letting them live or die by themselves! When the sage is unkind, he treats his people like the trampled grass with no sympathy at all!"

(4)

Wang Pi, however, was able to defend these lines without apology:

Heaven and earth follow the natural way of things, they neither act nor make. The ten thousand things govern themselves. Therefore heaven and earth are not humane (*jen*). The humane one makes and transforms, dispenses favors and acts. But when things are made and transformed, they lose their genuineness; when favors are dispensed and actions are taken, not all things may flourish. If not all things may flourish, the earth would not be a place bearing forth all things. But the earth has not produced the grass for the beasts and yet the beasts feed on the grass; it has not produced the dogs for humans and yet humans feed on the dogs. Doing nothing to the ten thousand things, yet the ten thousand things all find their right use. . . . The sage's virtue

(*te*) corresponds to that of heaven and earth. He treats the hundred families as grass and dogs.

Wang Pi's comment brings out the unintentional character of the universe. The non-humane way of heaven and earth means the absence of design. To act humanely is to choose this and reject that, to apply something like Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason allowing certain possibilities to be actualized and others to be suppressed. The humane way is one of conscious selection and planning; Tao's way is pure spontaneity. Because heaven and earth are not humane, having no value distinctions or any principle of selectivity, everything is allowed to come forth, to find its place and use. This inhumanity on the part of heaven and earth, Su Ch'e (1039-1112) points out, is indeed the greatest kindness. The non-providential character of heaven and earth turns out to be real providence to the ten thousand things.

Wang Pi interprets *ch'u kou* as grass (*ch'u*) and dog (*kou*). In the *Chuang Tzu* chapter 14, *ch'u kou* stands as one term meaning the straw dogs used for sacrifice.

Before the straw dogs (*ch'u kou*) are presented at the sacrifice, they are stored in bamboo boxes and covered over with patterned embroidery, while the impersonator of the dead and the priest fast and practice austerities in preparation for fetching them. But after they have once been presented, then all that remains for them is to be trampled on, head and back, by passers-by; to be swept up by the grass-cutters and burned.

(Watson: 158-159)

Once a thing has served its purpose, it is speedily destroyed. Heaven, earth, and the sage treat all beings and all people as unfeelingly as straw dogs, mere means in the universal process of becoming. To Hegel, all individuals, even great heroes, are subject to the cunning of reason that victimizes them for the appearance of the higher universal in the world historical process. Existence is a procession in which each individual has an appointed time and place. Once that role is played out, room must be made for others.

Once their objective is attained, they fall off like empty hulls from the kernel. They die early like Alexander, they are murdered like Caesar, transported to Saint Helena like Napoleon. This awful fact, that historical men were not what is called happy—for only private life in its manifold external circumstances can be "happy"—may serve as a consolation for those people who need it, the envious ones who cannot tolerate greatness and eminence.

(1953: 41)

The *Tao Te Ching* does not regard history as the progressive unfolding of the higher universal in the realization of the absolute idea. It is also typically against the worship of heroes (ch. 19.1). There are no great world historical figures in Taoism.

Though its benevolence is not to be measured against the standard of human kindness (*jen*), Tao is a benevolent power (chs. 34, 62, 77, 81). Tao is the great image that brings the blessings of peace and tranquillity to all who come to it (ch. 35.1). Chapter 41.3 says that Tao alone helps and fulfills all. Chapter 79.3 says: "The Tao of heaven has no partiality, it is always with the good people."

Yet, in this chapter heaven and earth, functioning as the bellows of the universe, undeniably form the devouring mouth in which all beings must perish. The return of all beings to the womb of Tao is necessary to the continuous pouring out of new beings in the world. Erich Neumann presents the rationale of ancient fertility cults:

The womb of the earth clamors for fertilization, and blood sacrifices and corpses are the food she likes best. . . . Slaughter and sacrifice, dismemberment and offerings of blood, are magical guarantees of earthly fertility. We misunderstand these rites if we call them cruel. For the early cultures, and even for the victims themselves, this sequence of events was necessary and self-evident.

(1954: 54)

Both the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* (Watson: 84-95) hold the conviction that the harmony and creativity of the whole is more important than the demands of the individual. Heaven and earth pay no heed to an individual's private needs. The dynamic outpourings of creativity are emphasized, not the right of the individual to stay around and state his or her claims. If the death of the individual is necessary for the unending life of the whole, so be it. In chapter 6 we shall see that only the whole is an inexhaustible and deathless life force.

2. The characters that stand for bellows are *t'o yo*. *T'o* is the external cover of the bellows, and *yo* is the bar that produces the air flow with back and forth movement. Heaven and earth form the furnace that absorbs and remolds all beings. The art of metallurgy was highly developed in ancient China. The beauty of Shang bronzeware has not been matched elsewhere in the world, but the lore of the ancient smiths has not been fully explored. Marcel Granet speaks of Taoism as going back to the days of the guilds of the smiths, custodians of the most wondrous of the magical arts (1926, II: 161). Mircea Eliade says: "The first smith, the first shaman, and the first potter were blood broth-

ers" (1971: 81). It is generally accepted that Taoism, both religious and philosophical, descended from ancient shamanism. There is also a reference to the potter in chapter 11.

T'o yo also symbolizes the reproductive activity of the male and female. According to Kao Heng, *yo* also means *mou*, the male animal, key, or the hill. The activity of the bellows symbolizes the interaction of the male and the female, here understood as heaven and earth. The emptiness between heaven and earth makes for continuous motion explaining the world's inexhaustibility.

On yet another plane *t'o yo* stands for a musical instrument. *Yo* also means a flute that produces music because of its hollowness. This is how Wang Pi interprets *yo*. The secret of Tao's inexhaustible creativity thus lies in its emptiness. In the *Chuang Tzu*, chapter 2, the music of earth is said to be produced by the spontaneity of the wind (Watson: 36-37). The music of heaven is the music of silence, the message in the next verse.

3. The *Tao Te Ching* generally takes a negative attitude toward speech (*yen*): Heaven does not speak (ch. 73.2), nature speaks little (ch. 23.1), and the sage teaches wordlessly (chs. 2.3, 43.2). Speech and discourse as the externalization of thought means the loss or falsification of the real. They belong to the coming out process, thus leading us away from Tao. It is by keeping to the silence of the center that one holds on to the root.

Shu literally means number or counting. In the *Chuang Tzu*, chapter 2, there is a passage that states that the counting or numbering from one to two to three pertains to the coming out process that will never lead us back to Tao (Watson: 43). Language and numbers lead to the many, not to the source of all beings. Wang Pi takes *shu*, number, to mean the reasoning principle (*li*) in things. In this sense the first line would read: "By many words the principles are exhausted." According to Ma Hsü-lun, *shu*, number, stands for a homophone, meaning speed or quickness. Language (*yen*) as the objectification of thought speedily disperses one's life energies so that one becomes quickly depleted. To preserve one's life energies it is better to keep silent.

Duyvendak translates *chung* as the "middle course," giving the impression that these lines refer to the Confucian mean governing speech and action. Such an interpretation is unwarranted. *Chung* as the opposite of speech means the center that does not come out, hence, does not distinguish or falsify. As chapter 56.1 says: "He who knows does not speak, he who speaks does not know," the Taoist mystic who has the vision of the unceasing creativity of Tao does not argue about the merits or demerits of humanity (*jen*) and righteousness (*i*). Was it the same insight that prompted Wittgenstein to say: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"?