A PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSLATION

DAO DE JING

"Making This Life Significant"

FEATURING THE
RECENTLY DISCOVERED
BAMBOO TEXTS

Translated and with commentary by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall

Daodejing

"Making This Life Significant"

A Philosophical Translation

Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall

Ballantine Books
New York

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Random House Publishing Group

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Ballantine and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

www.ballantinebooks.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2003096751

ISBN 0-345-44419-1

Camera-ready copy for this book was prepared by Daniel Cole.

Cover art: The bamboo strips used as part of the cover design are photographs representative of the three *Laozi* bundles recovered at Guodian. The strips are reprinted here with the permission of Wenwu Publishing House. The photographic representation of a sculpture of Qi Baishi by the Nanjing sculptor Wu Weishan on the back cover is reprinted here with his kind permission.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition: January 2003
First Trade Paperback Edition: January 2004

9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments

The *Daodejing* has probably been translated into the English language more often than any other piece of world literature. Why translate it again? An entirely reasonable question.

And a reasonable question requires a reasoned answer. Recent archaeological finds (Mawangdui 1973 and Guodian 1993) have provided us with textual materials that are physically more than a millennium earlier than previously available versions of the *Daodejing*. Such finds challenge the authority of existing translations to the extent that these new materials have increased our knowledge of the text and of the circumstances of its transmission. And there is broad scholarly agreement that these early redactions of the *Daodejing* do indeed cast important new light on the structure and the meaning of this defining document in Daoist philosophy.

In addition to providing new insights into an old document, these archaeological finds have also provided us with textual materials that are importantly different from what has been available up until now, enabling us to resolve some persistent linguistic problems. Undoubtedly the most substantial addition to the *Daodejing* are the fourteen strips—*The Great One Gives Birth to the Waters*—that appear as an integral element within one of the Guodian versions of the text. Beyond the seamless physical consistency of these strips with the rest of this early exemplar of the *Daodejing*, they contain a discussion of Daoist cosmology that not only uses the familiar *Daodejing* vocabulary, but further brings a clarity to this cosmology that enables us to understand other chapters of the *Daodejing* in a way that has not been possible before. In

deference to a continuing and yet inconclusive debate on the relationship between this exciting new portion of the text and the *Daodejing* itself, we have followed the practice of excerpting this new document and of giving it the title *The Great One Gives Birth to the Waters*. We have translated it, and have discussed it in some detail, in an appendix. Whatever the ultimate status of these strips with respect to the *Daodejing* itself, their critical importance as a resource for illuminating the Daoist response to the cosmological question of the source and nature of creativity is nowhere in question.

However, beyond the archaeological finds there is, if possible, an even more compelling reason to take up the project of offering yet another English-language translation of the *Daodejing*. The *Daodejing* is a profoundly "philosophical" text, and yet it has not been treated as such. It has been translated and interpreted initially by missionaries, and more recently by sinologists. That is to say that, to date, the *Daodejing* has only incidentally and tangentially been engaged by philosophers. This assertion is meant neither to impugn the usually good intentions of the missionaries nor to pretend that there is any substitute for the sophisticated philological, historical, literary, and cultural sensibilities that we associate with good sinology. In fact, if there is an indictment to be made, it is to be directed against professional philosophy in our Western seats of learning that, in its own self-understanding, continues to insist that philosophy is exclusively an Anglo-European enterprise.

Given this marginalization of other philosophical traditions, philosophy as a discipline has an unfulfilled responsibility to our academy. An essential occupation of philosophers is to identify and describe the generic traits of the human experience in order to locate problems within the broadest possible context. And these defining generic characteristics are importantly different as we move from one cultural and epochal site to another. Philosophers have the responsibility to seek out and to understand the uncommon assumptions that distinguish cultures as a preventative against cultural reductionism and the misconceptions such ethnocentrism entails. Thus, the absence of philosophers in the interpretation of

Chinese philosophy has come at a cost. It has become a commonplace to acknowledge that, in the process of Western humanists attempting to make sense of the classical Chinese philosophical literature, many Western assumptions have inadvertently been insinuated into the understanding of these texts, and have colored the vocabulary through which this understanding has been articulated. Chinese philosophy has been made familiar to Western readers by first "Christianizing" it, and then more recently by locating it within a poetical-mystical-occult worldview. To the extent that Chinese philosophy has become the subject of Western philosophical interest at all, it has usually been analyzed within the framework of categories and philosophical problems not its own.

The recent recovery of new versions of existing texts and the further discovery of many that have been long lost has occasioned the retranslation of many of the classics, and has provided both a pretext and an opportunity for philosophers to step up and rethink our standard readings. Most importantly, it has presented us with the challenge of trying, with imagination, to take these texts on their own terms by locating and interpreting them within their own worldview.

The happy collaboration of Hall and Ames has, over nearly a quarter of a century, been an attempt, however imperfect, to bring together both sinological and philosophical skills first in our interpretive studies of classical Chinese philosophy, and more recently, in our new translations of seminal texts. In developing a strategy for our translations, benefiting enormously from the participation of Henry Rosemont Jr. in these efforts, we have developed a structure that includes a philosophical introduction, an evolving glossary of key philosophical terms, a self-consciously interpretive translation, and the inclusion of a critical Chinese text.

In describing our translations as "self-consciously interpretive," we are not allowing that we are given to license, or that we are any less "literal" than other translations. On the contrary, we would insist that any pretense to a literal translation is not only naïve, but is itself a cultural prejudice of the first order. To begin with, we would assert that English as the target language carries with it such

an overlay of interpretation that, in the absence of reference to an extensive introduction and glossary, the philosophical import of the Chinese text is seriously compromised. Further, a failure of translators to be self-conscious and to take fair account of their own Gadamarian "prejudices" with the excuse that they are relying on some "objective" lexicon that, were the truth be known, is itself heavily colored with cultural biases, is to betray their readers not once, but twice. Just as each generation selects and carries over earlier thinkers to reshape them in its own image, each generation reconfigures the classical canons of world philosophy to its own needs. We too are inescapably people of a time and place. And a most cursory understanding of the *Daodejing* itself would require that we acknowledge ourselves as such. This self-consciousness is not to distort the *Daodejing*, but to endorse its premises.

A lot has happened as we worked on this translation. Tragically, the David Hall side of the project that burned most brightly, also burned most quickly, and in the company of family and friends, he died in his desert one spring day.

The profound sadness and sense of loss is made bearable by a compounding of happiness in a collaboration that only got better over the years because it always attracted further collaboration. Along the way, many friends and colleagues have added to the enjoyment and satisfaction that we were always able to find in our work. The formidable D. C. Lau with a comment here and an allusion there has given us things to think about with respect to the *Daodejing* specifically, and over the years with respect to Chinese philosophy broadly, that have returned to our thoughts regularly for further reflection. Clifford Ames and Owen Lock, keepers of the English language, interrogated an earlier version of the manuscript with a thoroughness that left not a single sentence unconfessed. And Geir Siggurdsson spent many hours on the banks of Weiminghu rescuing our Introduction from itself. Xing Wen lent a steady hand to some technical problems with the text, and Danny Coyle searched the final manuscript for infelicities. Robin Yates, with remarkable tact and good sense, saved us from a reading of chapter 77 that was too clever by half. And dear Bonnie interrupted her own sab-

batical to further discipline these pages. Over the years, Daniel Cole has, with precision and with art, made the most of the presentation of our work, and without him there would be far less beauty in this world. When the time came, Tracy Bernstein and Allison Dickens stepped up as editors for Ballantine, and gave us every opportunity to make the most of our efforts. Finally, I personally want to express my deep gratitude to my graduate students at Peking University who, in our comparative philosophy seminar in the fall of 2001, challenged me to think long and hard about Daoist cosmology, and who enabled me to see things that David had known all along.

Roger T. Ames
Peking University
April 2002

Historical Introduction

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Warring States Period (403–221 BCE) in which the *Daodejing* was born is fairly named. As time passed, internecine warfare raged with escalating ferocity among the contending states of the central Chinese plains. The killing field casualties rose exponentially as the "art" of warfare progressed from swarming militia to the efficiency of phalanx-like fixed troop formations. At every level of innovation, from the introduction of cavalry, to standard issue crossbows, to siege engines, these instruments of aggression made a folly of defense. Cities were walled and fortified only to be breached; borders were drawn up only to be redrawn; alliances were formed only to be betrayed; treaties were signed only to be reneged upon. For generation after generation, death became a way of life, so that mothers gave birth to sons with the expectation that they would never reach majority.

The eventual outcome was never in doubt. In the race to empire, the game was zero-sum. And to lose was to perish utterly. In the centuries of protracted labor that preceded the birth of this profoundly literate Chinese culture, the most widely circulated texts were not religious or philosophical treatises; they were military handbooks. In fact, most of the philosophers who traveled from court to court were purveyors of wisdom "guaranteed" to lead their patrons to certain victory. And even when their expositions focused on the social and political reforms necessary for a flourishing state, at some point, almost every one of the texts named for them turns to warfare and to the necessity of a strong military.

It was as a response to these darkest of days in which the blood of China's children irrigated the crops and their flesh fertilized the land that the *Daodejing* emerged as an alternative vision of what the human experience might be like. The world was wasting away, and the *Daodejing* was a mysterious elixir that offered to serve as its restorative.

THE NATURE AND APPLICATIONS OF THE *DAODEJING*

The great French sinologist Marcel Granet observed that "Chinese wisdom has no need of the idea of God."[1] Analogously, in this Chinese world in which nothing was "created," including the world itself, the *Daodejing* too appeared without the benefit of efficient cause. Of course the text has long been associated with the sobriquet the "Laozi 老子," or "The Old Master," but the historicity of this rather generic old man is as likely as his name is informative.[2]

What do we know about this authorless text? On the basis of rhetorical patterns and rhymes, William Baxter dates the *Daodejing* to as early as 400 BCE, but suggests early or mid fourth century BCE as its most likely period of compilation.[3] Given that it is widely cited in the late fourth and third century BCE corpus—the *Zhuangzi*, *Zhanguoce*, *Lüshi chunqiu*, *Hanfeizi*, and so on—the text in some form is likely to have appeared earlier rather than later. The 1993 recovery of three distinct bundles of strips dating to about 300 BCE that together constitute a "partial" *Daodejing* from a tomb in Guodian, a village to the north of the ancient Chu capital of Jinancheng in modern-day Hubei province, is consistent with Baxter's estimate. It is not clear whether this Guodian version of the *Daodejing* is itself an interim phase circulating orally in the growth of the complete 81 chapter version, or whether it is someone's abridged version of an already existing complete text. But even in this partial text (however we choose to understand the term "partial"), the explicit anti-Confucian polemic suggests a date of compilation at which the Daoist and the Confucian lineages had already drawn their lines.

Before we speculate on the authorless origins of the *Daodejing*, it might be helpful to address the issue of orality. The relationship between the spoken and written languages of early China has had an important bearing on the past and the future of a text—that is, how a text would emerge over time out of the oral tradition, and how it would be transmitted to future generations. Elsewhere, together with Henry Rosemont, we have argued that:

> Classical Chinese . . . is like the good little boy: it was primarily to be seen and not heard. A person who tried to write a speech in *wenyan* today would end up with a soliloquy. This is not to imply that sounds were and are totally irrelevant to the written language, for some puns and all rhymes, alliteration, and so forth are obviously phonetic in character. Further, such linguistic devices were undoubtedly of enormous value in facilitating the memorization of large tracts of text that could be recalled to fund discussion. What this does imply is the following, which is an important premise for our overall position: spoken Chinese is and was certainly understood aloud; classical Chinese is not now and may never have been understood aloud as a primarily spoken language; therefore spoken and literary Chinese are now and may always have been two distinct linguistic media, and if so, the latter should clearly not be seen as simply a transcription of speech.[4]

The claim that the written language is not a transcription of speech is qualified in this argument by the acknowledgment that in a largely if not primarily oral tradition, much of the language that at some point and for specific reasons comes to be written down has earlier been transmitted from memory, and in this form, enriches refined speech much as the crafted apothegms of Shakespeare, Pope, Nietzsche, and Emerson abound in good intellectual conversation today.

D. C. Lau tells us a lot about the text. In preparing his own translation of the *Daodejing*, he has followed the ubiquitous division of the short text into two books, the "*dao*" classic and the "*de*" classic, and has also respected the further traditional rendering of the text into 81 "chapters." But he takes one additional step in dividing these 81 chapters into 196 sections with even more ad-

ditional subsections, justifying this seeming fragmentation of the work on the basis of internal rhymes and the observation that there is only a very loose sense of textual coherence.[5] Lau also suggests that the rhymed passages that constitute more than half of the text were probably "learned by rote with the meaning explained at length in an oral commentary."[6]

Michael LaFargue offers us some further insight into the nature and function of the *Daodejing*. He argues that the text does not "teach philosophical doctrines" but rather contains "sayings" that fall into two groups: "polemic proverbs" that seek to correct some common assumption ("cheaters never prosper"), and sayings that recommend a certain regimen of self-cultivation.[7] LaFargue makes a further important point in insisting that, contrary to the standard handwringing about the impenetrability of the text, the words usually "conveyed a single definite meaning for a group of people with a shared competence."[8] That is, the sayings that constitute the text were largely meaningful to its anticipated audience within the context of their own historical period and life experience.

If we combine and expand upon the insights that we have rehearsed above, we can make a reasonable conjecture about the provenance, the coherence, and the applications of the *Daodejing*.

First, the fact that remarkably similar bamboo strip and silk manuscript versions of the *Daodejing* are being found in archaeological sites from significantly different times and places testifies to the probability that we are dealing very early on with a canonical "text" if not a widely popular classic. We have put "text" in quotation marks and have used the expression "classic" advisedly because the written form of the work seems to be derivative of an essentially oral tradition.

Indeed, while we might be accustomed to think of such traditions of wisdom literature as being passed down through the written word, beyond the pervasive use of rhyme, there are other rather clear indications that memorization and oral transmission probably played a major role in establishing a common frame of reference for the academic lineages of early China. The pervasive use of differing loan characters in the written forms of the *Daodejing* and

other recovered texts suggests that they represented sounds first and then, by context and inference, ideas. This would mean that they were part of an oral tradition that was written down from memory for some specific purpose, perhaps in this case providing reading material for the now silent tomb occupant in the journey to the nebulous world beyond. The accumulation of written texts also seems to have had a role in the construction of court libraries at state academies that would try to attract the best and brightest scholars of their age, and thus bring prestige to their patrons.

Another factor that would have influenced this process of standardization is the relationship between a rich and redundant spoken language, and "texts" which operate as an oral corpus of economical aphorisms to capture the prevailing wisdom of the time. These combined sayings would be available in the oral language as familiar apothegms that could be used as "topics" to begin discussions, with the possibility of further elaboration occurring in the vernacular language. While there seems to be a certain fluidity in the transmission of these early documents, the recent archaeological finds are uncovering increasingly earlier versions of relatively standardized texts, the *Daodejing* among them, suggesting that rote memorization and "canonization" had some force in consolidating the texts and preserving their integrity.

We would agree with Michael LaFargue that much of the rhymed materials found in the *Daodejing* can be fairly described as a kind of "proverbial" wisdom literature that, rather than offering exposition, seeks to stimulate a sympathetic audience to conjure up the conditions necessary to make its point.[9] A significant quibble with LaFargue, however, would be that these rhymed sayings are not only mnemonic, but are also memorable in the sense of the clever West African proverb-tellers or the evocative epigramatic and scriptural sayings of our own tradition. That is to say, the aphorisms that came to constitute the *Daodejing* should not be confused qualitatively or functionally with the familiar adages that LaFargue uses to make his own point (for example, "nice guys finish last"). Such banal clichés are seldom confused with wit or wisdom. By contrast, the elegant sayings that constitute the

Daodejing are "the sound from the ground," sharing with other such conventional sources a widespread, often informal, dissemination, and the cultural function of sustaining a shared linguistic currency and a common wisdom within a competent population. By "competent" we are following LaFargue in describing an audience with a similar worldview and common sense—precisely those assets lacking in our own contemporary attempts to engage the "text."

It is interesting to reflect on how such conventional sources, encompassing among other things everyday popular songs and their distillation in the *Book of Songs*, functioned to produce meaning and promote different philosophical agendas in the early Chinese corpus. What can be said about this largely oral medium of transmission and communication of songs is perhaps even more true of the layer of selected wisdom sayings that constitute the *Daodejing*.

David Schaberg explores the way in which uncanonical songs underwent a process of historical framing during the Warring States Period and Qin dynasty,[10] when commentators approached a song, often enigmatic and sometimes even incomprehensible, as an encoded means of communication that could only be understood and appreciated by fitting it with, and within, a particular historical anecdote of some interesting individual or event.

A similar process seems to have been at work in the philosophical literature of this period in which canonical songs such as those collected in the *Book of Songs*, presumably widely remembered and sung by the population, were "decoded" when they were used to punctuate a particular philosophical point. That is, one intriguing characteristic of almost all of the classical texts—the *Analects*, *Mozi*, *Mencius*, *Zhongyong*, *Xunzi*, and so on—is that having presented some kind of a philosophical argument they then quite literally break into song. And there seems to be a dividend for both philosopher and song alike in participating and being used in this practice. From the perspective of the song, it is framed and clarified, and is thus reauthorized as a shared and respected repository of ancient meaning. And the philosophers for their trouble get to claim the prestige of a canonical source for the assertion at hand.

The song is a particularly effective addition to the philosophical argument for several reasons. It is persuasive by virtue of being widely known among the audience of the text. Again, the original source of the song is the daily life of the people, where each song is what Schaberg describes as "a manifestation of complete and uncontrollable genuineness."[11] This raw spontaneity and honesty lies in the fact that songs are most often the vehicles of either praise or blame: a public outpouring of approbation for some instance of virtuous conduct, or an irrepressible protest against some injustice. When these philosophical texts repeatedly burst into song, they are taking full advantage of the reader's assumption that such songs do not lie. Thus, when philosophers invoke a song, they not only seek to clarify their arguments, but also seek to attach the indisputable veracity of the song to their claims.

The song further dramatizes the argument and charges it emotionally, bringing the more general and abstract assertions of the text down to earth by locating them in seemingly specific historical situations. Thus, a well-placed song lends veridical force to the philosopher's claims, and at the same time, invests these claims with passion.

It would seem that a great many hands across an expanse of time set down, sorted, re-sorted, edited, and collated the *Daodejing* and the materials that constitute it. Little wonder that the text can initially give its readers the appearance of being fragmentary, disconnected, and occasionally, even of being corrupt. It should not be surprising, then, especially to the modern Western reader who might be used to a more linear and sequential mode of presentation, that the *Daodejing* seems to be something less than a coherent whole. But first impressions in this instance are belied as the architecture of the text emerges from different directions.

First, when we turn to reflect on how the selected wisdom sayings of the *Daodejing* function, we can assume that they, like the repertoire of songs, have a kind of unquestioned veracity that comes from belonging to the people and their tradition. We can further observe that this veracity is made corporate by a reading strategy that co-opts the reader. Two often remarked characteristics of the

Daodejing are palpable absences: it contains no historical detail of any kind, and it offers its readers no doctrines in the sense of general precepts or universalistic laws. The required "framing" of the aphorism by the reader is itself an exercise in nondogmatic philosophizing where the relationship between the text and its student is one of noncoercive collaboration. That is, instead of "the text" providing the reader with a specific historical context or philosophical system, its listeners are required to supply always unique, concrete, and often dramatic scenarios drawn from their own experience to generate the meaning for themselves. This inescapable process in which students through many readings of the text acquire their own unique understanding of its insights informed by their own life experiences is one important element in a kind of constantly evolving coherence. The changing coherence of the text is brought into a sharpening focus as its readers in different times and places continue to make it their own.

Again, there is a greater degree of coherence to the *Daodejing* than a first reading might suggest. Chapters are sometimes grouped around specific themes and subjects. For example, chapters 1 and 2 are centered on the theme of correlativity, chapters 18 and 19 contrast natural and conventional morality, 57 through 61 all begin with recommendations on proper governing of the state, 67 through 69 are about prosecuting war, chapters 74 and 75 deal with political oppression and the common people, and so on. We have appended a thematic index that reveals at least some of such editorial organization.

Another source of coherence in the *Daodejing* lies in the fact that it, like so many classical Chinese texts, is read and appropriated *paronomastically*. That is, a close reading of the text reveals repeated characters and metaphors that awaken in the reader an expanding web of semantic and phonetic associations.

An additional observation to be made is that the rhymed sayings are not themselves a grab-bag miscellany of clever yet sometimes contradictory insights. On the contrary, it would seem that these specific aphorisms have been selected and edited to support the broader purpose of the text. Michael LaFargue and other promi-

nent voices (notably Hal Roth) have argued persuasively that what gives the *Daodejing* its indisputable focus is its overall didactic project. It would seem that the aim of the compilers of the *Daodejing* is to prescribe a regimen of self-cultivation that will enable one to optimize one's experience in the world. These same wisdom passages are an integral element in this process that, when authenticated in the conduct and character of the practitioners, result in their personal transformation. It is important to note that this goal of self-transformation has nothing to do with death, judgment, and an afterlife, nor has it anything to do with the "salvation of the soul" (the traditional concerns of Western eschatology). Instead, such personal growth and consummation is meliorative in the sense of producing the quality of character that makes this world itself a better place.

Having underscored the necessary collaboration between the reader and the text in the production of meaning, we are faced with the question as to our intentions in appending our own commentary after each chapter in this translation. The idea of writing an explanatory "commentary" seems to be as promising in its putative outcome as "explaining" a haiku. The commentary, then, is intended as no more than a suggestive footnote that is successful only to the extent that it sparks the reader's own engagement with the chapter itself. If it is treated as systematic or exhaustive or authoritative, it has ironically betrayed the reader that it is intended to serve.

NOTES TO THE *HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION*

1. Granet (1934):478. In fact, many of the most prominent sinologists, Chinese and Western alike, use their own language, but are quite explicit in rejecting the idea that Chinese cosmology begins from a transcendent Absolute and entails the reality/appearance that arises from such a commitment. See Tang Junyi (1988):100–03, Xiong Shili (1977):180–91, Zhang Dongsun (1995):271–72, Graham (1989):22, Needham (1956): 290, Sivin (1995):3, Hansen (1992):215, Giradot (1983):64.

2. Graham (1990) rehearses the composite legend of a "Laozi" that first came to associate the *Daodejing* with Lao Dan at about 250 BCE.

3. Baxter (1998):233, 249.

4. Ames and Rosemont (1998):38–9.

5. The irony is that terms that are usually used to indicate inference—*gu* 故 and *shiyi* 是以—are often used in the text as mere grammatical markers to link sections that otherwise have little or no connection. See D. C. Lau (1982):139.

6. D. C. Lau (1982):133.

7. LaFargue (1998):263.

8. LaFargue (1998):260.

9. LaFargue (1994):125–74.

10. Schaberg (1999).

11. Schaberg (1999):337.

Philosophical Introduction
Correlative Cosmology—
An Interpretive Context

1. OPTIMIZING EXPERIENCE: *THIS FOCUS AND ITS FIELD*

We will argue that *the* defining purpose of the *Daodejing* is bringing into focus and sustaining a productive disposition that allows for the fullest appreciation of those specific things and events that constitute one's field of experience. The project, simply put, is to get the most out of what each of us is: a quantum of unique experience. It is making this life significant. In his early work in articulating the assumptions underlying Chinese natural cosmology, Tang Junyi is saying something similar when he summarizes what he takes to be the most crucial contribution of Chinese culture broadly. It is

> . . . the spirit of the symbiosis and mutuality between particular and totality. In terms of our understanding this means an unwillingness to isolate the particular from the totality, and in terms of feeling, it means the commitment of the particular to do its best to realize the totality.[1]

If this is indeed the defining problematic of the text, it might help us understand at least one insight conveyed in its title, the "*Daodejing*." The scores of translations that have introduced this text to the Western academy have deferred to the difficulty of making sense of the title by conventionally leaving it untranslated. Alternatively they have simply titled it after its putative author, "the Old Master," still leaving it untranslated as the "*Laozi*."

While almost all translators have skirted the problem of rendering the title into English by simply romanizing it as "*Daodejing*," a few earnest souls have stepped up and offered their best effort, each of them emphasizing either a different dimension of the work itself, or a more subjective understanding of what the text means to them. Herbert A. Giles (1886), for example, underscores the always laconic, often opaque, and sometimes even tentative diction of the text in calling it *The Remains of Lao Tzu*. G. G. Alexander (1895) takes a figurist approach, finding in the text echoes of his own religious sensibilities: *Lao-tsze: The Great Thinker with a Translation of His Thoughts on the Nature and Manifestation of God*. Seeming to rescue this protean piece of literature for perhaps gray but always responsible philosophy, Paul Carus and D. T. Suzuki (1913) render the title: *The Canon of Reason and Virtue: Lao Tzu's Tao Teh King*. But "reason" for these scholars turns out to be "Divine Reason" and the "Son of Heaven" is "the High Priest of the people who must bear the sins of mankind."[2] While sensitivity to the religious dimension of the text (albeit a sensitivity derived from a tradition radically different from its own) is its own virtue, the sin of mankind is certainly increased by half in their willingness to reduce the *Daodejing*'s exquisite poetry to rather unremarkable doggerel (even doggerel has its standards). Witness chapter 6:

> The valley spirit not expires,
> Mysterious woman 'tis called by the sires,
> The mysterious woman's door, to boot,
> Is called of heaven and earth the root.
> Forever and aye it seems to endure
> And its use is without effort sure.

Perhaps the most widely known and accepted English translation of the title is Arthur Waley's (1934) *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*. While seemingly secular and more dynamic, Waley's popular title still suggests our familiar "One-many" metaphysics. In this title, the demonstrative and possessive pronouns nominalize "*the* Way" and isolate it metaphysically as the "One" source of order for a uni-

verse that is ordered by it, locating the energy of creative transformation in this superordinated agency as its "Power." Further, the use of a capital "W" invests this "Way" semantically as a metonym for the transcendent and Divine. Waley's language might sound more liberating, but his title still promises a version of the *Daodejing* located squarely within a worldview more familiar to his readers than relevant to the text.

We want to introduce a translation of the title that attempts, however imperfectly, to capture the defining purpose of the text stated above: bringing into focus and sustaining a productive disposition that allows for the fullest appreciation of those specific things and events that constitute one's field of experience. Of course, there is no one correct translation of the title, *Daodejing*. Were we to give priority to the cosmological insights provided by the text, we might render *Daodejing* as: "The Classic of This Focus *(*de 德*)* and Its Field *(*dao 道*)*." If instead we wanted to emphasize the outcome of living according to this cosmology, we might translate it as: "Feeling at Home in the World." But with deliberation we choose to underscore the human project that has prompted the articulation of Daoist cosmology and is inspired by it. Thus we translate *Daodejing* as "Making This Life Significant." The Philosophical Introduction that follows will stand as our clarification of this translation, and as an argument that seeks to defend it.

2. DAOIST COSMOLOGY: AN INTERPRETIVE CONTEXT

We begin our argument for translating *Daodejing* as "Making This Life Significant" from Daoist cosmology. Taking a closer look at the interpretation of both the title and the content of the *Daodejing* as "The Classic of This Focus (*de* 德) and Its Field (*dao* 道)," we might first ask what does the expression "this focus" mean? The Daoist correlative cosmology begins from the assumption that the endless stream of always novel yet still continuous situations we encounter are real, and hence, that there is ontological parity among the things and events that constitute our lives. As a parody on

Parmenides, who claimed that "only Being is," we might say that for the Daoist, "only *beings* are," or taking one step further in underscoring the reality of the process of change itself, "only *becomings* are." That is, the Daoist does not posit the existence of some permanent reality behind appearances, some unchanging substratum, some essential defining aspect behind the accidents of change. Rather, there is just the ceaseless and usually cadenced flow of experience.

In fact, the absence of the "One behind the many" metaphysics makes our uncritical use of the philosophic term "cosmology" to characterize Daoism, at least in the familiar classical Greek sense of this word, highly problematic. In early Greek philosophy, the term "kosmos" connotes a clustered range of meanings, including *arche* (originative, material, and efficient cause/ultimate undemonstrable principle), *logos* (underlying organizational principle), *theoria* (contemplation), *nomos* (law), *theios* (divinity), *nous* (intelligibility). In combination, this cluster of terms conjures forth some notion of a single-ordered Divine[3] universe governed by natural and moral laws that are ultimately intelligible to the human mind. This "kosmos" terminology is culturally specific, and if applied uncritically to discuss the classical Daoist worldview, introduces a cultural reductionism that elides and thus conceals truly significant differences.

The Daoist understanding of "cosmos" as the "ten thousand things" means that, in effect, the Daoists have no concept of cosmos at all insofar as that notion entails a coherent, single-ordered world which is in any sense enclosed or defined. The Daoists are, therefore, primarily, "acosmotic" thinkers.[4]

One implication of this distinction between a "cosmotic" and an "acosmotic" worldview is that, in the absence of some overarching *arche* or "beginning" as an explanation of the creative process, and under conditions which are thus "an-archic" in the philosophic sense of this term, although the "nature" of something might indeed refer to "kinds," such "natural kinds" would be no more than generalizations made by analogizing among similar phenomena. That is, difference is prior to identifiable similarities.

The Chinese binomial most frequently translated as *kosmos* is *yuzhou* 宇宙, a term that overtly expresses the interdependence between time and space. The "world" as *shijie* 世界 is likewise expressed literally as the "boundaries between one's generation and the tradition." For ancient China, time pervades everything and is not to be denied. Time is not independent of things, but a fundamental aspect of them. Unlike traditions that devalue both time and change in pursuit of the timeless and eternal, in classical China things are always transforming (*wuhua* 物化). In fact, in the absence of some claim to objectivity that "objectifies" and thus makes "objects" of phenomena, the Chinese tradition does not have the separation between time and entities that would allow for either time without entities, or entities without time—there is no possibility of either an empty temporal corridor or an eternal anything (in the sense of being timeless).

What encourages us within a Western metaphysical tradition to separate time and space is our inclination, inherited from the Greeks, to see things in the world as fixed in their formal aspect, and thus as bounded and limited. If instead of giving ontological privilege to the formal aspect of phenomena, we were to regard them as having parity in their formal and changing aspects, we might be more like classical China in temporalizing them in light of their ceaseless transformation, and conceive of them more as "events" than as "things." In this processual worldview, each phenomenon is some unique current or impulse within a temporal flow. In fact, it is the pervasive and collective capacity of the events of the world to transform continuously that is the actual meaning of time.

A second assumption of Daoist "cosmology" (now using this term "cosmology" under advisement) that follows from this acknowledgment of the reality of both change and the uniqueness that follows from it is that particular "things" are in fact processual events, and are thus *intrinsically* related to the other "things" that provide them context. Said another way, these processual events are porous, flowing into each other in the ongoing transformations we call experience. Formation and function—the shape of things and what they do to whom—are interdependent and mutually de-

termining characteristics of these events. It is for this reason that things resist "definition" in the literal sense of *finis*—a practice that delineates some ostensibly discrete boundary around them, and thus reduces all relations to external, extrinsic transactions. With fluid and shifting boundaries among things, integrity for any particular thing does not mean *being* or *staying* whole, or even actualizing its own internal potential. Rather, integrity is something *becoming whole in its co-creative relationships with other things*. Integrity is consummatory relatedness.

Integrity in this sense of becoming whole in one's relations with other things is a co-creative process in which one shapes and is shaped by one's environing circumstances. Not only is change an integral characteristic of things, but real creativity is a condition of this continuing transformative process. That is, our immediate experience is composed of fluid, porous events that entail both persistence and the spontaneous emergence of novelty, both continuity and disjunction. In this evolving order, there is at once a familiar rhythm to life, and the newness of each moment.

The irrepressible presencing of novelty within the context of what already exists guarantees the uniqueness of each emerging event, and preempts notions such as strict, linear causality, absolute predictability, and reversibility. The world is ever new. And the propensity of things—the force of circumstances—inching ahead in its seeming ineluctability, is always underdetermined, attended as it is by the contingency of real novelty.

In our introduction to *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the* Zhongyong, we introduce a distinction between power and creativity, and follow A. N. Whitehead in questioning the appropriateness of using "creativity" in the familiar *creatio ex nihilo* model that we associate with Judeo-Christian cosmogony. Whitehead argues that any robust sense of creativity requires that creativity itself is more primordial than God.

In the received Judeo-Christian tradition, the all-*power*ful God *determines* things, *makes* things. God, as Omnipotent Other Who commands the world into being, is *Maker* of the world, not its

Creator. In the presence of the perfection that is God, nothing can be added or taken away. There can be no novelty or spontaneity. Thus, all subsequent acts of "creativity" are in fact secondary and derivative exercises of power. Creativity can make sense only in a processual world that admits of ontological parity among its constitutive events and of the spontaneous emergence of novelty.

Power is to be construed as the production of intended effects determined by external causation. Real creativity, on the other hand, entails the spontaneous production of novelty, irreducible through causal analysis. Power is exercised with respect to and over others. Creativity is always reflexive and is exercised over and with respect to "self." And since self in a processive world is always communal, creativity is contextual, transactional, and multidimensional. Thus creativity is both *self*-creativity and *co*-creativity. Either everything shares in creativity, or there is no creativity. Indeed, it is this transactional, co-creative character of all creative processes that precludes the project of self-cultivation and self-*creation* from being egoistic.

One further point can be made with respect to the creativity that the spontaneous emergence of novelty makes possible. The radical sense of creativity that we associate with "bringing into being" in a *creatio ex nihilo* sensibility is too isolated and extreme for this idea within the Daoist tradition. The term *dao*, like the terms "building," "learning," and "work," entails both the process and the created product. It is the locus and the time frame within which the always contextualized creativity takes place.

When the *Zhuangzi* observes that "we are one with all things 萬物與我爲一," this insight is a recognition that each and every unique phenomenon is continuous with every other phenomenon within one's field of experience. But is this an exhaustive claim: are we talking about *all* phenomena in the continuing present? Because the world is processional and because its creativity is *ab initio* rather than *ex nihilo*—a contextual creativity expressed across the careers of its constitutive phenomena—any answer to this question would have to be provisional. Phenomena are never either atomistically discrete or complete. The *Zhuangzi* recounts:

> With the ancients, understanding had gotten somewhere. Where was that? Its height, its extreme, that to which no more could be added, was this: Some of these ancients thought that there had never begun to be things. The next lot thought that there are things, but that there had never begun to be boundaries among them. . . .[5]

A third assumption in the Daoist "cosmology" is that life broadly construed is entertained through and only through these same phenomena that constitute our experience. The field of experience is always construed from one perspective or another. There is no view from nowhere, no external perspective, no decontextualized vantage point. We are all in the soup. The intrinsic, constitutive relations that obtain among things make them reflexive and mutually implicating, residing together within the flux and flow.

This mutuality does not in any way negate the uniqueness of the particular perspective. Although any and all members of a family have implicated within them and thus present (rather than represent) the entire family, all members constitute and experience the family from their own particular point of view. And members in making the family their own quite appropriately have a distinctive proper name.

A corollary to this radical perspectivism is that each particular element in our experience is holographic in the sense that it has implicated within it the entire field of experience. This single flower has leaves and roots that take their nourishment from the environing soil and air. And the soil contains the distilled nutrients of past growth and decay that constitute the living ecological system in which all of its participants are organically interdependent. The sun enables the flower to process these nutrients, while the atmosphere that caresses the flower also nourishes and protects it. By the time we have "cashed out" the complex of conditions that conspire to produce and conserve this particular flower, one ripple after another in an ever-extending series of radial circles, we have implicated the entire cosmos within it without remainder. For the Daoist, there is an intoxicating bottomlessness to any particular event in our experience. The entire cosmos resides happily in the smile on the dirty face of this one little child.

It is only through husbandry that you come early to accept the way,
And coming early to accept the way is what is called redoubling
your accumulation of character.
If you redouble your accumulation of character, all obstacles can be
overcome,
And if all obstacles can be overcome, none can discern your limit.
Where none can discern your limit,
You can preside over the realm.
In presiding over the mother of the realm
You can be long-enduring.

In this processual Daoist cosmology, continuity is prior to individuality, and the particular character or disposition of each event is thus an ongoing distinctive achievement. That is, each event distinguishes itself by developing its own uniqueness within the totality. And freedom is neither the absence of constraint nor some isolatable originality, but the full contribution of this achieved uniqueness to a shared community.

A fourth presupposition of Daoist cosmology is that we are not passive participants in our experience. The energy of transformation lies within the world itself as an integral characteristic of the events that constitute it. There is no appeal to some external efficient cause: no Creator God or primordial determinative principle. In the absence of any preordained design associated with such an external cause, this energy of transformation is evidenced in the mutual accommodation and co-creativity that is expressed in the relations that obtain among things. When turned to proper effect, this energy can make the most of the creative possibilities of any given situation. This kind of responsive participation we have characterized elsewhere as *ars contextualis*: the art of contextualizing.[8] *Ars contextualis* is a way of living and relating to a world that quite simply seeks to get the most out of the diversity of experience.

3. GETTING THE MOST OUT OF ONE'S INGREDIENTS

The reality of time, novelty, and change; the persistence of particularity; the intrinsic, constitutive nature of relationships; the perspectival

nature of experience—taken together, these several presuppositions that ground the Daoist worldview and provide Daoism with its interpretative context set the terms for optimizing our experience. Or said in a more metaphorical way, there is a strategy in the *Daodejing* for getting the most out of the ingredients of our lives.

The Confucian focus on the family (*jia* 家) serves as a starting point for understanding this Daoist sensibility, for the Confucian project of self-consummation, although decidedly different in its parameters, has a similar objective. We have argued elsewhere that the family serves as a pervasive metaphor for social, political, and even religious relations within the Confucian worldview.[9] The *Analects* 1.2 states explicitly that the way of conducting oneself most productively as a human being emerges out of the achievement of robust filial relations:

> Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way (*dao* 道) will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁).

The underlying assumption is that persons are more likely to give themselves utterly and unconditionally to their families than to any other human institution. Thus, the family as an institution provides the model for the process of making one's way by allowing the persons who constitute it both to invest in, and to get the most out of, the collective human experience. Promoting the centrality of family relations is an attempt to ensure that entire persons without remainder are invested in each of their actions.

The power of the family to function as the radial locus for human growth is much enhanced when natural family and communal relations are perceived as being exhaustive, without being construed as a distraction from, in competition with, or dependent upon any more fundamental relations, especially those characteristic of transcendental religiousness. It is from the family expanding outward that persons emerge as objects of profound communal, cultural, and ultimately religious deference, where the focus of religious rev-

erence remains ancestral rather than supernatural or otherworldly. Human relations, far from being subordinated to one's relationship with one's God, are the concrete locus out of which religious feelings emerge.

Ambrose King makes the argument that relationships within the classical Chinese cosmology are construed broadly in familial terms.[10] We have gone further in suggesting that family is a more adequate metaphor than Joseph Needham's notion of "organism" for thinking about Chinese cosmology, and that arguably *all* relationships within this world are familial.[11] This metaphor certainly has application to the *Daodejing*, where rulership as an institution is naturalized on the model of the family, and explicit images of human procreativity—mother and infant—are projected onto the cosmos.

In fact, the sustained Grand Analogy that pervades the *Daodejing* is: *dao* is to the world as ruler ought to be to the people. *Dao*—the discernible rhythm and regularity of the world as it unfolds around and through us—is nonimpositional: "Way-making (*dao*) really does things noncoercively."[12] This attitude is carried over into the human world. In governing effectively, coercion is perceived as impoverishing and dehumanizing. So the consummate political model in Daoism, corresponding to the consummate experience itself, is described as *wuwei* ("noncoercive activity") and *ziran* ("self-so-ing," or "what is spontaneously so"). As stated in chapter 17, under the sway of nonimpositional rulership, the people are able to be spontaneous.

> With the most excellent rulers, their subjects only know that they
> are there,
> The next best are the rulers they love and praise,
> Next are the rulers they hold in awe,
> And the worst are the rulers they disparage. . . .
> With all things accomplished and the work complete
> The common people say, "We are spontaneously like this."

Spontaneity must be clearly distinguished from randomness and impetuosity. In fact, far from being "uncaused," it is the novelty

made possible by a cultivated disposition. Spontaneity is the punctuated flow and pressure of the calligrapher's brush; it is the singing dexterity of Cook Ding's cleaver.

Spontaneous action is a mirroring response. As such, it is action that accommodates the "other" to whom one is responding. It takes the other on its own terms. Such spontaneity involves recognizing the continuity between oneself and the other, and responding in such a way that one's own actions promote the interests and well-being both of oneself and of the other. This does not lead to reductive imitation but to complementarity and coordination. Handshakes and embraces are actions that presuppose a recognition of the relational stance of the other, and that complete that stance. In the dancehall of the cosmos, when the music for the next dance starts to play and partners open their arms to each other, the dance proceeds as a dyadic harmony of nonassertive actions.

4. APPRECIATING THE PARTICULAR

This Daoist theme of optimizing experience might be explored more concretely by borrowing a memorable passage from William James. James alludes to a classical Western nursery rhyme—yet another kind of "sound from the ground"—to reflect on precisely the issue of how to get the most out of one's life experience. He at once asks and answers the question "What Makes a Life Significant?":

> Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence, as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a maniac? Or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anesthesia as regards Jill's magical importance? Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely poor Jill's palpitating little life-throbs *are* among the wonders of creation, *are* worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. He struggles toward a union with her inner life, divining her feelings, anticipating her desires,

> understanding her limits as manfully as he can, and yet inadequately, too; for he is also afflicted with some blindness, even here. Whilst we, dead clods that we are, do not even seek after these things, but are contented that that portion of eternal fact named Jill should be for us as if it were not. Jill, who knows her inner life, knows that Jack's way of taking it—so importantly—is the true and serious way; and she responds to the truth in him by taking him truly and seriously, too. May the ancient blindness never wrap its clouds about either of them again! Where would any of *us* be, were there no one willing to know us as we really are or ready to repay us for *our* insight by making recognizant return? We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic, and important way.
>
> If you say that this is absurd, and that we cannot be in love with everyone at once, I merely point out to you that, as a matter of fact, certain persons do exist with all enormous capacity for friendship and for taking delight in other people's lives; and that such persons know more of truth than if their hearts were not so big.[13]

What is particularly instructive about this excerpt from James is his claim that the site of knowing the truth about Jill is Jack's heart. Both the magical importance of Jill as someone valued and the absolute truth about Jill as a matter of fact are realized concretely in these immediate feelings. Persons are constituted by their relationships, and these relations are valorized and made real in the process of persons bringing their fields of experience into focus. And it is Jack who focuses Jill with optimum resolution. The unmediated acknowledgment of Jill as one of the wonders of creation resides in the affective relationships that give her context, particularly, her Jack. This is only to say that the creative transactions—the doings and undergoings among persons—are a disclosure of their feelings for one another. Thus, affective tone and the subjective form of feeling are always entailed in the uniquely perspectival locus of the co-creative process. We feel our way forward into novel experience.

When we turn to the Chinese language in which this Daoist worldview is sedimented, James's insight into the inseparability of fact and value—the cognitive and the affective, thinking and feel-

"Returning" is how way-making moves,
And "weakening" is how it functions.
The events of the world arise from the determinate,
And the determinate arises from the indeterminate.

The most basic meaning of "returning" restates what has been said above. As Tang Junyi reports, cosmology is not simply a linear zero-sum victory of order over chaos driven by some external cause, but rather is the endless alternation between rising and falling, emerging and collapsing, moving and attaining equilibrium that is occasioned by its own internal energy of transformation.[16] This cosmic unfolding is not "cyclical" in the sense of reversibility and replication, but is rather a continuing spiral that is always coming back upon itself and yet is ever new.

It is the disposition of all things that their present condition entails its opposite. The *Daodejing* observes in chapter 58:

It is upon misfortune that good fortune leans,
It is within good fortune itself that misfortune crouches in ambush,
And where does it all end?

This insight into the mutuality of opposites has several implications. Perhaps most obviously, young is "young-becoming-old"; dark is "dark-becoming-light"; soft is "soft-becoming-hard." In the fullness of time, any and all of the qualities that define each event will yield themselves up to their opposites. Those who are born into the world and live to grow old will eventually die. Anything that embarks upon this journey toward fruition has in its first few steps set off on the long road home. And it is at the moment of setting out as a newborn infant that a person has maximum potency. Thus, the journey can fairly be characterized both as a returning and a gradual weakening of one's initial promise. And it is by effectively husbanding this potency over one's career that one is able to make the most of one's experience.

By anticipating the changes in your conditions, and by remaining focused despite the unavoidable vicissitudes that are visited upon you as you move along the continuum from beginning to end, you are able to optimize the possibilities at each moment and thus en-

joy the ride to its fullest. Cultivating a proper disposition and being prepared for the seasons through which you pass from birth to death will enable you to consistently get the most out of your circumstances. It is your resolution—the intensity found at the center—that will keep your life experience in focus, establish you as an object of deference, and enable you to enjoy both a productive life and a healthy death.

Said another way, to lose focus and stray off course along the way while on this journey will precipitate reversion. Squandered energy while young will age you prematurely. As it says in chapter 55:

> For something to be old while in its prime
> Is called a departure from the way of things.
> And whatever departs from the way of things will come to an untimely end.

Aggression directed at others will, like Monsieur Guillotine's guillotine, come back to shorten your own life. Again, as in chapter 74:

> To stand in for the executioner in killing people
> Is to stand in for the master carpenter in cutting his lumber.
> Of those who would thus stand in for the master carpenter,
> Few get away without injuring their own hands.

The world around us is always an interface between persistent form and novelty, the familiar honeycombed by the unexpected. The new emerges within the context and the security of the ordinary, and in due course, what was new overtakes and supplants the ordinary, and what was ordinary becomes an increasingly fragile memory for those who can still remember. In time, the new becomes the newly ordinary, and the ordinary returns whence it came.

6. AESTHETIC HARMONY

At this point we would like to introduce a few technical terms of aesthetic analysis that might be applied in explaining the particularly Daoist mode of attaining and sustaining harmony. This vocabulary is drawn from the work of A. N. Whitehead's *Process and*

Reality, a philosophical work that is grounded in an aesthetic sense of order.[17]

According to Whitehead, there are four fundamental variables that contribute to the achievement of that harmony deriving from a balance of simplicity and complexity. These variables are *triviality*, *vagueness*, *narrowness*, and *width*.

Triviality involves an excess of differentiation. It is complexity without contrast. An order is trivial when it is characterized by an excess of differentiation among its elements, all of which are entertained equally and are given equal importance. Systems theory would call triviality an excess of information leading to the production of dissonance: it is mere "noise." It is chaos. There is no organizing strategy, no hierarchy, no differential importance. This is sheer multiplicity without focus or discretion.

Vagueness, as Whitehead uses the term, is an excess of identification. In a vague order, the differences among items are irrelevant factors in constituting the order. It is simplicity without contrast. The vague order displays an undifferentiated commonality of character. Vagueness is a bland field without particular focus; it is the facile and unconsidered use of generalizations.

Narrowness is an emphasis upon certain components in an order at the expense of others. It is simplicity in search of intense contrast. An order dominated by narrowness has an intensity of focus that backgrounds all other strongly differentiated factors. Matter-of-fact gives way to importance.

Finally, *width* involves the coordination of differentiated elements, each with its own unique contribution to the order. It is complexity that sacrifices some contrast for depth and scope. The kind of discussion one would hope to have in an interdisciplinary university seminar would likely contribute to an order characterized by width. Width involves the balancing of narrowness and vagueness.

A productive order has all four characteristics in various forms of background/foreground combinations. Vagueness, and the mild identification it entails, when focused by the narrow, produces the contrasts appropriate to the production of harmony. Contrast in-