

A Dao for the Third Millennium: The politics, psychology, philosophy, and practice of proper living.

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Excerpt for Booklife Review. The book is structured around the 81 verses of the ‘Dao de Jing’ This excerpt explores the first verse, and is the longest section of the book since it introduces a number of concepts dealt with in more detail later.

Verse the first: Beginnings - In at the deep end.

What we are taught of being is not all there is to know.

The knowledge that would define reality is not all there is to learn.

In the unknown is the beginning of things - before heaven or earth.

The known is the place where we experience our reality in the world.

When we cease longing – we gain insight into what is unknown,

To embrace yearning - gives insight into the known.

The known and the unknown begin in each other,

In this way, darkness is born,

And a gateway to the light opens in the shadows.

With this introduction, we start to get a glimpse of exactly where the old boy is coming from.

These initial lines require a more extended exploration as we investigate some of the ideas

introduced and some of the methods and sources that might be used to further an

understanding of them. Here, Laozi is setting the ground rules and pointing out that some of

the supposedly stable bedrock underpinning our comprehension may not be quite as solid as

we supposed it to be.

This unaffected opening is full of meaning. In fact, the multi-layered strands of significance are so extensive in these few simple lines that several levels of ‘unpacking’ are needed to extract anything like an overall picture.

Typically, Laozi makes no attempt whatsoever to ease us into his thought patterns, his very first lines aim straight at the innermost heart of the mysterious Dao, he simply tells it the way he sees it without preface. Consider these interpretations and implications for instance – and these are just a part of what may be extrapolated from the density of information in this opening message:

Among other things, Laozi is telling us here that no amount of factual knowledge guarantees wisdom, and that reason alone is insufficient for total understanding. He points out that we are fixed in a ‘now’ we may pretend to understand, but we must also realize that there is a fuzzy margin to our understanding and neither a proper beginning nor a proper end to it. He wants us to accept that uncertainty permeates our discernment and open our minds to the possibility that all that is unknown, may cast doubt on all that we think we may know.

Here too, in these opening lines, is the first mention of the being/non-being divide. In common with the philosophers of many schools and religions, Laozi insists that there is more to life than facts quantifiable and capable of being categorized in rational inquiry. So, it should perhaps come as no surprise that the predominantly scientific and rational orientation of much of Western thought runs into some early difficulties with Laozi, unless it is also accompanied by a flexible appreciation of the intractable human dilemmas against which rationality often struggles to no avail.

This first conflict arises in our generally overly simplistic acceptance of the rationalist principle at the very foundations of our Western modes of thought. Science seeks closure by limiting and defining, it rejects anything that cannot be conclusively described. In its probing

and microscopically detailed examination of the nature of reality, serious science is innately the province of specialists in narrow areas and their conclusions are all expected to be tried, tested, and proven. By contrast, the old boy is an unabashed universalist, and despite the simplicity of the language, he searches for the all-inclusive and seeks to incorporate the indefinable, and even the irrational, on the grandest of macrocosmic scales.

The micro and macro of the respective juggernauts of empirical science and human intuition, emotion and religious or spiritual unification appear irreconcilable. But perhaps there is not as much distance between them as superficial consideration might indicate. Indeed, if Laozi is right, there must be a way of reconciling and integrating these contradictory conceptualizations of our world. In fact, if we consider some of the advances made over the last one or two generations, some progress is being made.

There are now researchers in fields as diverse as physics, mathematics, statistics, and the social sciences who are prepared to admit that our 'natural laws' are all capable of being subsumed into a more comprehensive and universally collective 'bigger picture.' We live in a world of contradiction and paradox, and as science proliferates, so does faith, with the two being uneasy partners at best and sworn enemies at worst.

The metaphysics of spiritual unity and the empirical realms of science seem worlds apart, yet Laozi insists that the 'the whole' is just that; these apparent opposites must - and can - be reconciled. It was Karl Popper (Popper, 2002) who showed the world that no scientific theory is ever conclusively proven as true. However, the bad news is that any theory can be conclusively proven as false, if even a single contrary fact is admitted as valid.

The point here is this, even a theory that has stood the test of time for generations is not immune to the sudden revelation of some contrary fact that will disprove it. Our view of the way the world works is never fully explained by science, it is simply our best practical

current modeling of the reality we experience. The old boy is never anti-science, far from it, he just asks us to recognize that the rational model is incomplete, and not the only choice available – there are instinctive and intuitive ways of understanding the world.

This is a major line of cleavage in our relationship to the world. The fact is that anyone of us may live our lives by choosing between a spiritual, or by a scientific paradigm of existence, each choice being a rejection of the other. Neither of these however, represents the true way of the Dao, and the old boy would immediately say we are well advised to find ultimate fulfillment in the reconciliation of both these life pathways.

Right now, across the range of Western cultures and beyond, in the rising nations of the global south, it is generally science and rationalism that hold sway, and as knowledge and insight expands, our model of the cosmos grows with it, or is replaced by something more functionally representative of each new perception we have. Sometimes during the evolution of our thinking, there is a scientific or social revolution and the whole world jumps to a new level of comprehension almost overnight; the Earth is *not* flat and does orbit the sun.

Microbes *can* cause disease; the seat of intelligence *is* in the mind and not in the heart etc.

The principle of all scientific advance is the same as that by which Einstein's physics subsumed Newton's, and some often-postulated 'grand unified theory' of physics may eventually enclose and unite both the micro world of quantum mechanics and the macro world of relativity. Each successive revision provides a bigger picture, although even that picture may be one that still falls well short of the ultimate whole.

What Laozi offers us is an insight into a model of our own internal, spiritual, emotional, and instinct focused universe. But this is a model that does not attempt to rival any paradigm of physical reality advanced by science, but to incorporate it entirely. He is engaged in focusing

his and his reader's will and ambition on the biggest picture of them all, something we can at this stage, still only refer to vaguely as the 'whole' or the 'Dao'.

We need to stop at this point for a moment of critical awareness. In proceeding, we must accept that in trying to grasp this Dao totality purely at the level of intellectual reasoning and rationalization, we are undertaking a fundamentally futile task. We are like the tape measure that tries to measure itself, the box that tries to enclose itself, and like Jorge Luis Borge's map that attempts to be so inclusive it becomes indistinguishable from the ground that it is mapping. (Borges, 1999)

In essence, any teaching that looks at ultimate totality (and the old boy is doing just that) is looking at something that incorporates and subsumes all of science, all of nature, all emotion, all spirituality, all of existence and experience - everything...

When we try to grasp the vastness of that totality, we are in the position of the person attempting to drain the ocean by bailing with a bucket, reason fails us, and we feel we are lost. However, all is not lost. Inability to grasp a thing in its entirety does not imply we should simply abandon any hope of achieving some measure of understanding of the concept at all. If we adopted this attitude of resignation our position in the world would be precarious indeed. After all, we do know a lot about oceans despite our shortcomings with the bucket.

In practice, we work to our capacity, with whatever level of understanding (and misunderstanding) we can muster to the problems of our lives, and this is generally sufficient to get by.

To further illustrate this point, think of the ways in which we 'understand' or have a notion of something. Take an object called 'engine' for example. This is a familiar idea to everyone. We mostly know what it is for, and what it can do, and we are satisfied there is no further knowledge required to utilize it effectively now and for the foreseeable future. Yet, the reality

is that for most people, their knowledge has severe limitations. Faced with a mountain of individual parts, few could lecture with any authority on their specific relation to the whole, much less proceed to build the engine itself. We simply accept, or more likely, are blissfully unconscious of the multitude of the constituent parts and only really see them and recognize them in the context of the whole they will become.

Similarly, Laozi addresses those individuals mired in the intricacies of the spare parts that make up the world. His focus is on making people look to the totality, the world as the end product of all of history and experience so far. Within that totality is found harmony, the ultimate meaning of existence is in the way the parts fit together to form the whole, but not so much in the technical details that underpin that unity.

The temptation of course, is always to limit our perception of the world to that small part of the world which we know and feel comfortable with, to voluntarily put on the blinkers and choose to ignore or deny everything not directly relevant to our own lives.

Laozi's message is that this is the inferior way. Figuratively at least, the old boy is now all bristling white beard and concern. Although he is very much an advocate of the simple life, he is telling us that we court disaster by denying a vital part of life. We are rejecting the whole for something lesser in the comfort zone, and in that whole is the greater good - the place of self-actualization he calls the Dao.

And with this we are back to the nature of this mysterious unifying principle just as Laozi will return to it repeatedly and inexorably. We already know we cannot get a direct grip or definition of the whole, certainly language is insufficient. Just occasionally though, we may get a flash of illumination that reveals some facet of this hidden essence and provides a sudden epiphany - that bombshell moment of inspired understanding that comes when some hidden aspect of obscure nature is momentarily revealed and comprehension dawns.

The old boy steadfastly insists that there is a universal meaning hidden in the idea of Dao, which given the right setting, will resonate for almost everyone. We might also note here in passing that this pursuit of ‘something hidden’ is a ubiquitous principle, and something common to all of religion and philosophy, and indeed to all of humanity. There is compelling evidence from any number of sources that at some point in life, almost everyone needs and seeks a mysterious ‘other’ to achieve completion.

While the names of our Gods change and proliferate as new religions arise and the old beliefs are denied, and while the means of approaching these mystical icons fall into disuse as ever more, and newer representations of the absolute capture the common imagination, the personal quest for individual realization through spirituality, or the acceptance of dogma – some kind of life-affirming passion - is something that endures down through the centuries and the millennia.

Any observer of the human condition might rightly conclude that humanity generally wants, even needs, this unseen something or other with some fervor. Even though individual ideas of what it might be may differ in a host of different ways: grace, the all, harmony, the Godhead, tranquility, enlightenment, wisdom, Buddha-hood, the divine light, unity, integration, nirvana, understanding, totality, peace, fulfillment, completion, ‘getting your head together’, the meaning of life... The Dao.

What is more, based on the historical evidence, humanity is prepared to go to any lengths to obtain this essence, although the journey may not always be one of light and celebration.

Those set on a path of personal self-realization include both saints and sinners.

Some have been known to give up family, friends and creature comforts on this quest, some train their minds, even at the expense of their physical bodies, some choose to expiate sin and cleanse their souls by condemning themselves to lives of poverty and discomfort. Some,

moved by a force beyond reason, will radically transform themselves, and not always for the better. Some will slip into madness or despair. The spiritual search can inspire much more than the realization of the potential of a single human life, it can be bent as a crusade to murder and torture in God's name – in the past, some have allowed this impulse to lead them to the sacrifice of their own kind on a bloody altar.

Motivated by the desire for communion in some realm of the absolute, soul-searchers have been known to embrace mysticism, ingest poisons and mind-bending drugs. Some have performed super-human feats of endurance, relinquished all comforts of life, and suffered any torment on themselves - or others - which might lead them closer to their ultimate goal.

Looked at in this light, when we consider the concept of Dao, and the urge towards some unrealized unity in general, we are not simply indulging in some frivolous academic exercise. We are looking at a characteristic almost universally acknowledged - though not always consciously or directly - as being central to our humanity.

Somewhere in this all-encompassing whole is, necessarily, as much powerful potential for the debasement of a life as there is for its fulfillment. This shapeless, nameless thing the old boy calls Dao, and which we sometimes endow with the name of a God, has a reality and a strength we cannot deny, and while for most the goal is harmony, self-knowledge, and a contented appreciation of the world, for some, its investigation may be fraught with peril.

For us, in a historical sense, the counterpart of unity with the bright image of our benevolent deity is something deeply rooted in our cultural heritage – the mindset of extreme alienated isolation, often equated in medieval times as possession by some dark and demonic force, which once found within, can only with difficulty be exorcised.

There is no need to resort to superstition here though, for thanks to the pioneering work of Carl Jung and others, twentieth century psychology has at least a partial key to our

understanding of this occurrence. ‘Exorcism’ and ‘demonic possession’ are all in a day’s work for both the priesthood and for practitioners of psychotherapy. Although the vocabulary of the inner experience may have changed substantially, the reality of the human condition is the same as it ever was. Jung tells us that the demons and dark forces of our ancient mythologies have never left us - but now that we have updated their labels, they are known as ‘neuroses’, ‘complexes’ and ‘psychological trauma’. (Jung C. G., *Civilization in Transition*, 1981)

Conflating ancient Chinese philosophy with contemporary psychotherapy may seem incongruous at first glance, but the prefix ‘psycho’ in the original Greek has the meaning of ‘soul’ or ‘spirit, and the suffix here ‘therapy’, which is also from the Greek, has the original meaning of ‘healing’ or ‘treatment.’ So, what is the difference between psychic healing through this modern therapy and the time-honored quest of reaching for completion in the all-encompassing Dao? Or even perhaps surrendering to the mercy of a divine being? The old boy is giving us a metaphorical shrug here and saying, ‘Does it really matter?’ The Dao is a great journey with a multitude of ways.

We are all free to choose a route or no route at all...

The old boy: Dimensions of understanding and experience in language.

Looking beyond the obvious evidence of what a legion of theologians and philosophers have been telling us for centuries, there is now emerging the beginnings of a scientific acceptance of the hazy realms of paradox and confusion. We now have the uncertainty principle, chaos theory, notions of multiple dimensions in string theory and the inexplicable behavior of quanta as examples to support the notion of things vague at the limits of all scientific knowledge and experience.

No matter which scientific and empirical branch of knowledge any researcher may care to explore, and no matter how certain and conclusive the core of that discipline may be, somewhere at the outer edge is a fuzzy area where things become inexplicit, and theories start to melt into each other. This is the place where physics rubs shoulders with metaphysics with an ease that might upset minds raised on the idea that an irrational conceptualization cannot be held as truly significant.

The ‘something’ that intimates the beginning of this unknown territory is the first glimpse of the essence that the old boy simply calls the ‘Dao’. This idea, as we have already discussed, has a multitude of interpretations and associations; it can be the way, the Godhead, the supreme mystery, and the source. It is the unity of all opposites, the encompassing whole, and the greater good. It is at once the vital inner essence of the soul and the concept of universal being - whether deified or not.

Whatever else it may be, argues the old boy, it is the embodiment of the natural flow of both rational and irrational events, and opposing it is like opposing the wind, the tide, or the onset of darkness at night.

Since we have already confessed to a lack of appropriate language to fully describe the Dao, one way we can attempt to obtain some kind of delineation and further our understanding is to switch perspectives from time to time, in for example, employing the jargon and the unique insights of specialists in other areas. Indeed, this is something we have done already done in equating ancient fears of possession by demons to contemporary mental disturbance requiring psycho-therapeutic intervention.

In this respect, some interesting comparisons with the old boy’s ‘manifold gateway’ and ‘crux of all mystery, can be made by references to contemporary thinkers as diverse as

French existential philosopher Jean Paul Sartre and Carl Jung, the Swiss philosopher and father of analytical psychology.

These two giants of twentieth century ideas may seem odd companions for the old boy when we are attempting a clarification of ancient Daoist values, but Jung especially was keenly interested in, and wrote extensively and with profound empathy on Eastern philosophy.

Furthermore, in his psychological work, he parallels and supports a fundamental precept of Laozi's in that he always staunchly maintains that the irrational unknown has just as much right to serious consideration and investigation as the rational known. Essentially, Jung is a humanitarian philosopher who interprets individual experience in terms of an all-inclusive viewpoint; Jung is 'big picture' by nature. He was also a friend and occasional scholarly collaborator of noted Sinologist (and by far the most credible translator of the classic '*I Ching*'), Richard Wilhelm.

For Jung, the mysterious ultimate source we characterize here as the Dao, finds its resonance in the unplumbed depths of the collective unconscious within each of us. In addition, for Jung as for Laozi, the greater good is always a product of individual rather than group effort. This is important. All progress leading to every revolution in thinking is the product of individual effort. It is not that the principles of the Dao do not hold true for organizations, they do. They apply to corporate enterprise large and small, and even to the sovereign state itself. But the integration of the whole comes only from personal insight, a kind of unification of the external and internal aspects of the self.

Exactly what this means and how it is to be achieved will become clearer later, for now it is enough to say that both Laozi and Jung view the average person as in some sense incomplete, there is something lacking, something that may nag at our consciousness and be a source of frustration, anxiety, and tension. We live polarized multi-faceted lives, and present our

cheerful, our impassive or our stoic facades to the world. We hide our inner selves, we commonly live in strained or failing relationships, and lack real connections to those around us in the world. We experience our moments of elation perhaps, but also grief, a sense of unease or quiet desperation and not unusually, just a vast indifference and apathy. We are generally partially conscious of missing something vital that might give us strength and purpose – but what can we do?

In this situation, even being part of a community, or cooperating within a group does not help resolve the situation, though it may relieve some feelings of isolation and disaffection and give us some sense of belonging. In short, we are something less than whole, and that is still true when there are several of us together. The important thing is always the individual, and never the group, and in this sense, putting any number of ‘disintegrated’ individuals together can never make an integrated whole, this would be like trying to form one good bottle from the shattered remnants of several.

In his lectures given in Cologne and Essen in 1933 Jung illustrates the pre-eminent significance of the individual when he proposes that everything that is worthwhile in humanity relies ultimately on the sense of responsibility of each individual person. When considered in totality, any large group of people becomes a nameless, mindless, amoral thing that evades responsibility and is always unaccountable...

In words that echo the thoughts of Laozi with some precision, Jung goes on to say that the problems experienced in the world, reflect the problems experienced by individuals. In other words, the wise do not attempt to fix the world until they have first fixed themselves. The priority therefore is always self-improvement for each person, a process entailing a deeper understanding of one’s own innermost being.

This psychological description by Jung of the self-focused intuition the old boy calls ‘work-on-the-self’ is very strongly reminiscent of Laozi speaking of the Dao:

“Small and hidden is the door that leads inward, and the entrance is barred by countless prejudices, mistaken assumptions, and fear...” (Jung C. G., *Civilization in Transition*, 1981)

The work of Jean Paul Sartre is another extraordinarily useful resource in interpreting Laozi, especially when it comes to really getting a feel for what it means to grapple with the concept of a mysterious ‘other’, even including the unknown aspects of the ‘whole’ of the Dao itself. Sartre even uses some of the same terms as the old boy, including the concept of ‘that which cannot be named.’ Even though the purpose and thrust of his work is to show how consciousness operates for the individual in the world, Sartre’s rational insights extend well into the fuzzy area most people would consider esoteric, and right into the mind-bending concept of nothingness itself.

Just as does the old boy, Sartre traverses unfamiliar regions of the soul.

Sartre’s ‘nothingness’ is quite literally ‘no thing’. But, think for a moment, how does a concept like ‘nothing’ even arise in the first place? After all, everything that can be named is a ‘something,’ even ‘the nameless’ in being termed ‘the nameless’ is reified and becomes a ‘thing. The word ‘nothing’ itself, being a word, apparently defies itself in the naming to become ‘something’. By the same token, ‘emptiness’ is still ‘something’ and so are ‘blank’ and ‘vacuum’... ‘

The mental gymnastics needed to comprehend these statements are necessary here. A ‘nothing’ cannot be referred to as an ‘itself; strictly, it cannot be referred to at all, without the ‘it’ ‘being’ ‘something. ‘Yet the idea, the concept remains and is familiar to all despite the difficulty in knowing how it might ever arise. How do you detect a nothing when the absence of anything still leaves something?

Since there is nowhere in the world, and logically for that matter, no place in the entire physical universe for a ‘nothing’ to hide, Sartre concludes that ‘nothingness’ is hidden deep in the heart of every individual being. It is in our consciousness, and is only, but always, present there. (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 1993)

Considering Sartre’s nothingness is like studying the impossible mechanics of an Escher print, or perhaps blinking incredulously at one of those pictures of the kind that trick the eye into first seeing a vase and then two faces staring at each other. The brain is forced into unfamiliar patterns of recognition. Take, for instance, these lines adapted from the writings of R.D. Laing, the noted existential psychologist (Laing, *The Politics of Experience & the Bird of Paradise*, 1984):

Nothing can keep me from success.

Nothing can prevent me from being happy.

There is nothing to fear.

This seems at first sight a positive message of buoyant affirmation, full of confidence that the individual can overcome all adversity. Now, *read the lines again*, but this time think of that ‘nothing’ as the heart of darkness; an ‘anti-thing’, a monster, a lurking, vague and hostile impalpable presence with malevolent intent. When that menacing ‘nothing’ becomes real in the consciousness and is directly experienced, it is as though the world is suddenly turned on its head. Now, you can empathize with the child lying fearfully in the dark. Now, you know there really is ‘nothing’ there to terrify you... ‘Nothing’ *can* stop you now... ‘Nothing’ *can* prevent you from fulfillment...

And suddenly, that buoyant affirmation becomes absolute terror...

There is as much unlimited potential for pure evil in this vision of the unknown as there is for pure good. Yet the old boy insists that embracing all in the Dao means just that. The world is not all sweetness and light, there are perils to be navigated and negative aspects to be confronted. Yet, the old boy, Jung and Sartre are all agreed that in realization of the possibilities lurking in the shadowy unknown lies the individual's path to freedom and control of their own destiny. Is it that 'nothing' sets you free? Or that you set yourself free? Or are they the same? In any event you have 'nothing' to lose...

Sartre's rather dark and pessimistic vision and the old boy's image of the greater good seem poles apart, and in some respects, they are. There is a sense however in which they might also be considered as the flip sides of the same coin. For Laozi the fulfillment of life lies in the striving by the individual for the unity of the one, for Sartre the emptiness of life derives from the severance of the individual from the unattainable unity of the one. In this sense they are one and the same. Just imagine yourself at any point on the 'Way,' the personal experience of living the Dao as a great journey. From anywhere on the way, it would be possible to empathize with either point of view by simply viewing the goal as drawing either ever-closer or ever-further away...

From the old boy's point of view, Sartre's bleak, and despairing acknowledgment of the impossibility of personal fulfillment is simply that he is seeing the Dao receding in the rear-view mirror.

And yet, one can always turn around...

My glass is half-full, or my glass is half-empty - it is all a matter of attitude.