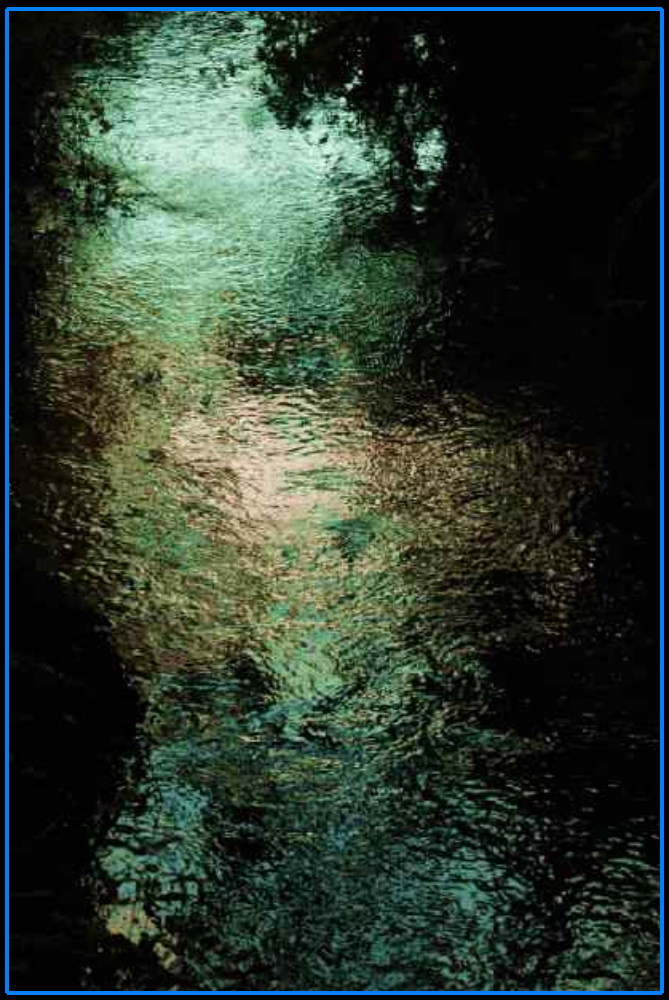

The Process of Reality

The curious continuity between early Chinese Taoism and early Greek philosophy

second edition

Bob Trubshaw

For nearly forty years Bob Trubshaw has been deeply influenced by the worldview of Chinese Taoism. Although Taoism has been a major part of Chinese culture for over two millennia, and as such is one of the more important world religions, Western awareness of Taoism is mostly through distorted and over-popularised interpretations. Fortunately, in recent years new scholarship has shed more light on exactly what early Taoists living nearly 2,500 years ago were thinking. Intriguingly these seem to be very similar to ideas being put forward at almost the same time by pre-Socratic Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus. By looking at well-established trade routes there was almost certainly contact between ancient Greece and China, via the Middle East and India.

The opening chapters of *The Process of Reality* look in detail at this curious continuity that defies a simple explanation of 'East meets West' and instead suggests roots going back well into prehistory. The final chapters consider what 'reality' looks like when seen from a Taoist rather than Western perspective. And this is not simply an academic exercise as Bob Trubshaw also discusses how, for him, it is also a 'lived experience' of 'emergent creativity' pervaded by something known to the Chinese as *ch'i* and to medieval clergy as *potentia*.

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Heart of Albion

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Preface to the first edition

> In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning.
>
> T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker', *The Four Quartets*

This essay has had a long gestation. As I describe in the penultimate chapter, the origins go back more than three decades. Even my attempts to pull my thoughts together go back several years. Some of the ideas in this essay first appeared in *Singing Up the Country* (Trubshaw 2011: Ch.10) but are much more fully explored here. Jeremy Harte and Alby Stone commented on a shorter early draft written in 2010. Alby eliminated some key weaknesses (though he may think I've not eliminated enough) and Jeremy's remarks provoked a major rethink of what was realistic to propose. Munir Hamilton drew my attention to the Sufi ideas of *tariqa*.

While all writing projects have something of the nature of an expedition, this one seems to blur into a wandering more akin to the journey of my own life, and the personal changes along the way. Over the few weeks while I have been giving as much attention as possible to completing the draft I have a sense of having travelled inwardly – much more so than with any previous writing project.

No matter how mundane or otherwise writing may be, composing anything more substantial than a shopping list is, de facto, a creative activity. This is when ideas 'shape up'. And, with any luck, the initial ideas lead to more ideas and insights – the 'ideas have ideas' so to

speak. That writing is a creative process makes it as one with the Tao – making this essay a product of the very processes it seeks to outline. And if that remark seems a tad obtuse then I suggest you reread this preface after you have got to the end…

Finally, some prefatory pedantry. I am aware that scholarly romanisation of Chinese now favours 'Laozi's *Daode jing*' – or even 'the *Laozi*' – over 'Lao Tsu's *Tao te Ching*' but I am assuming that readers of this essay will be more familiar with the older usage, even though it gives a misleading indication of how the words are pronounced in Chinese. Other authors have romanised his name as Laotze, Lao Tze, Lao Tse or Laotzu. Likewise I assume readers may have heard of Chuang Tsu (also romanised as Chuang Tzu although the preferred modern spelling is Zhuangzi) or the *I Ching* (now romanised as *Yinjing*). I have also retained the older form 'Taoism' (pronounced 'Dowism') as the current romanisation as 'Daoism' also fails to represent how the Chinese word (see ideograms below) is pronounced (simply because Western languages have no counterpart to the leading phoneme). Likewise I have retained *ch'i* and *ching* rather than the newer forms of *qi* and *jing*. People who are scholarly enough to know about such matters will be familiar with the older spellings. And everyone else will feel in more familiar territory – although their pronunciation of the words will probably bear no resemblance to any Chinese dialect!

On the same level of scholarly pedantry, Heraclitus is more correctly spelt Herakleitos. He was more likely to have pronounced his name as Hera-KLYtos rather than HerAC-letus. The reference to 'Mr Heraclitus' in the opening chapter is a whimsical nod of the head in respect to both John Michell and Paul Screeton (see Screeton 2010: xx).

My thanks to various purveyors of *pu erh* teas and players of the *go chin* (also called *qin, guqin* or *qixianqin*) for adding all the right sorts

Modern ideograms for 'Taoism'.

of ambience. And my greatest thanks to the *ch'i* of the henge bank here at Avebury and to Judi – without whom this essay would not have become part of the myriad things.

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury

June 2012

P.S. Thanks too to Terri Bradshaw for spotting a 'howler'.

Preface to the first edition

Ever since I first spotted the 'curious continuity between early Chinese Taoism and early Greek philosophy' which forms the subject of this essay I have been keeping my eye out for academic research which recognises the same continuity. And, much to my surprise, with the exception of Charles Kahn (1979: 297–302) and Victor Mair (1990) (both discussed in the main text) who tentatively look at the trade of goods and ideas into south-western China in the mid-first millennium BCE there seemed to be an absence of such research.

However, in June 2019 I happened to read a book published twenty years before on Japanese mandalas (Grotenhuis 1999). Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis summarises the work of Edward Schafer who established that the Western zodiac was known in China by the sixth century BCE (Schafer 1977: 10; cited in Grotenhuis 1999: 119), although during the European medieval era it was superseded by a different zodiac – but retaining the Western twelve divisions.

Knowledge of the Western zodiac precedes the overlap of ideas in both Heraclitus and early Daoism by about two hundred years. This is itself considerable confirmation of a 'curious continuity'. More especially, the Western zodiac would have been known to Chinese 'diviners' as the main interest of this symbolism would have been to astrologers. These are most likely the same people who would be using early writing to record divinations made using heat-cracked tortoise shells and such like.

And, even more importantly, a zodiac expresses an ontological 'ideology'. Far from being just a superficial 'fad' or fashion, ontological concepts are usually close to the core of a culture's worldview. As Scafer states, astronomy and religion are inseparable (Schafer 1977: 3; cited in Grotenhuis 1999: 119)

Schafer notes that the Western zodiac is first known in Chaldean culture (612–539 BCE) and so may have spread further afield as Babylonian culture steadily spread through the Middle East and into the Greek-speaking societies of the eastern Mediterranean.

The original edition of this essay was written with the underlying premise of 'isn't it curious that there are parallels between Greek and Chinese culture in the sixth century BCE' and sets out seemingly provisional evidence to support the idea of an origin in a culture somewhere in between. In the light of Schafer's recognition of a zodiac seemingly originating with the Chaldeans also being part of Chinese culture then the whole tone of this essay needs to be rewritten on the basis 'there is already a sixth century BCE, precedent for the influence of Middle Eastern culture and here's a whole load more evidence.' However there seems little to benefit from such a radical rewrite – I simply ask the reader to bear in mind Schafer's research while reading what follows, and to adjust their perspective on my remarks accordingly.

Apart from this additional preface and relevant additions to the bibliography there are no changes to the text of the first edition.

Bob Trubshaw

Wymeswold

July 2019

Chapter One

Stepping into the river with Heraclitus

I travelled 2,500 years to the eastern Mediterranean to the town of Ephesus (now in Turkey but then part of the Greek empire), to meet the early Greek philosopher, Heraclitus.

> 'Mr Heraclitus, where I come from you're best known for saying "You can't step in the same river twice."'

'Well, I'm pleased they've heard of me so far in the future. But that's not really right. I actually said "We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not."'

> 'So are you saying that no one ever steps in the same river twice, as the river changes?'

'And the person changes too. Indeed, everything flows, nothing stands still. Is there anything alive that doesn't change?'

> 'Seemingly not. But is there anything that stands still, that endures?'

'Nothing endures but change.'

> 'One of your contemporaries, like you a poet-philosopher, said "Stay with the timeless flow" and also used water as an example, when he said "The highest good is like water." Had you heard these sayings?'

'No, indeed not. But he sounds like a man after my own manner. Who was he?'

> 'We only know his nickname – the Old Master or the Old Boy, which in his own language is Lao Tsu.'

'Here in Ephesus we trade with many distant places, and the traders bring with them not just goods but a great many ideas from places to the east. Indeed, I have spoken many times with Magi from Persia and followers of the ancient religion of Zoroastra from further east again. But often we know too little of each other's languages to discuss deeper matters in detail. Is Lao Tzu one of those people?'

> 'No, he lived further east again and to the north, in China.'

'Ah ha, the land where the mysterious silk is made. We hear of that land only in myths. I had not heard that they had poets or philosophers. Do you know what else he said?'

> 'Well at times he sounds much like you – he is enigmatic and at times difficult to understand.'

'Blah! No need to take seriously those who call me The Riddler and The Obscure – those who do are simply revealing their own inabilities and presumptions! As I have often said, there is a greater need to extinguish hubris than there is a blazing fire. Instead, people that love wisdom must be acquainted with very many things indeed. However much learning about things does not teach understanding – else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras. Was Lao Tzu such a one too?'

> 'I think not. He also said that "The great Tao flows everywhere…"'

'What is the great Tao?'

> 'It refers to the ultimate, the nameless – it is said that the Tao that can be told is not the timeless Tao. However Tao is often translated as "way" – but could just as easily be translated as "process" or "flow". Indeed Lao Tzu says of the Tao "Being great, it flows."'

'Ah ha, indeed a man of my kind! His "flow" sounds rather like my "flux". Are all his sayings about the water and flow?'

> 'Many are, but a great deal else has come down to us. He also says the way – the Tao – of heaven is like the bending of a bow as the harmonious structure of the world depends on opposite tension, like that of the bow and lyre.'

'Ah ha! The bow is indeed life, even though its purpose is death. The balance between the tension in the string and the strength of the bow is a good example of opposition bringing concord.'

> 'That too sounds almost like what Lao Tzu wrote. His followers went on to make much of the dualisms, such as high and low, male and female, hot and cold, being just two aspects of a larger whole. Is that similar to what you meant when you referred to night and day being the same?'

'Exactly! It seems he and I ought to meet up!'

> 'Would I be right in thinking that night and day are part of a flow, a process of mutual creation? What might be called a dialectic processes?'

'"Dialectic" is a new word to me, please explain.'

> 'Well, for example by creating, say, the idea of plenty we simultaneously create an idea of the absence of plenty, of famine. In other words, one idea is matched by what it excludes.'

'Yes, yes. The cosmos is full of examples, as day yields night, so winter summer, war peace, plenty famine. All things change. Best to say simply that the way up and the way down are one and the same.

'You said you come from 2,500 years in the future. What do you know of my followers?'

> 'Well scholars were still quoting from your book a thousand years after you wrote it. But, within a century or two of your death, philosophers called Plato and Socrates and their followers took Greek philosophy in other directions. It is their ideas that have dominated Western thinking for the last two millennia. Your ideas of change did not really feature in their works… '

'Bhah! So they listened to that dimwit Parmenides! "Change is impossible… " Blah, makes you want to weep! He himself explains that the world of appearances is false and deceitful – but couldn't see the falsehood and deceit in his own writings though! Could only see what he expected to see. But if you do not expect the unexpected you will not find it, for it is hard to be sought out and difficult.'

'Mr Heraclitus, that is an excellent thought to ponder on. Thank you for sharing your ideas with me.'

Chapter Two

The life and times of Heraclitus

> 'We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not.'
>
> Heraclitus

The writings of Heraclitus have come down to us only as short quotations in much later works. And the oldest of these later works to have survived, at least as fragments, were composed about a thousand years after his death. Any attempt to study his works and ideas must peer through the decidedly thick mists of time and scholarly research.

In the fictional interview acting as an introduction to this essay I have woven the pithiest of Heraclitus's remarks into a context which, while it may make some sort of sense to modern sensibilities, may of course simply be a bad case of misquoting him to fit my prior assumptions.

Heraclitus was known in his own lifetime as 'The Obscure' and 'The Riddler'. He is known to have written a short book, which was copied many times in later centuries – although no copy has come down to us. The many copies indicate that his ideas continued to be of interest. Modern historians have approached his legacy in any manner of ways but few so enthusiastically as Charles Kahn who begins the preface of his book called *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* thus:

> Heraclitus was a great prose artist, one of the most powerful stylists not only of Greek antiquity but of world literature. He was also a major thinker, perhaps the only pre-Socratic philosopher whose thought is of more than historical interest today.
>
> (Kahn 1979: ix)

Kahn considers that Heraclitus should be thought of as both a philosopher and a poet who 'was even more original' than Dante (Kahn 1979: x; 7). Other scholars have judged Heraclitus's thinking as 'subtle' and his remarks as oracular (Guthrie 1962: 413; 414 fn2; 426). Kahn sums up these other views fairly succinctly:

> In spite of much obscurity and uncertainty of interpretation, it does appear that Heraclitus' thought possessed a comprehensive unity which (conceivably because of a lack of information about Anaximander) seems completely new. Practically all aspects of the world are explained systematically, in relation to a central discovery – that natural changes of all kinds are regular and balanced, and that the cause of this balance is fire, the common constituent of things that was also termed their Logos. Human behaviour, as much as changes in the external world, is governed by the same Logos; the soul is made of fire, part of which (like part of the whole world-order) is extinguished.
>
> (Kahn 1979: 212)

It would be long time after Heraclitus before people began to distinguish 'metaphorical' from 'literal' thinking. So to Heraclitus and his contemporaries the idea that all is fire was essentially literal. But as such ideas were expressed through 'poetic' discourse this way of thinking was 'deeper' than the thinking of ordinary people. They were *explanations* rather than merely *descriptions* of reality. The key to this evolves (after Heraclitus's time) into the differences between the Greek words *mythos* and *logos*. In ancient Greece the *mythos* were the declarations of a respected person, whereas the *logos* had to be argued for (W. Doty pers. com.).

Indeed, to make any attempt to understand Heraclitus's epigramatic fragments we need to understand his life and times.

What do we mean by an 'early Greek philosopher'?

Heraclitus is one of a group of people living in the eastern Mediterranean around two-and-a-half thousand years ago who are now referred to as 'early Greek philosophers'. This term requires a number of qualifications. Firstly, while they lived in Greek-speaking cities they did not necessarily live in places we now think of as Greece – many of them, including Heraclitus, lived on what is now the Mediterranean coast of Turkey.

Secondly, we describe them as 'philosophers'. However their contemporaries thought of them as 'students of nature' or 'natural philosophers'. If we think of the original sense of the Greek word 'philosopher' as 'lover of wisdom' then we are closer to their world-view than the narrower modern sense of what a philosopher does. They were also, in the language of archaic Greek poetry, *bathymetes* and *bathyphrons* – meaning 'deep thinking' and 'deep pondering' respectively. The metaphorical use of the word 'deep' here denotes the intellectual and the spiritual – so 'deep pain' in Greek denoted mental or spiritual anguish. While modern thinking uses metaphors of inwardness and – for spirituality – upwardness, we nevertheless innately recognise the idea behind 'deep thinking' and its links with philosophy.

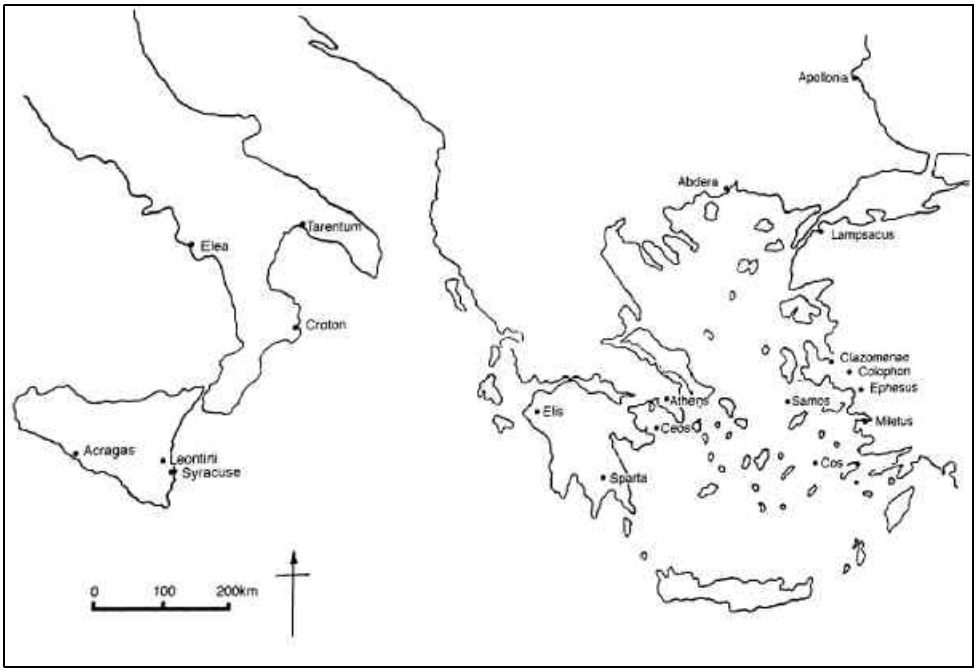
Thirdly, although they are indisputably the oldest-known 'Greek philosophers' we simply do not know if there were any 'Greek philosophers' earlier than them – and, more importantly, to what extent their ideas are the development of an older tradition or, even more plausibly, the development of idea brought to the attention of the Greeks through trade links.

However, despite qualifications over all three words – 'early', 'Greek' and 'philosopher' – they are widely known as early Greek philosophers. But there are a number of different 'schools' of thinking among them – although, confusingly, there is also some overlapping of the names given to the different schools. There is, however, a clear distinction between the ideas of the early Greek philosophers who come before

The idea that everything important in ancient Greece happened first in Athens is a wonderfully successful example of 'parochial' mythmaking. But, like the Parthenon, it is just a fabrication…

Socrates and those – such as Plato and Xenophon – who come after. Hence the term **pre-Socratics** (often spelt **Presocratics**) seemingly defines this watershed. However, as A.A. Long has cogently described, confusingly the term Presocratic is used to describe early thinking both before *and after* Socrates. More importantly, the term implicitly oversimplifies the varieties of thinking and contradictions among these early philosophers (Long 1999: 5–7). And Plato and his successors also 'misrepresent' – and, presumably, misunderstood – the ideas of pre-Socratics they criticise (Moravcsik 1989).

As most of the earliest of these philosophers lived in then-important trading port of Miletus (at that time one of the many independent Greek



The Aegean. (After Long 1999.)

city-states in Asia Minor but now in western Turkey) they are also known as the **Milesian School**. Heraclitus lived along the road to the north at the equally important port of Ephesus (now called Efes, also now in Turkey). As this part of the eastern Mediterranean is known as the Ionian Sea, then the culture of this area in the middle of the first millennium BCE is known as **Ionian**.

Pythagoras, a near-contemporary of Heraclitus, was also a near-neighbour as he lived at Samos, an island within swimming distance of Ephesus. The biography of Pythagoras says that he, like his father, was a gem engraver. He travelled to Egypt, along what is now the coast of Syria and Lebanon (then Phoenicia – and the Phoenicians were best-known as traders) and even to Andalusia. He also went overland to Persia, Babylonia and India. Scholars often dismiss this as legend rather than history – but a good gem engraver needed good gems. And the best ones would only be obtained by going to the places where they

were extracted. Furthermore Pythagoras was known for the eccentric habit of wearing trousers. Greeks did not wear trousers at that time – but many of the societies in Persia did. As it is highly unlikely that this detail was invented by his biographers – after all it would make him seem like a 'barbarian' in their eyes – then we can be fairly sure that Pythagoras would not have been averse to adopting ideas which came from Persia. Indeed at least two of Pythagoras's notable contemporaries – Theodorus (another gem engraver from Samos) and Telephanes (a sculptor from Phocaea) – worked extensively for the Persian kings.

Similarly Empedocles, another near-contemporary, seems to have travelled extensively from his home on Sicily. It was 'well-attested and common' for experts and craftsmen to travel throughout the Mediterranean and Near East 'in the areas between Italy in the west and Ionia, Mesopotamia, and central Asia in the east' (Kingsley 1995: 151–2, summarising six other sources). Kingsley illustrates this general comment with the travels of Zopyrus, another Sicilian of the same time who is known to have been in Miletus and the Bay of Naples (Kingsley 1995: 151–4).

Despite widespread Athenocentric myth-making which offers an imaginary prominence for Athenic culture, only in the next century do Athenians begin to catch up with the Ionians – and also start the process of rewriting history as if all the important aspects of ancient Greek society were invented in Athens. The thinking of the Ionian pioneers is based less on ideas from within the emergent Greek empire but instead from a range of Near Eastern and Middle Eastern thinking, including Zoroastrianism and Judaism of the exile period. Jonathan Barnes even suggests that the writings of Xenophanes suggest familiarity with Indian Brahmanism (Barnes 1982: 38).

While international influences can be traced, parochialism is more prominent. Heraclitus was dismissive of the Milesians, writing that 'Much learning does not teach the mind, otherwise it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hecateus.' Parmenides returned something of the same sort of compliment by specifically arguing with all of Heraclitus's key ideas and attempting to show that all is stasis.

Who's who?

Confused? No need. Here's a timeline of the key people:

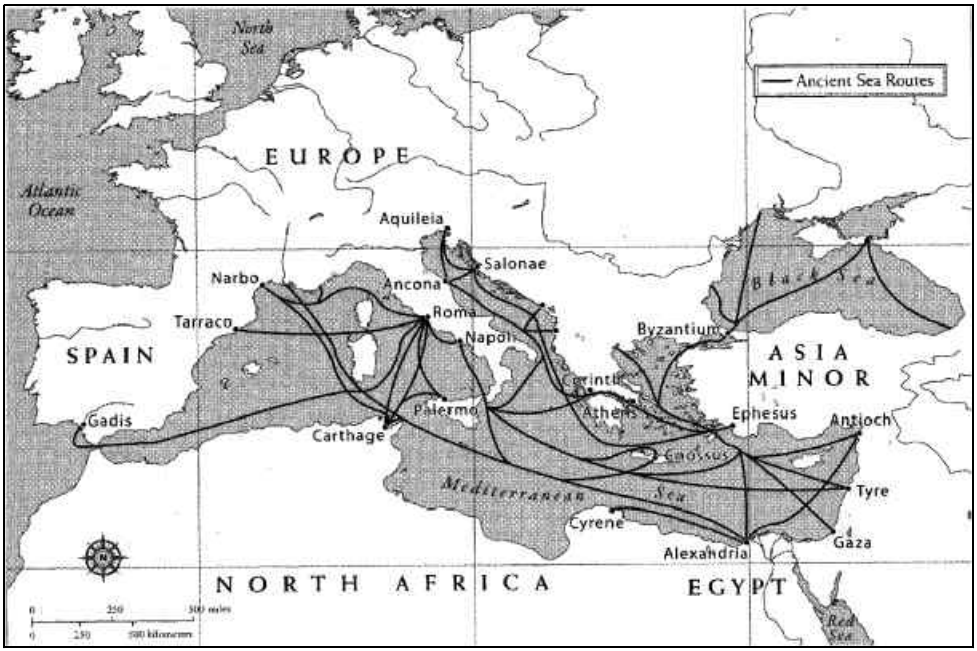
Thales	born *circa* 624;	died *circa* 546 BCE;	lived in Miletus
Anaximander	born *circa* 610;	died *circa* 546 BCE;	lived in Miletus
Anaximenes	born 585,	died 528 BCE;	lived in Miletus
Xenophanes	born *circa* 570;	died *circa* 475 BCE;	born Colophon (modern Turkey) but travelled widely; may have been exiled to Sicily.
Pythagoras	born *circa* 570;	died *circa* 495 BCE;	lived Samos (Greek island close to modern Turkey)
Hecataeus	born circa 550;	died circa 476 BCE;	lived in Miletus
Heraclitus	born *circa* 535,	died 475 BCE;	lived Ephesus
Parmenides	born between 540 to 515 BCE;		lived Elea (Greek colony on the southern coast of Italy)

Roughly contemporary are Anaxagoras, Antiphon, Democritus, Diogenes, Empedocles, Gorgias, Herodotus, Hippias, Leucippus, Melissus, Pherecydes, Philolaus, Prodicus and Protogoras.

Then we have the much more famous **Athenian schools:**

Socrates	born 469;	died 399 BCE
Xenophon	born *circa* 430;	died 354 BCE
Plato	born 424–3;	died 348–7 BCE
Zeno	born *circa* 334;	died *circa* 262 BCE

Plato and Aristotle are condescending towards Heraclitus. Yet their thinking is indebted to him in ways they fail to acknowledge – or perhaps even recognised (Hussey 1999: 109). Plato linked Heraclitus with the theory of *panta rhei* (universal flux), in contrast with Parmenides' conception of a fixed and stable reality. Plato's theory of forms has been seen as a response to Heraclitus (Barnes 1982: 65), sharing with Parmenides the idea of fixed 'essences' while allowing for the manifest forms to change.

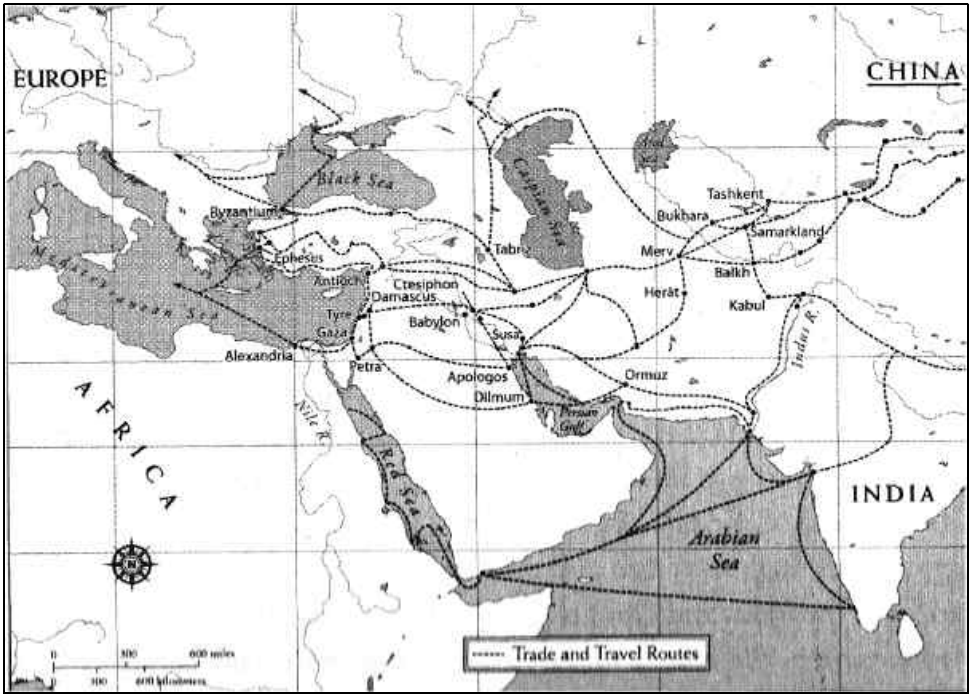


Historic sea routes in the Mediterranean. (After Ansary 2009.)

Heraclitus's ideas also influenced the next few generations of Athenian philosophers, notably the **Stoics** (founded by Zeno), although it is difficult to distinguish Heraclitus's thinking from the Stoics' somewhat different stance (Kahn 1979: 5).

The Milesian melting pot

What is missing from this timeline are the near-contemporaries in other cultures. We have little evidence for the beliefs of the Magi and Zoroastrians, simply because next to nothing about their ideas has survived in written form. Egyptian hieroglyphs and Babylonian cuniform tablets, although older, do not give us any useful insights into the philosophical systems of these cultures. The Sanskrit Uppanishads are older, while the first books of the Old Testament are broadly contemporary with Heraclitus, but again neither offer a clear view of



Historic land routes from the Mediterranean through the Middle East to northern India and China. (After Ansary 2009.)

any systems of thought existing alongside the religious doctrines and myths. The only other culture from which written records have survived over the two-and-a-half millennia is China. And, as I have already suggested, Heraclitus had a near-contemporary in China known to us as Lao Tsu. This makes the writings of early Taoists and the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers the oldest surviving philosophical systems.

There were two major networks of trade and travel in the first millennium BCE. One was waterborne and joined together the coastal settlements of the Mediterranean with the Black Sea. The Greek-speaking city states (later to coalesce as the Greek empire) were near the hub of this, with the consequence that it is the ideas circulating in these places that are best known to subsequent Western culture. The other network used mostly overland routes and linked the Middle East

with India and China. This network, while at least as important as the sea routes of the Mediterranean, is less well-known and much less well-understood by historians. The two networks of course meet in the Middle East – especially at ports such as Ephesus and Miletus; later Constantinople becomes the most important of all these ports linking the two skeins of intermingling trade and cultures.

These historic trade networks have much older precedents. The oldest-known religious site, Göbekli Tepe – which dates back to around 10,000 BCE – is in southern Turkey near the border with Syria. This places it – and I really don't think it's a coincidence – bang in the middle of this later overland network. The settlement of Nevali Çori in eastern Turkey on a tributary of the Euphrates is the same age and shares this same pivotal location (the site of this settlement has been inundated following the construction of the Atatürk Dam in the 1990s). While the direct evidence is of course lacking, there is every reason to suppose that this 'cradle of Neolithic civilisation' – a Neolithic culture that 5,000 years later would reach as far as the British Isle – was part of an extensive network of travel routes. The cultures and societies would evolve but, by and large, the routeways would continue to be used.

The later Mesopotamian culture in the 'fertile crescent' between the Tigris and Euphratres rivers (in modern Iraq) was contemporary with the more geographically-isolated early civilisations in the Huang Ho valley of China, the Indus valley in India and the Nile valley in Africa. But the 'fertile crescent' had no natural geographical boundaries and was the setting for successive waves of conquests. By 550 BCE the Persians had taken charge. And, instead of displacing previous cultures, they allowed them to resettle (this is when the Hebrews return from exile in Egypt, although they are only one among many other examples). This means that an unbelievable variety of older and newer cultural ideas are being brought together. And that teeming mix was also being 'exported' to places such as Greece along with the spices, silks and other more tangible aspects of culture (Ansary 2009: 6–10).

To utilise once more an oft-used metaphor, we need to imagine the ports of Miletus and Ephesus in the mid-first century BCE as melting

pots of ideas. And, although Western culture sees the early Greeks as its primary source, in practice the Greeks were largely writing down (often for the first time) ideas which were coming from already well-established cultures further to the east. The empires of Persia and China were thriving. And this meant both trade and warfare. Indeed, throughout Heraclitus's lifetime Persian armies were regularly attacking the gates of Ephesus (West 1971: 202; Ansary 2009: 10) – and later conquered Ephesus and Miletus. And where there is warfare there is also trade – we only have to think of the wealth of ideas which came into Europe from the Middle East at the time of the Crusades; without Arabic learning and libraries there would have been no Renaissance.

While much of the finer detail will always be lost in the mists of time, the broad sweep of history asserts that the eastern Mediterranean between about 650 and 500 BCE burgeoned economically, politically and artistically – in all the realms of architecture, sculpture, vase painting and poetry (Barnes 1987: 11). We must assume that all other intellectual pursuits – including philosophy – would have been equally thriving.

Greek knowledge of mathematics and astronomy is based on earlier ideas in Egypt and Babylon (Critchlow 2007). The 'origin myths' of Thales and the Milesian school are almost certainly based on ideas circulating in the Near East. Heraclitus's writings reveal parallels with Zoroastrian beliefs and the utterances of Old Testament prophets.

The plausibility of links with all these cultures had previously indicated by William Guthrie's study of Milesian trading links which extended into Babylon, Persia and possibly as far as China (Guthrie 1962: 29–30; 251–5). Pherecydes, an approximate contemporary of Heraclitus who lived on the Cycladic island of Syros, wrote a book called either the *Pentemychos* or *Heptamychos* which is one of the first prose works in Greek and spans mythic and pre-Socratic thinking. Martin West has identified 'abundant eastern influence' in Pherecydes; his contemporaries refer to him using 'secret books of the Phoenicians'. They also said he visited Egypt – but that was said about almost every thinker of the era and is probably untrue for most. But clearly it was part of a 'mythos'

that went with innovative thinkers of the sixth century BCE (West 1971: 3–4).

West also discusses in detail the influence of Zoroastrianism and Manicheaism on the pre-Socratics (West 1971: 31–2; 37–40; 67; 167). However West concludes that Heraclitus is *not* Zoroastrian (West 1971: 144; 170). Most revealing is his discussion of Babylonian and other oriental influences in Anaxaminder's cosmology (West 1971: 87; 89, 96–7, 109).

However West is far from an uncritical enthusiast for oriental influences on the pre-Socratics – he deals cogently with the over-enthusiasm of previous generations of scholars (West 1971: Ch.6). However, despite his overall scepticism, he does identify links between Heraclitus and the Uppanishads (West 1971: 173–4; 187; 194-5; 201–2; 223–5) and with the Persian Magi (West 1971: 239–40) – at a time when the Magi were being persecuted and seeking refuge abroad (West 1971: 241).

The extensive trade that was making cities such as Miletus and Ephesus exceptionally rich was also enriching the intellectual life. If Miletus can be compared to a melting pot then it was a pot that was seemingly seething – and the same would have been true at the rival port of Ephesus where Heraclitus spent his life.

Problems of Greek scholarship

The 'obscure' and 'riddling' nature of the fragments of Heraclitus's writing have, rather inevitably, led to many attempts to find parallels in other schools of thought. 'Heraclitus attracts exegetes' wrote Barnes (1982: 57) and Kahn devotes nearly two pages to discussing the multiple exegeses of Heraclitus (Kahn 1979: 87–8), noting that 'By the ambivalent and enigmatic quality of his utterance he lends himself as few authors do to the free play of interpretation.' (Kahn 1979: 87)

Among those who might rightly or wrongly be accused of such 'free play of imagination' are a number of later scholars. Among them are several who have spotted the parallels between some of the surviving epigrams of Heraclitus and his near-contemporary in China, Lao Tsu (Parkes 1987: 140; Kingsley 1995; Herman 1996: 95; Harbsmeier 1998: 258). The following remarks about early Greek philosophy also draw

upon a number of earlier academic sources (notably Guthrie 1962, 1965, 1969; Kahn 1979; Barnes 1982, 1987); the last of these (Barnes 1987) provides the most accessible overview.

The deeply-rooted myth of Western progress means that, until recent decades, scholars of early Greek philosophy uncritically – and largely understandably – placed the pre-Socratic thinkers at the start of the journey towards twentieth century rational positivism. This 'onwards and upwards' development was accepted even by critics of positivism, such as E.R. Dodds, Dodds upturned a few apple carts in academe in 1951 by publishing a book which suggested that ancient Greek thinking should not be excluded from twentieth century notions of 'primitive thought' – not least because, against all the evidence, from Socrates onwards their systems of thinking were based on the belief that the universe was inherently rational.

In the 1950s, '60s and '70s the notion of progress to ever-better understanding was uncontested. And this is largely the era in which key academic works about early Greek philosophy (such as Guthrie, West, Barnes and Kahn) were written. However, the same year as the penultimate of these studies was published, 1972, Richard Rorty's first article appeared, and his first book appeared the same year, 1979, that Kahn's work was published. Although old-school philosophers would argue that the aim of philosophy is to find the 'objective bases' on which human social activity takes place, Rorty and a number of his contemporaries demonstrated that such objective higher ground simply does not exist and that *all* philosophy exists *within* the social structures – which include language – within which philosophy takes place.

Curiously, the post-modern relativism that Rorty injected into philosophical debate was in some respects anticipated by the Eliatic school of early Greek philosophy. Although I am not aware of Barnes' opinions about Rorty, his summary dismissal of the Elaitics gives plenty of clues:

> If the Eliatics are right, scientists may as well give up their activities: *a priori* ratiocination reveals that the phenomena which science attempts to understand and explain are figments

> of our deceptive sense: the scientist has little or nothing to investigate – let him turn to poetry or gardening.
>
> (Barnes 1972 (1982: 305))

Early Greek scholars, such as Barnes, require an immense scholarly knowledge. The texts they are studying are known through fragmentary quotations copied many times. The oldest extant copies date from about a thousand years after the deaths of their original authors. There is much scope for confusion and error. It is therefore unfair to criticise them for 'merely' specialising in one complex field of study. Martin West, who attempted to compare Greek philosophical thinking with ideas circulating elsewhere in the Middle East at the time, is fully aware of the problems of straddling different disciplines (West 1971). And all these scholars are acutely aware that 'comparativism' earlier in the twentieth century had produced poor scholarship.

And yet to fully understand early Greek philosophy does require us to step outside long-standing Western mindsets and see their writings not as the first steps on the march to a pinnacle of Western rationalism, but rather as part of the flux of ideas current at that time. The 'myth of progress' emphasises the earliest instances of ideas which later come to dominate thinking while the same time deprecating or largely ignoring the ideas which fell by the wayside. Yet at the time these ideas were being argued over there would have been no inevitability about which ideas were to win over and which were to lose out.

From oral lore to written 'law'

Furthermore, the writers on early Greek philosophy understandably approach their sources as historians. Any other way would be folly, and the fragmentary nature of the surviving versions make even this historical approach tricky. But clearly these are simply the oldest-surviving writings about philosophical matters. There is good reason to think that they are indeed the oldest such writings in any Western language (although predated by Sanskrit Uppanishads and approximately contemporary with the oldest-surviving Chinese literature). And yet, self-evidently, while the writing down of such ideas was a novelty at the time, the discussion of such ideas was not novel. So these early writings

are also tantalising insights into an orally-transmitted tradition that most certainly continues for many centuries after writing is first used and which presumably dates back several centuries before.

Scholars are well-aware that this material was formed within a largely oral culture – the Socratic method of pupils learning by listening to the master is clearly attested, a tradition still familiar to all Western academes as it continues in lectures and seminars. But these scholars rarely address the implications of this crucially-important, albeit academically 'invisible', flux of orally-transmitted ideas. In contrast, folklorists are accustomed to recording and analysing ideas which are transmitted in both oral and more literary forms. For example, fairy tales (*contes de fées*) in the eighteenth century are clearly being passed on from mothers and grandmothers to their children although the only record we have is from more literary versions which 'fossilise' the evolution of the progressive changes. Yet it is possible to take a folkloric approach to writing of the mid-first millennium BC, as Alan Dundes did in his remarkable book *Holy Writ as Oral Lit: The Bible as folklore* (1999).

Homer and Hesiod straddle oral and written forms of epic poetry. But just as their idiom reflects clearly its oral traditions, so too they reveal oral traditions of knowledge. Similarly Xenophanes reveals oral traditions of knowledge and oral transmission (Long 1999: 344–5). In contrast, Heraclitus is much more literary than oral (Kahn 1979: 3; 7–8). Was this a reflection of Ephesian culture at the time or was it because of a greater awareness of foreign literature than his contemporaries? We can only speculate.

Further evidence for lost oral traditions is the statement in the *Dialogues of Plato* about the three teachers of Socrates. These are Asphasia of Miletus (who taught him rhetoric), Diotima of Mantinea (who, according to Plato's *Symposium*, taught him the meaning of love) and Pythia (the oracle at Delphi). Note again the connection with Miletus. Some might find it odd that someone we think of as a philosopher credits an oracle as one of his teachers. And, perhaps almost as odd to Western preconceptions of philosophers, all these three teachers are female.

Something was going on ancient Greece which has largely been lost to subsequent male-dominated history! While the evidence will always be lacking, Heraclitus's female teachers could not have been the only such women involved in the transmission of ideas – we must assume there was a substantial oral tradition maintained by women which did not make it (at least at first-hand) into the writings of their male contemporaries.

Because the evidence is entirely lacking or too ephemeral, most scholars have shown little interest in establishing where the early Greeks' ideas originated. And those scholars who do – such as Martin West – work within 1960s archaeological theories of 'diffusionism' from the east to the west. As Charles Kahn notes just a few years later (1979: 297–302), a more nuanced approach would allow for both parallel thinking and a 'reverse flow' of ideas. However Kahn then proposes a 'universalism' of ideas which seems to be poorly-thought through and which could just as easily be an account of an 'invisible' oral tradition straddling geographically-separate cultures.

Part of the problem is that, even when comparisons can be drawn with other early cultures, academics fear that the quick sands of comparativism will engulf them. As there have indeed been too many poorly conceived comparative studies of the ideas circulating in early cultures, this fear is entirely understandable. In the final analysis the comparison of ideas across time and place can only illuminate the historical connections, not vice versa.

How old is old? How original is original?

The ideas of the earliest-known Greek philosophers, such as Pythagoras and Heraclitus, have survived only as quotations in later copies-of-copies, with the oldest surviving copies dating from around one thousand years after the philosophers' deaths. This creates considerable complexities in distinguishing 'true' quotations from paraphrases or even glosses. And in many cases the use of Greek is itself obtuse – after all these pioneering philosophers were writing in a new idiom on a new subject (Barnes 1987: 29–30).

So when we start looking at the work of Heraclitus, who was known in his own lifetime as 'The Obscure' and 'The Riddler', then we are in decidedly difficult terrain. However it is terrain shared in this respect with the *Tao te Ching*, which is also regarded as unduly enigmatic (even though there are fewer problems for modern Chinese readers reading early texts than for scholars attempting to understanding early Greek) and which is also only known from copies-of-copies made much later.

Chapter Three

The life and times of Lao Tsu

Next I want to look a little more at Chinese culture around the same time as the early Greek philosophers. Sometime around 300 BCE a sophisticated orally-transmitted tradition began to be written down. After a few hundred years these texts became formalised as a collection of eighty-one short and often enigmatic works which can be read as both philosophy and poetry. This collection is known as the *Tao te Ching* (pronounced something like 'dow duh jing'). This can be translated in various ways but my preference is 'The way, inner power and vital essence'. However, while these three terms are fairly distinct in English, in more profound Taoist thinking they are near-synonyms.

Unlike the largely-forgotten remarks of Heraclitus, the *Tao te Ching* continued to influence Chinese thinking all the way through to modern times – although there have been many varieties of Taoism over that time, many of which draw upon later texts and ideas never mentioned in the *Tao te Ching*. Indeed the *I Ching* ('The Book of Changes') which has become well-known in the West during the last half-century or so seems to be later as the *Tao te Ching* never mentions any ideas associated with it. Neither does the *Tao te Ching* refer to the concept of *yin-yang* by name – although it attempts to describe the same dualisms.

The *Tao te Ching* is attributed to Lao Tsu. According to legend Lao Tsu was born in Chü-jen (now Honan Province) in the sixth century BCE. He may have been known to his friends as Lao Dan or Li Erh and worked as a record keeper in the Zhou dynasty court – a time of considerable conflict in emerging China (then much smaller than the

How Lao Tsu is imagined to have appeared.

modern country). One day, out of disgust with the ways of the world, he 'dropped out' of court life and starting walking westwards to leave the country. A border guard recognised him and refused to let him pass until he had written down his wisdom. Legends say that a he did it in one sitting, then departed and was never heard from again.

The nickname Lao Tzu – which has the meaning 'old sage' or 'old master' – arose because he was said to have been born looking like an old man. But the same legends hold that his birth was the outcome of a miraculous conception caused by a falling star – and his premature age was a result of a supernaturally extended pregnancy. Such details are common enough elaborations in the hagiographies of persons considered divine or semi-divine in both eastern and more western

cultures. But they clearly tell us we are in the realms of legend rather than accurate biography. And everything we know about Lao Tsu – including his supposed birth names – is from legend not historical sources.

The illusory Old Boy

As noted Lao Tzu's nickname has the literal meaning of 'old sage'. But in Chinese this would be used in the same way we refer fondly to an 'old boy'. Indeed, it is preferable to think of Lao Tzu as just such an 'Old Boy'. But most modern scholars agree that there never was an 'Old Boy'. Instead it is a name invented by later editors and redactors for a collection of short works by two or more different but unknown authors. Certainly any of the English translations of the *Tao te Ching* reveal a noticeable shift in idiom between the terse opening chapter and the somewhat more discursive later chapters; finer details in idiom are no doubt hidden by the unifying stylistic tendencies of the translators. Harold Roth has explained concisely and clearly why early Taoism needed to invent a 'founding father figure' (Roth 1999: 199–201) at a time when it was competing with at least three other religious systems, each of which had such a founding father.

Frankly I am not that concerned – the ideas developed in early Taoism 'make sense' whether or not there was actually an 'Old Boy' or whether really this is a pseudonym for a group of like-minded authors. After all Western schoolmasters have inculcated their pupils with the idea of Pythagoras being just one person – whereas the texts attributed to him are now known to be by several different followers (and, to confound all present day preconceptions, Pythagoras himself seemingly wrote nothing about mathematics or geometry…). Those who dispute the existence of a historical Jesus usually do not dispute the importance of the legacy of ideas attributed to him – and in some respects that has parallels to the legacy of Lao Tsu.

The other seemingly-important author in the early phase of Taoism is Chuang Chou. His book, usually referred to as the *Chuang Tsu,* is more discursive in style than the *Tao te Ching*. Most scholars attribute seven so-called 'inner chapters' to Chuang Chou himself and but attribute the

other twenty-six chapters in various ways to Chuang Chou and several later authors. The oldest surviving edition is from around six hundred years after the original compilation, so scholars can only speculate about the original – although it seems about a third of the original has been lost (Kohn 1992: 70).

Again, current scholarship holds that there may never have been anyone called Chuang Chou and, even if there was, his was just a convenient name given to a compilation of related texts. In more recent books on Taoism you may see the *Tao te Ching* referred to as 'the *Lao Tsu*' as this makes clearer the parallels to 'the *Chuang Tsu*' – in other words, both books are collections of writings attributed to their 'nominal' authors. (In practice such modern scholars are likely to use a different system of romanisation and call these books the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*.) If you really need the nitty-gritty then Harold Roth has summarised recent scholarship (Roth 1999: 5–6).

Ongoing scholarship is revealing even older texts, such as the *Huai-nan Tsu* and *Nei-yeh* (the latter is part of a much longer work known as the *Kuan Tsu*). However before delving into the depths of these I will provide an overview of the underlying thinking that characterises early Taoism.

Chinese notions of religion

None of these early Chinese thinkers whose writings make up the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang Tsu* set out to found a religion, still less one that would – based on the number of followers – hold a place among the 'top five' world religions today. Westernised notions of Taoism deeply influenced my thinking when I first encountered them over thirty years ago, so I am always surprised when other people seem to have little awareness of Taoism. For what it's worth here's what the anonymous contributors to the relevant Wikipedia page thought is an acceptable outline at the beginning of April 2012:

> Taoism… refers to a philosophy and a religious tradition that emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao, the source and essence of everything that exists. The Chinese word Tao (or Dao, depending on the romanization system used) is usually

translated as 'way', 'path' or 'principle', but in this context takes its meaning from 'reality' or 'nature', which the word Tao can also mean. The proper path in life, says Taoism, is one that works in harmony with reality, the essence of the natural universe.

The keystone work of literature in Taoist philosophy is the *Tao Te Ching*, a concise book containing teachings attributed to Laozi, or 'the Old Teacher', in ancient China. A number of widespread beliefs and practices that pre-dated the writing of the Tao Te Ching were also incorporated into religious Taoism. After Laozi the literature of Taoism grew to vast proportions as the inherited beliefs and practices continued to evolve. The philosophy, its literature, and the religious rituals profoundly influenced the culture of China and surrounding societies in Asia. Philosophical Taoism, individualistic by nature, is not institutionalized. Religious Taoism has been institutionalized for centuries and has been influenced by a variety of cultures and traditions. Today the philosophy exercises a profound influence on modern thought worldwide: the *Tao Te Ching* is, after the Bible, the book most often translated into English. Religious Taoism, though it travels less readily from its Asian roots, claims adherents in a number of societies.

Taoist propriety and ethics emphasize the Three Jewels of the Tao: compassion, moderation, and humility, while Taoist thought generally focuses on nature, the relationship between humanity and the cosmos; health and longevity; and *wu wei* (action through inaction). Harmony with the universe and its source (Tao) is the intended result of Taoist practices.

Religious Taoism traditionally features reverence for ancestors and immortals along with a variety of divination practices. Clerics of institutionalised religious Taoism (Dàoshi) often take care to note distinctions between their ritual tradition and the customs and practices found in popular ('folk') religion. Chinese alchemy (including Neidan), astrology, cuisine, Zen

Confucius presenting the young Gautama Buddha to Lao Tsu. Qing Dynasty painting.

> Buddhism, several Chinese martial arts, traditional Chinese medicine, feng shui, and many styles of qigong have been intertwined with Taoism throughout history.
>
> http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taoism

To this I would add that Taoism in the first millennium CE was influenced by Chinese Buddhism. The most conspicuous aspect of Buddhism, its doctrine of 'salvation' or enlightenment, infiltrates Taoism fairly subtly, for instance as notions of ever-increasing levels of purity and oneness. A more conspicuous synthesis – more often a clashing syncretism – between the two traditions created the school of Chinese Buddhism known as Chan which, when exported to Japan, became Zen Buddhism. All of this is much later than the era of early Taoism which is the focus of this essay.

Unlike the limited awareness many Westerners have of Taoism, a near-contemporary of the authors of the *Tao te Ching* and *Chuang Tsu* is somewhat better known in the West: Confucius. Everything most people

in the West first knew about Confucius and Confucianism was filtered by Jesuit scholars living in China during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They developed a mythos which re-packaged Confucianism as a precursor to Christianity. This approach was continued by subsequent Protestant missions in more recent centuries – indeed there is something vaguely C of E about the Confucian edicts! Missionary zeal meant that Taoism was tersely dismissed as nothing more than 'folk superstition' in great need of being eradicated in favour of Christianity.

The perceived 'conflict' between Taoism and Confuscianism is a construct of this Western bigotry. In contrast we should regard these two schools of thinking as (to use a Taoist term) 'mutually arising'. Confucianism can be compared to Western notions of the 'moral order' of society, while Taoism encompasses popular religious practices. In contrast, the Church of England – and, in various ways, all other Christian denominations – concerns itself with both morality and liturgy. However this comparison should not be taken too far as Christian denominations also concern themselves greatly with matters of faith and doctrine, neither of which feature in Confucianism or Taoism.

Strictly, the customary religious practices of every family and village have no collective name in Chinese. In Chinese usage the word 'Taoism' refers to the élite 'caste' of *tao-shih* scholar-priests (all-but extinguished in mainland China during the twentieth century by government-led cultural purges). Neither – until recently – was there a Chinese word with the sense of the Western word 'religion'. To translate Western writings a word was invented – *zongjiao* – which has the literal meaning of 'sectarian doctrine'. Looking from the outside-in at Christianity it seems unerringly accurate! In contrast, the Chinese refer to systems of religion as *jiao* – 'schools' or 'teachings'. Indeed the nearest to the Western word 'Taoism' is the Chinese word *daojia* – 'school of the Tao'.

Western understanding of Taoism

Similarly most Western knowledge about Taoism tells us more about the preconceptions of the Western scholars than about Taoism as it might be recognised in China. Just how wide that gulf really is was revealed by Kristopher Schipper after he went to live in Taiwan in the early

1960s and – almost by chance – discovered the existence of a thriving 'folk religion' with ancient texts then unknown to Western scholars. He became the first Westerner to be trained as a Taoist 'priest' (although the Chinese term, *tao-shih*, has a different sense to Western notions of priesthood) and then published an enthralling academic book about his discoveries and experiences (Schipper 1982 (1993)).

Isabelle Robinet's summary of the history of Taoism as a religion (rather than as a system of philosophy) was published in French in 1992 and in English in 1997. This overview – which the author admits has to leave much out – runs to nearly three hundred pages. Clearly it is not possible to adequately offer any worthwhile precis here. Suffice to say that the contrast between the Taoism described by Schipper and Robinet and better-known Western accounts by the likes of Arthur Waley or Alan Watts (Walley 1956; Watts 1976) could not be greater. Schipper describes a folk religion based around more-or-less elaborate rites of passage and seasonal rituals while Robinet sets the historical context of continually evolving ideas and ever-shifting and competing sects – whereas Waley and Watts describe what at times seems more like a system of esoteric philosophy than a religion.

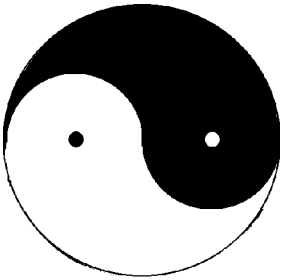
Turning the clock back to early Taoism

At first glance there seems to be a similar gulf separating the modern day folk religion experienced by Schipper from the early Taoism of over two thousand years ago. However this is less a distortion of scholarly preconceptions than a reflection of what the sources tell – and what they omit. The sources for early Taoism do not describe rituals and, with some exceptions, neither are they the texts used in the rituals. Instead they describe the 'world view' – the cosmology – of these pioneering 'deep thinkers'. In many respects they are the close counterparts to their contemporaries in the eastern Mediterranean who were the *bathymetes* ('deep thinkers') or early philosophers.

The survival of these remarkable early Taoist texts – and the challenges of attempting to interpret them – concerns the remainder of this chapter. One of the main challenges is to 'strip away' later (yet still very deeply rooted) ideas. In this respect studying early Taoism has some parallels

Left: *The eight trigrams of the* I Ching.

Right: *The yin/yang diagram.*



to the study of early Greek philosophers – in both case the earliest ideas have been occluded by later developments and changes in emphasis. My thoughts are based mostly on the works of Norman Girardot, Isabelle Robinet and Harold D. Roth (Girardot 1983; Robinet 1997; Roth 1999) – although that does not necessarily mean they would agree with my attempts to summarise their ideas!

Firstly we must turn the clock back – not least in terms of Western scholarship:

> … earlier discussions of the Daoist tradition were often distorted and misleading – especially in terms of the special Western fascination with the 'classical' or 'philosophical' *Daode jing* and the denigration and neglect of the later sectarian traditions.
>
> (Girardot, Miller and Liu 2001: xxxi)

Turning the clock back in Chinese culture takes us back before most of these later – and usually conflicting – sects. It takes us back before the preoccupations with 'alchemical' concerns with immortality (Roth 1999: 5). More importantly, we are going back before the compilation of the *I Ching* – although there is archaeological evidence of divinatory practices in China (based on cracking tortoise shells with fire) which go back long before early Taoism. And, while fundamental dualisms feature in the *Tao te Ching* and *Chuang Tsu*, their writings predate even the well-known *yin-yang* diagram.

Yes, the *Tao te Ching* does describe what would later be known as the *yin* and the *yang* 'principles' – but it does not use those words. Instead

the second chapter of the *Tao te Ching* expresses the notion more discursively:

> Having and not having arise together.
> Difficult and easy complement each other.
> Long and short contrast each other.
> High and low rest upon each other.
> Voice and sound harmonise each other.
> Front and back follow one another.

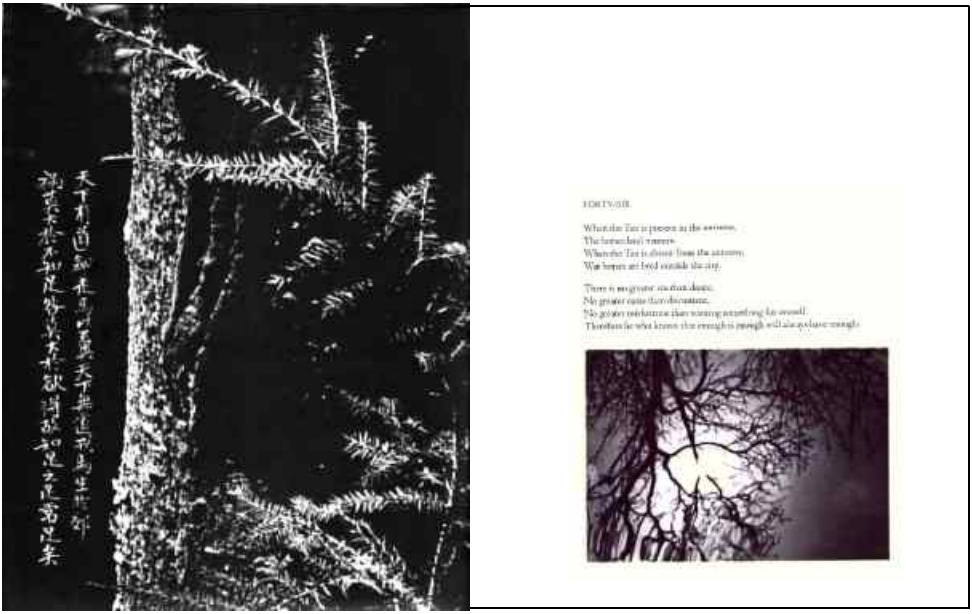
More importantly, the dualism of opposites is expressed as a dialectical process in which a third stage of unity is followed by *wan wu*. This means literally 'the ten thousand things' but is a frozen metaphor for 'many' or, in this context, 'all things'. More accurately the sense is not of many separate things but of an overall unity, the Tao, merely differentiated in a myriad manner. As chapter 42 of the *Tao te Ching* tersely states:

> Tao begat one
> One begat two
> Two begat three
> Three begat all things

(Translations of the *Tao te Ching* are taken from Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English's 1973 translation, or adapted from their work incorporating ideas by other scholars. For example Feng and English retain the literal expression 'ten thousand things' for *wan wu* whereas I favour the intended meaning of 'all things' or 'myriad things'.)

Taoism before Lao Tsu and Chuang Tsu

Predictably enough there has been much speculation about the 'origins' of Taoism. Western scholarship in the post-Second World War era looked – and found – evidence for shamanism. But it would. Because 'shamanism' is one of those words which pretty much means whatever the scholar chooses it to mean, so just about anything can be used as evidence for such a fluid notion (see Trubshaw 2012a: 21–4 for a longer discussion). The same era of scholarship *expected* to see 'shamanism' at the origin of the older religious systems because it



A typical page layout from Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English's translation of the Tao te Ching *published in 1972.*

assumed that 'shamanism' was the oldest type of primitive religion from which others evolved and progressed. As *direct* ethnographical evidence of shamanism (as opposed to presumed iconographical 'evidence') only goes back to around the seventeenth century at best then this myth of the triumph of Western religions over 'primitive' ones is decidedly disingenuous!

As an example of this wonky thinking, ideas circulating in China during the fourth century CE (some eight hundred years after Lao Tsu and Chuang Tsu) became known as the *Lingbao* school. In this context *ling* ('sacred, spirt') and *bao* ('treasure') are often translated as 'sacred jewel'. What confused rather too many scholars is that much earlier the word *lingbao* referred to a sorceress (someone whose body acts as a container for the sacred spirit). While the rituals developed by the Lingbao school still form the basis of Taoist practices, the key ideas are in fact borrowings from Buddhism, not 'carry-overs' from already-extinct

sorceresses, still less sorceresses who (seemingly only the imaginations of scholars) were in some sense shamans.

Frankly, all such out-of-date notions of 'shamanic origins' need to be given a very wide berth (although some authors, such as Jordan Paper (Paper 1995), have developed much more nuanced versions which require more lengthy discussion). What we can say about precursors to Taoism is that in the Han period (before 206 BCE) there were a number of seekers of immortality who had a respect for non-action and borrowed their ideas from a number of popular religious practices. They were known at the time as *daojia* or Taoists (Robinet 1997: 42). One of the popular practices widespread in China since the second millennium BCE was divination. The people who performed ritual divinations were the *fangshi* – and their worldview continues to colour Chinese thinking.

The ideas of the original *daojia* were 'co-opted by charlatan magicians' (Roth 1999: 5) for about three hundred years. When they re-emerged it was during the time of two millenarian rebellions. Only after this – around 200 CE – did what we now think of as Taoism begin to emerge. Subsequent wars in the third century caused these 'Celestial Masters' to disperse from their power-base in Sichuan (south-west China) into the rest of the country. While I fully acknowledge that this is the formative period of Taoism as we now know it, my interest is in the early Taoism of around six or seven hundred years before.

Taoism has always placed great emphasis on written teachings. Indeed, this is the main reason why we know so much about the early versions! But over the centuries the volume of literary works which make up the key canonical works became immense. Imagine more than 1,600 books – about 200,000 pages in all – mostly written in arcane symbolic language akin to Western alchemical texts and authorship attributed to various deities (in Western parlance they were 'channelled'). And these were bound together in a conventional order which was actually quite random – imagine the different passages of the Bible in no obvious order, interspersed in no particular order with sections from the Book of Common Prayer, various hymns and poems, some divinatory interpretations, perpetual almanacs, lots of advice on

ruling a country, a few recipes and assorted letters between various worthies, together with botanical and astronomical texts. Many generations of scholars have attempted to shed light on this mess of historical material (known collectively as the *Tao-tsang* or *Dao Zang*) and to identify later from earlier works. Unsurprisingly, only in recent decades has the light shone on some really interesting 'discoveries'.

Inward training the early Taoist way

From the perspective of early Taoism the most interesting 'discovery' is a body of work known as the *Nei-yeh*. These words mean 'inward training' or 'inner workings'. It is not that no one knew about them – the texts were there for all who cared to look in the right place. Even by the standards of the *Tao te Ching* they are rather terse pronouncements. The opening chapter of the *Nei-yeh* is typically gnomic:

> The vital essence of all things:
> It is this that brings them to life.
> It generates the five grains below
> And becomes the constellated stars above.
> When flowing amid the heavens and the earth
> We call it ghostly and numinous.
> When stored within the chests of human beings,
> We call them sages.
> (translation Roth 1999: 46)

While it was fairly clear that these verses expressed similar sentiments to the *Tao te Ching,* what no one had noticed was that they do not use any of the distinctive metaphors used in the *Tao te Ching* (such as the empty vessel; the valley spirit; the unhewn; the profound mirror), still less the more discursive ideas in the *Chuang Tsu*. And, like the *Tao te Ching* and *Chuang Tsu,* there is no reference to either *yin-yang* or the *I Ching*. Nor are there polemical attacks on other schools of thinking, as there are in the *Tao te Ching*. The conclusion is inescapable: the *Nei-yeh* predates all other known Taoist works (Roth 1999: 188–9).

The scholar Harold Roth at the Great Wall of China.

Harold Roth has devoted an entire book to translating and interpreting the *Nei-yeh* (Roth 1999). By the standards of academic writing most of it is quite readable – and the less readable sections are a result of the intense scholarship needed to understand the Chinese language and literary idioms which are now heading for 2,500 years past their use-by date. Roth argues that the poetic idiom of the *Nei-yeh* dates it to before the latter half of the fourth century BCE (Roth 1999: 25).

More crucially this verse idiom is ideally suited to oral transmission. For how long these ideas had been circulating orally is, of course, an unanswerable question. From parallels with the Christian Gospels and various traditional sagas we can assume that a hundred or two years of fairly accurate transmission would be entirely plausible, with slowly-evolving precursors spanning several more hundred years. But just because they *could* have been transmitted orally over such long time spans does not mean they actually were – and certainly does not preclude them being adapted from similar ideas in a different language.

But the *Nei-yeh* texts are remarkably 'focussed'. What emerges is an over-arching concern with an unspecified 'correct posture'. The implication – and one well-attested by Taoist monastic practices until the Maoist Cultural Revolution (see Blofeld 1973 for one of the few first-hand accounts in English) – is that meditation formed a core aspect of the practices of these pioneering Taoists. Correct breathing and 'centring' were also key (Roth 1999: 109).

When your body is not aligned
The inner power [*te*] will not come.
When you are not tranquil within,
Your mind will not be well-ordered.
Align your body, assist the inner power [*te*]
Then it will gradually come on its own.
(*Nei-Yey* chapter 11, translation based on Roth 1999: 66)

This meditational practice involved 'emptying the mind'. Yet the word *hsu* ('emptiness') – well-used in other Taoist texts such as the *Tao te Ching* in this context – does not appear in the *Nei-yeh*. Instead it uses a unique metaphor of 'cleaning out the lodging place of the numinous'. This metaphor seems to be making the meditation practice an 'internalised' version of the cleansing of a temple prior to a ritual (Roth 1999: 189–90). The concept of the 'numinous mind' (*shen*) – more specifically expressed as a 'mind within the mind' – is the subject of chapters 8 and 19 of the *Nei-yeh* (Roth 1999: 107–8). The opening lines of chapter 8 express succinctly experiences familiar to anyone who has attempted to follow a meditational practice:

There is a numinous mind [*shen*] naturally residing within;
One moment it goes, the next it comes,
And no one is able to conceive of it.
Nei-yeh chapter 8 (translation Roth 1999: 106)

But the word *shen* – translated by Roth as 'numinous mind' – is more like a verb than a noun. It seems to be referring less to 'some internal numen or spirit' but rather to a spirit-like or numinous power. And that power has the ability to foreknow – in other words it has divinatory powers. By concentrating that specific 'energy' gives the Taoist sage the ability to divine without the conventional Chinese divinatory tools of tortoise shells or yarrow stalks (Roth 1999: 107).

By concentrating the vital breath [*ch'i*] as if numinous [*shen*]
The myriad things [*wan wu*] will all be contained within you.
Can you concentrate? Can you unite with them?

> Can you not resort to divining by tortoise or milfoil
> Yet know bad and good fortune?
> (*Nei-yeh* chapter 19; translation Roth 1999: 82)

The numinous 'mind within the mind' mental state denoted by the verb-like word *shen* is also a direct – 'non-dual' – awareness of the Tao. It is this that makes it numinous – hence the equally valid translation of *shen* as 'numinous mind'. In this non-dual state the sage has attained *chao chih* ('illumined knowing') – an ability to immediately and intuitively know 'all the myriad things' (*wan wu* – literally 'ten thousand things'; see earlier in this chapter) (Roth 1999: 108).

The Tao in the *Nei-yeh* is as paradoxical as the 'definitions' in later Taoist writing:

> Clear! As though right by your side.
> Vague! As though it will not be attained.
> Indiscernable! As though beyond the limitless.
> […]
> Silent! None can hear its sound.
> […]
> Obscure! We do not see its form.
> *Nei-yeh* chapter 4 (translation Roth 1999: 52)

In chapter 6 there is an equally paradoxical description: 'As for the Way: it is what the mouth cannot speak of, the eyes cannot see, and the ears cannot hear.' (translation based on Roth 1999: 56) As William James first observed, paradox is one of the ways of expressing the 'ineffable' qualities of numinous and mystical experience – just as paradox is part and parcel of Heraclitus's pronouncements about flux. And yet these early Taoist authors seem to think in terms of the Tao as something more-or-less manifest, as a force or (in modern terminology) an 'energy'. The purpose of these literary paradoxes seems to be to cause the collapse of dualistic thinking – to trigger a 'concrete' and lived experience of the Tao as non-dual (Roth 1999: 142–3).

According to chapter 4 of the *Nei-yeh*, we make daily use of the 'inner power' [*te*] of the Way [*tao*]. And the description of the 'vital essence'

[*ching*] in chapter 4 resembles the Way itself (Roth 1999: 102). So, in this one short chapter of the *Nei-yeh* the three words which make up the customary title of a later early Taoist work – the *Tao te Ching* – appear as near-synonyms.

If the *Nei-yeh* is such a concise pioneering work, why was it 'overlooked' by later Taoists? Well perhaps in part because it is so terse – the *Tao te Ching* and *Chuang Tsu* are much more 'readable' and less focussed on meditation in the correct posture and breath circulation. But the main reason is that the later works also have much advice for political leaders, something which is entirely lacking in the *Nei-yeh*. And, in the Warring States era – the really formative period for Taoism – anything which did not have a pervasive political dimension was destined to be sidelined. And so the *Nei-yeh* texts became 'buried' between other much less remarkable works in the conventional order of the Taoist canonical literature and so, to all intents and purposes, became lost.

Stepping back into the river

Quite central to early Taoism is an ongoing process of 'constant renewal' or regeneration. In both the *Nei-yeh* and *Tao te Ching* a number of words recur: *hua* (transform), *xiu* (exert oneself), *bian* (change, metamorphosis). There is a 'driving force' or 'energy' to this process which is known as *ch'i*. Several of the early Taoist texts describe how *ch'i* gives form to [*zao*] and transforms [*hua*] everything. This compound word, *zaohua*, also recurs and denotes the process of creation (although a process without a creator).

On the one hand *zaohua* defines the form that *ch'i* takes but, on the other, changes it constantly. The only constant reality is *ch'i* in its transformations. This makes *ch'i* akin to an infinite potential energy in which all things are nothing but *ch'i*, yet when each of those things disappear the *ch'i* remains (Robinet 1997: 7–8; 14).

This sounds like a paraphrase of a quantum mechanics model in which energy and mass are 'interchangeable'. It also sounds like a expanded paraphrase of the more fragmentary remarks which have come down to us from Heraclitus about everything being flux or change. All three

world views – Taoist, modern physics and Heraclitus – share the sense of reality as a creative process. More than any of the metaphors of flow, or of bows and lyres, which I cited in the previous chapter as the common ground between Heraclitus and early Taosists, it is this much deeper sense of 'what reality is' (and, by extension, the exclusion of a great many other concepts about the ultimate nature of reality) which makes me think that somewhere, somehow, sometime there was a sharing of ideas. That this same concept of an ineffable 'energy' underlying a constant process of creation was forgotten in the West for over two thousand years yet now is regarded by modern physicists as the 'best fit' to the evidence simply adds to the intrigue!

If you're finding it difficult to get your head around this constant process of creation then think of a candle flame. There is no single 'thing' which is the candle flame, just a constantly-renewed stream of incandescent particles. While we can keep a candle in a museum we cannot keep a flame in a museum – only continually create a flame. In the same way the water in a whirlpool is constantly being renewed – hence the Taoist expression 'you can't take a whirlpool home in a bucket'. Any attempt to take a bucket of whirlpool home quickly becomes just a bucket of water that is no longer whirlpooling.

With a little thought it becomes clear that – usually over a somewhat longer timeframe – all living creatures share these essential characteristics of flames and whirlpools. Indeed, stretch the timeframe even longer and inanimate objects too are the 'transient outcomes' of processes of creation and transformation played out over the *long durée*.

Following the fascination

However, much as I am aware that – as stated in the quotations from Girardot, Miller and Liu above – Western views of Taoism have been distorted by the fascination with such 'philosophical' aspects of the early texts, it is exactly that fascination which I need to focus on in the rest of this work! The various thinkers whose ideas were later compiled into the works attributed to Lao Tsu and Chuang Tsu might be thought of as akin to a Greek school of philosophy – albeit philosophers more concerned with cosmology, mysticism and political rulership than their

post-Enlightenment Western namesakes, and with the 'schools' distinguished by doctrinal differences rather than lineage (Roth 1999: 5; 7; 175).

The parallels between ancient Greece and China around the sixth century BCE are almost exact. Just as there is much more to Milesian or Athenian society than a ideas of a handful of *bathymetes* and proto-philisophers, and much more to religious practice of the time than would ever be gleaned from reading what survives of their works, so too there is much more to Chinese society and religion than 'philosophical' texts such as the *Tao te Ching*. So, while my interest is specifically those early philosophical remarks, I can only emphasise that they are merely part of a much greater whole, albeit a 'whole' which was mostly orally transmitted, so has been effectively lost to us. However I am beginning to over-anticipate the final chapter.

Passing through India

In the previous chapter I outlined the trade routes from the eastern Mediterranean overland through the Middle East into India and then into China. These were well-established by the time of pre-Socratic philosophers and the early Taoists. Inevitably there is too little evidence for how ideas travelled along these routes – the nearest to any evidence is the scholarly debates about early Taoism travelling eastwards from early adepts living in the kingdom of Ch'u to the more westerly kingdom of Ch'i (modern Xi'an) in the fourth century BCE (Roth 1999: 20; 187).

The internal evidence of early Taoist texts remains ambiguous. Consider the following quote from the *Chaung Tsu*:

> How do I know this is so? The morning mushroom knows nothing of twilight and dawn; the summer cicada knows nothing of spring and autumn. They are the short-lived. South of Ch'u there is a caterpillar which counts five hundred years as one spring and five hundred years as one autumn. Long, long ago there was a great rose of Sharon that counted eight thousand years as one spring and eight thousand years as one autumn. They are the long-lived. Yet P'eng-tsu alone is famous

> today for having lived a long time, and everybody tries to ape him. Isn't it pitiful!
>
> *Chuang Tsu* section 1

To me this sounds like a badly regurgitated version of Vedic chronologies. Could the 'caterpillar' be a corruption of an unfamiliar word borrowed from Sanskrit? After all the modern-day city of Xi'an (the successor to the focus of Ch'i culture) is only nine hundred miles from the Bangladesh border, mostly across modern Sichuan province. And Sichuan province owes its wealth and importance to the trade route from the Huang He Valley to foreign countries of the south-west, notably India. Chuang Tzu's reference to 'south of Ch'u' at the very least refers to what is now Sichuan – and could quite conceivably refer to places we now think of as Bangladesh and India.

Victor Mair has drawn attention to the parallels between early Indian scriptures – the *Upanisads, Vedas* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* – and early Taoist texts (Mair 1990). The breathing practices of Indian yoga seem also be close to the practices of early Taoists. While his suggestions remain inconclusive, add to the mix this anonymous Internet description of 'East Asian Barbarians during the Zhou Dynasty 1046 BCE–350 CE':

> By the third century BCE, Chinese officials knew of three powerful groups of mounted, nomadic pastoral people north of China. One of these groups, the Xiongnu (Hsiung-nu), was in the Ordos region and most of Mongolia (including Inner Mongolia). To the east of the Xiongnu, in eastern Mongolia and the plains of Manchuria, there was the second group, the Donghu (Tung-hu). The third group, the Yuezhi (Yueh-chi), were west of the Ordos region, in the region of Gansu (Kansu). A fourth mounted, nomadic people was the Wusun (Wu-Sun). They were weaker than the Xiongnu, the Tonghu, and the Yuezhi. They were located east of the Yuezhi. The ethnicity of the Xiongnu is unknown. It has been speculated that they were either Turkic, Mongolic, or related to some Siberian people such as the Yenisei or the Tunga. There is nearly a general consensus among scholars that both the Yuezhi and the Wusun were originally Indo-European. During

> the Period of the Warring States (475–220 BCE), some of the Quanrong (Chuan-rung) became absorbed into the Xiongnu but the main body of the Quanrong later posed a significant problem for the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE) and the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 CE–250 CE). Also, by the end of the fourth century BCE, the Chinese term Hu refers to non-Chinese people of the north in general, while Yueh refers to non-Chinese people of the south in general.
>
> spooksrus.tripod.com/barbarians/zhou_dynasty_barbarians.html

While I have deleted ten bibliographical references from this passage, I realise it's still about as clear as mud without further knowledge of the geography and cultures. But what is clear from this summary is that by the time of the early Taoists then non-Chinese people to both the north and south were sufficiently significant for them to have the collective names *Hu* and *Yueh*. And what this also says is that contact with people from the north and south was not so close for there to be a need to distinguish either different societies or different language groups. It mimics the way Westerners used to broadly refer to 'Orientals' without distinguishing between the vast number of nationalities and ethnicities.

This strongly suggests a cultural environment where ideas as well as people were flowing – presumably both into and from China – but not in a 'well-focussed' manner. It is just the sort of cultural environment – with the associated problems of exactly translating words and ideas – in which Chuang Chou *might* have written down a scrambled, caterpillar-infested version of Vedic chronology. But, as I'm sure you're already thinking, it falls well short of sufficient evidence that this actually happened, rather than *might* have happened! And no matter how many such 'interesting parallels' there are to be discovered, none will offer conclusive proof that specific ideas travelled around.

The nearest we have to proof for 'intellectual curiosity' promoting travel in the mid-first millennium are the reports of two kings of Ch'i (Wei, ruled 358–320 BCE, and Hsüan, ruled 320–301 BCE), sending out expeditions to find islands of immortals. This is the same king Hsüan who paid seventy-six scholars to form an early 'academy'; they are

known as the 'Chi-men' because their quarters were near the Chi gate to Lin tzu, the capital city (Roth 1999: 21–2). City gates are of course the ideal place for such scholars to meet visitors and exchange ideas. What we don't know is if these Chi-men met the sages from Ch'u who brought early Taoism into Ch'i – although the Ch'i kings' interest in longevity seems to fit rather too well with the proclivities of such Taoists.

Another sliver of evidence that early Taoist thinking arrived in a 'diffuse' manner along trade routes comes from the lack of a clear 'founding father' figure. At the start of this chapter I noted how the legends of Lao Tsu were invented to create such a founding figure. But the fact that the key early Taoist texts – those attributed to Lao Tsu in the *Tao te Ching* and those attributed to Chuang Tzu – all seem to be the work of a group of scholars does suggest (although most certainly does not prove) that ideas might have been making their way into China in a somewhat piecemeal manner.

Towards cosmologies

While even the most cursory reading of the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chaung Tsu* will reveal that much of the writing is concerned with mysticism and political rulership, it is the sections on cosmology (mostly in the *Tao te Ching*) which are most intriguing. Later chapters of this essay will look in more detail at the similarities between the all-but contemporary schools of Greek and Chinese thinking. But they were not the only early schools of thought – both the Dharmic and Abrahamic traditions were already well past their infancy and Babylonian, Zoroastrian and Persian beliefs were almost at the end of their lives. The next chapter offers an overview of this variety of early 'deep thinking'.

Chapter Four

Cosmologies and cosmogonies

The sort of 'deep thinking' which was going on in China and the Greek empire around 2,500 years ago included thoughts about the fundamental nature of the world and the universe and – almost integral to such thinking – how the world and the universe came into existence. Although Hesiod uses the word *kosmos* as a verb to describe Greek generals ordering troops for battle, Heraclitus is the first person known to have used the word *kosmos* to refer to 'the order of everything' – although he may have possibly have been influenced by the previous generation of Milesian thinkers. As Jonathan Barnes notes:

> It is remarkable enough that these thinkers should have felt the need for a word to designate the universe – everything, the whole world. Normal conversation and normal business do not require us to talk about everything, or to form the concept of a totality or universe of all things.
>
> (Barnes 1987: 18)

The original sense of the Greek word *kosmos* combines two modern concepts as *kosmos* was both 'an orderly arrangement' and also something pleasant or beautiful to contemplate (hence the modern word 'cosmetic'). Astronomers and modern physicists have hijacked the words 'cosmos' and 'cosmology' but, in other disciplines, these words have much wider meanings. In this essay I will use the words 'cosmology' and 'cosmological' in their wider sense of 'understanding the order of everything' rather than as synonyms for objects and events in outer space. The 'orderly arrangement' of everything which makes up the cosmos is not simply the order of the stars, atoms and the material

The Greek word kosmos *is the root of the English words cosmos, cosmology, cosmogony – and cosmetic.*

world – it also extends to such social differences as the roles of men and women, the differences between kings and their subjects and – perhaps even more importantly – the differences between deities and mortals. From this perspective, many of the chapters of the *Tao te Ching* can be considered as cosmological pronouncements.

Primordial chaos

The word 'cosmogony' refers to the creation of the cosmos – in Western society the opening verses of the Bible are the best-known cosmogonic myth. In most non-Western traditions the Earth is not created from 'nothing' but instead the myths infer a pre-existing (though usually undifferentiated) 'something' from which plants and animals are created. For example, Homer made the river Oceanus the father of everything (without explaining where water came from) while Hesiod thought of the origin of everything was in a 'yawning gap' he called Chaos. The wide variety of such primal origin myths currently culminates in the Big Bang of modern astrophysics.

Wonton soup.

Heraclitus stands apart from other early Greek philosophers not because he offers a different cosmogony to his predecessors but rather because he denies the need for any cosmogonic myth at all. If, as he believed, the cosmos had always existed then it had no origin – and so there was no need for an origin myth (Barnes 1987: 39). But, from a higher order of thinking, we can see that even the idea of an ever-existing cosmos is just an extreme variant on other cosmological mythmaking.

The cosmogonies of early China are concerned with 'differentiating' and rationally ordering the component parts of the undifferentiated primordial chaos. The same notion is conveyed by the Sanskrit word *rupa* and in Plato's cosmogony in the Timaeus, where order is imposed through persuasion and rationalisation (Cornford 1957: 33, 160; Hall 1982: 53).

For early Taoists the primordial chaos was not homogenous in the sense of being everywhere the same. Rather it was *hsüan*, which means 'deep, dark and mysterious' as well as 'the chaos preceding order' (Hall 1982;

Girardot 1983; Kohn 1992). Taoists refer to the pre-creation 'chaos' metaphorically as wonton soup. Like minestrone soup, wonton soup comprises of a variety of ingredients each in small pieces. Such soup can be seen as just that – undifferentiated soup – or it can be 'differentiated' into component parts.

Just such differentiation is the act of naming things. It is in the context of such a metaphor we should read such cosmogonic expressions as:

> Naming is the origin of heaven and earth
> Naming is the mother of all things
>
> (*Tao te Ching* chapter 1)

In early Chinese cosmogonies the primordial chaos was created by the initial separation of heaven and earth (Hall 1982: 55–6). In the *Tao te Ching* chapter 5 we are informed:

> The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows.
> The shape changes but not the form.

Chapter 25 of the *Tao te Ching* is usually translated as

> Man follows the Earth
> Earth follows Heaven
> Heaven follows the Tao
> Tao follows what is natural

although a 'causative' cosmogonic paraphrase would read: The Tao comes from what is natural; Heaven comes from the Tao, Earth comes from Heaven, and humans come from (or even 'are born from') the Earth. Seemingly sharing the same scriptwriter, *Enuma elish* has Tiamat divide the sky and earth, while in Genesis God divides heaven from earth. The gap between is, initially at least, 'chaos'. (Hall 1982: 55)

The separation of heaven and earth is the primordial act of creation so can also be read as one of sexual creation, just as all Chinese dualisms are expressions of the all-encompassing *yin/yang* dialectic, of which the female/male associations are a key part. Although woefully anachronistic, the sexual connotations of the initial separation of heaven and earth in Chinese cosmology puts me in mind of the Japanese haiku which translates as 'I am so horny even the crack of dawn had better

Perhaps James Joyce in Finnegan's Wake *got the closest to a concise expression when he contrived 'Chaosmos'.*

watch out!' (appropriated by Tom Waits for his song 'Nighthawks at the diner').

This is not simply back-projecting modern thinking. The earliest Greek poets described how Zeus married Earth and produced the world of nature (Barnes 1987: 13–15). Hesiod makes much of the union of earth (female principle) and sky/heaven (male principle). Aristophanes considers that love seeks a unity to overcome the separation or gap (*chaos*) that emerged with the creation of the sexes. In *The Birds,* Aristophanes' version of the Orphic cosmogony, Eros is given the role of creating the order of things: (Hall 1982: 55–6)

> Then all things commingling together in love,
> there arose the fair Earth and Sky.

And the *Chuang Tsu* confirms that Aristophanes was not the first to have such libidinous thoughts:

> The passionate union of *yin* and *yang* and the copulation of husband and wife is the eternal pattern of the universe. If heaven and earth did not mingle, whence would everything receive life?
> (Watts 1976: 26)

Contrary to modern conceptions of the word 'chaos' as somehow 'chaotic', both Greek and Chinese thought of chaos as the thus-far undifferentiated 'raw material' of the cosmos. Perhaps James Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake* got the closest to a concise expression when he contrived 'Chaosmos'.

Making distinctions is fundamental

The human brain naturally differentiates the 'chaosmos' of sensory perceptions as the ongoing part of our cognitive processes. This was first recognised by the Gestalt school of psychologists in the 1930s but research in the last two decades of the twentieth century onwards has greatly extended our understanding (see the contributors to Noë 2002 for a useful summary). Interestingly this same research leads to models of consciousness as a complex 'process', so 2,500 years after dialectical processes were suggested as the underlying principle of matter, now an analogous concept is being presented as the underlying principle of how we think we think.

The 'act of separation' or 'making a distinction' ('One begat two' as the *Tao te Ching* chapter 42 put it) also forms the basis of G. Spencer Brown's fully self-contained model of mathematics, *The Laws of Form* (Brown 1972). This starts from the entirely theoretical first principle of 'making a distinction' and builds up to a way of describing all mathematical processes. But this is not pure theory as Brown applied his ideas to develop a safe way of interlocking signalling and points systems for British Rail (still being used on the Great Western main line in 2012 (BBC 2012)). And the same process of 'making a distinction' at its most uncomplicated is of course the binary code of every digital device.

Western philosophy is predicated upon making distinctions – not just between what is real and what is not, but between subject and object, self and other, through into a whole maze of moral discriminations. These distinctions are inherent – although rarely consciously recognised – in the cosmological systems of every society.

Top: *First Great Western train.* Above: *Network Rail signal box.*

Since the 1960s every train in Britain runs safely because of the innovative ideas of a philosopher-mathematician.

Back to early Greece

All the pre-Socratic philosophers wondered about the origin of the universe and its basic constituents, although not all offered answers. As noted, early poets described how Zeus married Earth and produced the world of nature. But early philosophers looked for answers that did not require supernatural intervention or unknowns. All the early Greek philosophers have much more in common with contemporary Chinese

thinking than with later Greek and Western philosophers as they are interested in identifying a 'primary dualism' in the universe. 'Making a distinction' is key to their cosmology – and they often speculate on how this dualism was created at the beginning of time. The distinctions they offer may seem a little whacky to modern scientific thinking but that is irrelevant – their shared interest is identifying the primary cosmological dualism.

Thales, the earliest of the known Greek philosophers, thought that water was the 'material principle' of all other things – but clearly recognised that water took on different physical forms, such as the earth. This seemingly differs from Taoist thinking in that a water:non-water dualism is seemingly absent, although there is an implict dualism of 'water-like water' being distinct from 'unwater-like water'. But was it the wet, liquid nature of water which Thales considered the defining characteristic of water? Or was it water's ability to flow? If so, the penultimate lines of chapter 14 of the *Tao te Ching* spring to mind:

> Stay with the timeless flow
> Stay with the ancient Tao

and chapter 35:

> The great Tao flows everywhere…

Indeed chapters 25, 28, 32 and 34 also explicitly use the metaphor of flow to describe key Taoist concepts. Water is itself used as a metaphor in chapter 8:

> The highest good is like water
> For the good of water is that it nourishes everything
> without striving.
> It occupies the lowest level, which all men think bad.

Another early Taoist text, the *Kuan-tzu* (attributed to Kuan Chung) has a similar passage:

> Water is the blood of the Earth, and flows through its muscles and veins. Therefore it is said that water Is something that has complete faculties… It is accumulated in Heaven and Earth, and stored up in the myriad things of the

> world. It comes forth in metal and stone, and is concentrated in living creatures. Therefore it is said that water is something spiritual.
>
> (Watts 1976: 48; slightly adapted)

The passage continues with a lengthy description of how water imposes *li* (the principle of order in nature) on plants and animals, and also on human beings before asking:

> What is it, then, that has the complete faculties? It is water. There is not one of the myriad things which is not produced through it. Only he who knows how to rely on its principles can act correctly.
>
> (Watts 1976: 49; slightly adapted)

The section of the *Kuan-tzu* continues with an aspirational statement of how sages and men's hearts should take water as their 'key'. This reveals that Kuan Chung was less interested in the fact that plants and animals are, by weight, at least four-fifths water but rather he was attempting to express a more mystical 'truth', in which the essential quality of water – its ability to flow – is implicit. I suspect if we knew more about Thales' concepts of water the parallels may be great.

Anaximander anticipated post-Enlightenment materialisn more closely when he argued that all is matter; but his views were disputed at the time. Followers of Pythagoras similarly anticipated modern physics when they argued that all is number. Anaximenes was more explicitly dualist but, in contrast to Thales, he thought the universe was made up entirely of air that was either rarefied or condensed. Alcmaenon was also a dualist but held that all things in human life can be explained in terms of hot/cold, light/dark, wet/dry etc – almost a paraphrase of the Taoist concept of *yin/yang*.

And the early Greek philosophers collectively share a deep understanding with contemporary Chinese thinking. Taoism has at its heart a sense of a 'great unity' (the Tao) which manifests as the 'myriad things' which make up the world. And. while the early Greeks squabble about whether earth, air, water, fire or number are the 'primary unity' they express these ideas as *singular words* – so they refer to 'earth' not

The way up and the way down are the same.

'earths' and 'fire' not 'fires'. At the same time they are making a distinction between this 'great unity' and the diversity of things – such as plants, animals and humans – which are plural. (Moravcsik 1989: 261–5) And if this fundamental one:many distinction just seems blindingly obvious, that is a reflection of how deep-seated such notions are in our own culture!

All change

Heraclitus disagreed with other early philosophers about the nature of the ultimate substance, and instead claimed that the nature of everything is change itself. Key to the Heraclitian system is the belief that change is real and stability illusory. For Heraclitus everything is 'in flux', as later restated in Plato's famous aphorism *panta rhei* ('everything flows and nothing stands still'). This would also be an entirely valid exposition of the Tao as the 'all-changing changeless' (*Tao te Ching* chapter 16).

Heraclitus is famous for supposedly expressing the notion that no man can enter the same river twice. His own words seem to have been:

> We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not.

However later Greek thinkers considered that the sense of his ideas was 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.' Whether this is an accurate interpretation of Heraclitus's own intentions or simply reflects later rethinking can be left as an unknown for present purposes.

Heraclitus's dialectical rhetoric is distinctive in Greek thinking as his ideas develop – embodying his belief in the universality of change – through internal contradictions.

As the noted scholar of early Greek philosphers, Jonathan Barnes, puts it: '… most strangely – Heracltius believed in the unity of opposites.' (Barnes 1987: 39; O'Brien 1989; O'Connell 2006: 92–3). This can be seen in his in remark about the path up being the same as the path down and other remarks such as:

> By cosmic rule, as day yields night, so winter summer, war peace, plenty famine. All things change.
>
> This universe, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be an ever-living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures.

Exactly the same dialectical 'union of opposites' underlies the Taoist concept of *yin/yang* as these examples from *Tao te Ching* illustrate:

> Having and not having arise together.
> Difficult and easy complement each other.
> Long and short contrast each other.
> High and low rest upon each other.
> Voice and sound harmonise each other.
> Front and back follow one another.
> (*Tao te Ching* chapter 2)

> Is there a difference between yes and no?
> Is there a difference between good and evil?
> Must I fear what others fear? What nonsense!
> (*Tao te Ching* chapter 20)

Unity of opposites

Taoist dualisms might be best thought of inseparable 'polarities' such as the north and south poles of a magnet, the positive and negative potential of electricity, or the cyclical variations that make up a wave. They may be opposites but they are not in opposition and mostly not in conflict. The root meanings of *yang* and *yin* denote the sunny and shady sides of a hill, although these words are more usually glossed as masculine/feminine, firm/yielding, strong/weak, light/dark, rising/falling or heaven/earth. Neither polarity can be eliminated any more than cutting a magnet in half will produce two halves with only a north and south pole each; likewise *yin* and *yang* arise mutually. Taoism is about the balance between opposites, just as when spicy food needs to be balanced with something more bland, such as rice.

Heraclitus also used various metaphors for such linked-at-the-hip dualisms. His most savvy was to note that the road up was the same as the road down. All very Taoist! Indeed the Greek word he uses, *hodos*, means 'road', 'way', 'path' or 'journey' – and I shouldn't need to remind you that *tao* too can be translated as 'way'. Theophrastus, an Athenian philosopher born about a hundred years after Heraclitus's death, regarded this quote as referring to the process of elemental *tropai* ('turnings') that produce the world. This would equate strongly to Taoist ideas about 'from the One (*tao*) comes the Many'. And Erin O'Connell has also argued that Heraclitus meant this quotation to signify that 'a single reality guides the processes of everyday experiences' and this same idea can be understood from other Heraclitian quotations (O'Connell 2006: 62–3). O'Connell has discussed in some detail the way Heraclitus uses language to 'tease out' some very sophisticated ideas within this broad unification of opposites by pairing words

beginning *dia-* (denoting movement or change, often with the sense of taking apart) with words beginning *sum-* ('bringing together') (O'Connell 2006: 92–3).

While academics agree that Heraclitus sought a 'unity of opposites', fairly predictably exactly what he meant by this has become fertile ground for intellectual arguments. Indeed, it might be said that within the overall unity there is a great deal of 'opposition'! What emerges from these debates is the extent to which such 'unity of opposites' becomes the basis for subsequent Athenian thinking. Notably both Plato and Aristotle wrestle with notions of 'one and many' that are explicitly Heraclitian (O'Brien 1989).

However in this instance Heraclitus is getting the credit for ideas which we know predate him. Anaximenes, who lived about two generations before Heraclitus in Miletus, also developed ideas about dualisms and, at least by implication, the unity which they shared (Wubnig 1989). Sadly Anaximenes' known writings are even more fragmentary than those of Heraclitus so we cannot be certain as to the extent to which Heraclitus was expressing novel ideas or simply developing ideas which were already well-established.

Dualisms or dialectics?

While such polarities as up/down or back/front are often referred to as dualisms, to my mind they are more in the nature of dialectics, in that two opposites mutually create each other. But, while Karl Marx thought in terms of a dialectical process which flowed from thesis to antithesis into synthesis, in this more cosmological and cosmogenic approach the dialectical process flows in the opposite direction – from a 'greater' (although often unnamed) unity into two recognised polarities.

Heraclitus has more in common with Karl Marx than might be imagined. Indeed he could be regarded as a clear ancestor (although the lineage passes through Nietzsche, who has been described as 'Heraclitus's greatest disciple'). Heraclitus is the first person to recognise – and actively promote – what we would recognise as a 'dialectical' approach to politics (Boudouris 1989). And, once again, the parallels

No wave without water

No water that cannot be a wave

with early Taoism leap out as both the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang Tsu* devote much of their content to advice on how to run a country!

Early Chinese thinking seems to modern minds mostly mystical and philosophical, largely because that is what modern scholars have concentrated on. Indeed, I too have been concentrating on the more philosophical remarks. The seemingly more mystical passages make much about trying to attain 'non-dual awareness' – and state that achieving such non-dual awareness is a 'numinous' experience (the literal meaning of the Chinese expression *chao chih* is 'illumined knowing'). The Tao is, inherently, non-dualistic – so awareness of the Tao has also to be 'a non-dual awareness' (Roth 1999: 108–9). To me this 'non-dual awareness' is concordant with a dialectical process which either flows from thesis and antithesis to synthesis or, more simply, sees the inherent unity 'behind' the dualism.

This idea can be found in the modern (but seemingly timeless, Taoist-like) remark:

> No wave without water
>
> No water that cannot be a wave

This ever-active dialectical process is perhaps what Heraclitus had in mind when he wrote 'Changing, it rests' and is the Big Idea behind the very specific metaphor in his expression 'Even the barley-drink separates if it is not stirred.' While much scholarly debate has been expended trying to unravel what these two epigrams 'really meant', few if any of these scholars have explored the parallels with early Taoist writings.

The Tao of the Heraclitian flux

The surviving quotes from Heraclitus offer many examples of opposed dualisms (see Barnes 1987: 102–4 for a scholarly compilation and O'Connell 2006: 50–3 for a more recent approach) but nevertheless a detailed understanding of his dualism eludes us. Indeed, so much as we can take a broad view of his philosophical stance, he is a monist rather than a dualist. He wrote 'everything happens in accordance with the Logos.' And 'Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one' and 'Graspings, wholes and not wholes,

convergent divergent, consonant dissonant. Out of all things one thing and out of one thing all things.'

That final phase 'from all things one and from one thing all' would be entirely at home in the *Tao te Ching*. The Greek word Logos has a number of 'levels' of meaning and in the mid-first millennium BCE these meanings are distinct from later ones (for example, in the opening phrase of the Gospel of St John). Intriguingly, the Heraclitian senses of Logos overlaps with the equally hard-to-pin-down senses associated with the Chinese word Tao. By changing just one word in Heraclitus's remark 'everything happens in accordance with the Logos' we would get the entirely valid Taoist assertion that 'everything happens in accordance with the Tao.'

Heraclitus was well aware of the difficulties of pinning down the sense of Logos. While he regarded it as eternal he also held the view that human understanding of the Logos is deeply flawed – just as a central tenet of Taoism is that the Tao is eternal yet fiendishly difficult to comprehend! Erin O'Connell has provided an erudite discussion of the sense of Logos in both Heraclitus and his 'disciple' Heidegger (O'Connell 2006: 18–22). In essence she concludes that the word Logos can denote more than one way of seeing the world, but the word has its origins in the process of selecting certain elements, events or concepts from a variety of possible choices. It is a process whereby boundaries are determined. It is an inevitable and necessary cognitive process (*legein*, a Greek verb cognate with *logos*) that is not necessarily consciously recognised. According to O'Connell, by using the word Logos Heracltius is attempting to bring both the general and particular aspects of the world out of this 'concealment' (O'Connell 2006: 22). It is, in other words, a process of 'revelation'.

As already noted Heraclitus's ideas are about a dialectical 'mutually developing' distinction and union. But does this mean that Heraclitus and Lao Tsu stepped into the same river of philosophical speculation? I have already shown that the metaphor of flow is intrinsic to both ways of thinking. And the evidence is even more compelling when we compare Heraclitus's lyre and bow metaphor:

> Men do not know how that which is drawn in different directions harmonises with itself. The harmonious structure of the world depends upon opposite tension like that of the bow and the lyre.

with Lao Tsu's:

> The Tao of heaven is like the bending of a bow.
> The high is lowered and the low raised.
> If the string is too long, it is shortened.
> If there is not enough, it is made longer.
> The Tao of heaven is to take from those who have too much and give to those who do not have enough.
>
> (*Tao te Ching* chapter 77)

So, while Heraclitus clearly did not write 'Listening not to me but to the Tao, it is wise to agree that all things are one', this would only be a 'maverick' translation rather than a wrong one!

Heraclitus and the living experience of 'everything is change'

If you're not convinced by my assertion in the previous paragraph, let's take an exceptionally close-up view of Heraclitus's use of language. The Greek word *diapherein* has the literal sense of 'taking part' but denotes something akin to the modern word 'process'. As such it would be an entirely valid word to use to translate the Chinese word *tao*. Four of the Heraclitian quotations which have come down to us use *diapherein*. He also uses it as a compound, *diapheromenon*, to contrast with *sumpheromenon* (bringing together – literally 'sum of the parts') -– thereby creating the dualism of 'bringing together' with the sense of 'taking apart' (O'Connell 2006: 68–9). Hereaclitus also uses the word *tropé* which literally means 'turning' or 'reversal' but has the sense of our word 'change'. The ways Heraclitus uses *diapherein* and *tropé* extend beyond these words' customary usage at the time. It is as if we are seeing Heraclitus struggling with the limits of his language to express idea which are effectively alien to Greek thinking.

As I have already noted in the opening of Chapter Two, Heraclitus's thinking is both novel and 'fully-formed'. More specifically, it offers explanations for almost every aspect of reality and human thinking (Kahn 1979: 212). People who pioneer ideas rarely develop such fully-formed or comprehensive systems of thought. But people who are translating ideas from other cultures and languages are able to do just that. And such translators inevitably struggle to find corresponding words for the more abstruse 'deep thinking'. So the evidence strongly suggests that Hereaclitus is creating a synthesis – a *sumpheromenon* or sum of the parts if you like – of ideas inherited from his Ionian predecessors with ideas which we now think of as early Chinese Taoism (although they too may have had their origin in a now-lost culture somewhere between western Turkey and western China – perhaps Persian). To be pedantic, this mixing of ideas is less a synthesis than a sycnretism. By which I mean that the outcome is less a smooth blend than a crashing together of disparate underlying concepts.

Miletus and Ephesus are exactly the places where such intellectual processes are most likely to have taken place. Not only that, the endless flow of opinions and convictions coming into these ports would mean that Heraclitus – and any other 'deep thinkers' in these cities too – would feel like they were living in an ever-changing flux of ideas. As with just about every other philosopher ever since, Heraclitus creates a philosophical system deeply rooted in his own *zeitgeist*. 'Everything is change' would have been the lived experience of Heraclitus and his peer group – and therefore an entirely reasonable basis on which to base a model of reality.

I have already noted that the close parallels between the writings of Heraclitus and those attributed to Lao Tsu and Chuang Tsu have been recognised by several writers (Parkes 1987: 140; Hideya 1989; Herman 1996: 95; Harbsmeier 1998: 258). Quite who influenced who – if at all! – is a matter of debate. Although Heraclitus lived a hundred or more years before the oldest attested writings of proto-Taoism, the novelty of his ideas within his own culture suggests that at least some of his key ideas arose from contact with the wide range of international visitors to Ephesus. Quite possibly the

early Taoists also learnt from similar contacts with a now entirely-lost tradition from within the vast area once known as Asia Minor. Clearly all this is pure speculation. What is clear is that there is an uncanny similarity between Heraclitus's ideas about Logos and early Taoists' ideas about the Tao. Both share words with the underlying sense of 'process', both are considered eternal – and both are widely misunderstood! Tao can also be translated as 'way' or 'path' and Heraclitus is famous for noting that the *hodos* ('way', 'path', 'road' or 'journey') up is the same as the one down – a remarkably Taoist way of thinking.

Indeed everything about Heraclitus's 'unity of opposites', his idea of everything being change or flux, with an underlying Monism to reality is more at home in early Chinese thinking than it is in early Greek thinking. While subsequent generations of Athenian philosophers dismissed some of Heraclitus's ideas they implicitly agreed with a great many of his underlying ones. When Plato famously observed that 'everything flows' (*panta rhea*) he was expressing an idea that would have readily passed the lips of both Heraclitus and any number of Taoists. Indeed the Greek word *panta* ('all things') seems like a direct translation of the Chinese *wan wu.* As discussed on page 33 this means literally 'the ten thousand things' but is a frozen metaphor for 'many' or, in this context, 'all things'. So the fragmentary quotation of Heraclitus 'Out of all things one thing and out of one thing all things' could just as easily be from the *Tao te Ching.*

But instead of dwelling on these speculations – plausible as they just might be – in the next chapter I want to speculate more implausibly. Not, I hasten to add, to offer any 'answers', still less 'truths' – but rather to look at how interesting the questions can be when we widen assumptions about early cosmological thinking.

Chapter Five

Flowing backwards

> 'Knowing the ancient beginning is the essence of Tao'
>
> *Tao te Ching* chapter 14

Despite the *Tao te Ching*'s insistence on primordial understanding, frankly the more that scholars investigate the origins of what is later referred to as Taoism the more things become increasingly obscure (Roth 1999: 178). Once the legends about an historical Lao Tsu and Chuang Chou begin to evaporate then there is no 'founding father'. As older and older fragmentary texts are found which predate their books then so too there are no longer any canonical works arriving 'fully formed'. While such a diffuse emergence is possibly consistent with a venerable indigenous tradition, to me it is more consistent with the ideas reaching China from other cultures. Such a suggestion is of course anathema to Chinese scholars and, without the all-elusive direct evidence, one which is unlikely to be given serious consideration among Western sinologists either. However there are parallels with the synthesis and syncretism of ideas from Hebraic, Persian, Hellenic Greek and other cultures which make up the diversity of ideas in the books of the New Testament.

Mercury developing – as a homunculus – inside the alchemist's alembic. From Mutus Liber *attributed to Altus, 1677.*

The Great Work East and West

Much as I have so far emphasised the apparent similarities between Heracltius and Taoism of the era of the *Tao te Ching* there is also another close parallel between Middle Eastern and Chinese thinking which can be seen just a few hundred years later. Between the second century BCE and the end of the second century CE Taoism became inextricably linked with alchemy and the pursuit of the elixir of everlasting life. Not all later Taoists were concerned with such matters

but the tradition was maintained by a minority. The parallels with Western alchemy are self-evident – apart from similar goals of longevity they are both concerned with on-going processes of transformation that require the creation and dialectical 'dissolution' of dualisms. And, while I have just called it 'Western alchemy', the name 'alchemy' alone tells us that we are dealing with ideas which enter Europe through Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern cultures at the time of the Crusades.

Unsurprisingly for such esoteric traditions as alchemy, historical research quickly peters out in the absence of surviving early documents. This makes early alchemy essentially 'prehistoric' (even though taking place in societies which in most other respects are historic). As a result scholarship has so far failed to establish the origins of either Western or Eastern alchemy, beyond speculating that they might be as old as metalworking. And, indeed, the skills of copper and bronze working are sophisticated processes of transformation which must have seemed every bit as 'alchemical' in prehistory as the notion of distilling the elixir of life from mundane ingredients seems nowadays.

Without invoking either Heraclitus or Taoism, a modern day alchemical expert, Charles Nicholl, is of the opinion that alchemy is essentially a process:

> There are two directions in which alchemical Mercury leads us. On the one hand, it is a complex elaboration of chemical substance, its various qualities referring back to the properties of quicksilver, or 'common mercury'... But there is another direction entirely, away from chemical matter. Mercury is not, finally, a substance, or even many substances: *it is a process...* All these [alchemical writings] point to one crucial idea: that transformation is something intrinsic and contained inside matter... Each stage of this self-devouring, self-generating process bears the name 'Mercury'. Mercury, in short, is alchemy itself.
> (Nicholl 1980, cited in Gilchrist 2007: 50–1; emphasis added.)

But once more Heraclitus is seemingly the precursor, as he is the first Greek philosopher to consider that fire (all-important to both Western and Chinese alchemical processes) is the fundamental nature of matter.

But not only would it be wrong to think of Heraclitus as a proto-alchemist, it also seems unlikely that Heraclitus was the first person to think that fire is the underlying principle of creation. Neither was he the first to link fire with flow and water. Chinese shamans and immortals were regarded as masters over water and fire. (Kahn 1992: 91) The age-less Indian deity of fire and lightning, Agni, also manifests as Apam Napat, 'the child of the waters'. Agni is thought of as a radiant being who dwells in water.

A web of Indo-European myths link Agni to the Irish Nechtan and the Roman Neptunus, both of who are 'radiant' beings associated with water – and, in the Irish tradition, with the 'creative inspiration' of poets. (And, whatever creativity may or may not be, it is characterised as an 'emergent' process; see Pope 2005: 5, 17, 78, 89.) This web of Indo-European myths is described by Alby Stone (Stone 1997: 83) but, for the purposes of this chapter, I simply want to draw attention to these geographically-widespread links between fire, water and creativity.

Contemporary contacts or common cultural carry-over?

As already described, Heraclitus and his near-contemporaries could have had contact with early (or proto-) Taoist thinking, despite the language barriers, as early Greek society was successful largely because it was trading material goods and ideas over a wide geographical area, including what is now northern India, which in turn accessed the trade routes into China.

But are such contemporary cultural contacts the only rationale? Could both systems of thinking not be as 'original' as the absence of prior historical evidence implies but instead be the oldest-surviving instances of beliefs once held more widely? After all Lao Tsu bluntly states 'My words have ancient beginnings' (*Tao te Ching* chapter 70) and 'Knowing the ancient beginning is the essence of Tao' (*Tao te Ching* chapter 14) – even though we have no way of knowing if this is a genuine claim to an inherited tradition or, as is so often the case, a 'modest' ploy for self-aggrandisement, or even a cosmogonic allusion.

Through the eyes of a folklorist, there is impressive evidence for the approximately-contemporary Old Testament having deep-rooted oral

precedents (Dundes 1999). The same way of approaching the ideas being 'critiqued' and developed around 500 BCE by early Greek philosophers and the 'Old Boy' collective who contributed to the *Tao te Ching* would readily suggest it is entirely plausible, indeed quite probable, that they had their origin in an orally-transmitted culture developed over previous decades or centuries.

The prehistory of ideas

How far back is difficult to even guess, but early Taoist religious practices embody pre-Taoist rituals (usually referred to as 'shamanic' because of the flawed Western scholarship which saw shamanism as some sort of worldwide proto-religion); (Kohn 1992: 81–2). If we think of first millennium BCE as the 'Iron Age' then earlier cultures are the 'Bronze Age' and not long before that the 'Stone Age'. So are these pre-Taoist rituals the shadow of Bronze Age worldviews? And to what extent were Bronze Age worldviews innovative and to what extent were they continuations of late Stone Age thinking?

Frankly I do not know enough about Chinese archaeology to offer an informed opinion. So looking instead at the evidence from northern Europe, while some aspects of material culture most certainly differ between the late Neolithic and the Bronze Age – with yet bigger differences developing during the Iron Age – other aspects are less easily differentiated.

Frankly the idea of social change needs to be seen from both ends of the telescope. Changes are responses to environmental or social 'pressures' and are often traumatic for those involved. Yet at the same time even the most traumatic changes take place in societies where most aspects of the culture remain more or less *unchanged* – or at least (as with emigration) there is a 'carry-over' from one place to another. And, even in societies which changed at a much slower pace than anyone alive today is accustomed to, there was always a variety of ideas and beliefs – and disbeliefs. Clearly people who live together tend to have more in common than people living even a few villages away, but nevertheless there can be sharp polarisation of attitudes and

Neolithic people living on the River Thames? Or Minnesota Indians photographed at the end of the nineteenth century?

outlooks within a community (read any history of early modern Nonconformist Christianity if you have any doubts!).

Ethnographers and the like use the technical terms 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' to distinguish between the variety of ideas at any one time and the variation in ideas over time. And there is not a single society known which does not reveal significant synchronic and diachronic changes – and it is beyond the bounds of belief that prehistoric peoples were any different. Think how many different tribes of Native Americans there were before contact with European colonialists. They had a very rich and varied culture within each tribe, with numerous regional overlaps and distinctions. These pre-colonial tribes were to all intents and purposes living in the Stone Age. And, while analogy is always dangerous, I have no reason to believe that life in prehistoric Europe was any less rich or diverse in its culture, or any less varied across regions.

As Neolithic as it gets: Stonehenge.

Distinctions and dualisms

There have been plenty of dualistic 'structuralist' speculations about the British Neolithic. Julian Thomas argued back in 1991 that the early Neolithic was the time when distinctions between *domus* (the domestic realm of the farmstead) and 'wilderness' were first established, and when the domestic (and temporary) were first seen as distinct from funerary activities and the permanence of burial monuments. Chris Tilley has also explored the evidence for deep-seated dualisms in Neolithic material culture (Tilley 1999). And subsequently Mike Parker Pearson has argued for sophisticated distinctions between life and death at Stonehenge and Durrington Walls in Wiltshire (Parker Pearson 2012).

Some dualisms in the Neoltihic seem self-evident to modern minds:

- *domus* / wilderness
- farming / gathering
- sedentary / nomadic

- human / animal
- human / Otherworldly
- human / deity
- life / afterlife (death)
- transient /enduring (monumental)
- secular / ritual

In addition to this list there is the later Neolithic distinction created by the seemingly-intentional exclusion of 'lay people' and the presumed 'included élite' at henges. This was first discussed by Christopher Tilley in his account of walking the Avenue at Avebury (Tilley 1994) and has inspired similar observations at several other henges, including Stonehenge, where the trilithons and the bluestone 'horseshoe' combine to inhibit people outside the henge from seeing or hearing what was happening at the centre.

But as obvious as these Neolithic dualisms seem to modern post-structuralist ways of thinking, were they as self-evident or intentional to the Neolithic people? The weight of evidence strongly suggests that there must have been some awareness of at least some of these dualisms, although that does not of itself make them all intentional. However, as this is seemingly the onset of such dualistic cosmologies, perhaps we are safer if Neolithic thinking is regarded as the onset of *proto*-dualistic cosmologies. In other words, some of the dualisms might seem rather poorly-constructed to later thinking. This certainly seems to fit the relationship between earth-built henges and water (either in the henge ditch or in close proximity, as with Ring o' Brodgar and Stenness in the Orkneys).

The world is really like our words for the world – isn't it?

When prompted modern minds can readily recognise dualisms and divisions in culture. But modern minds have much greater difficulty in looking past the distinctions. We are so used to Western languages which divide the world into seemingly static 'things' (nouns) and the 'events' (verbs) which ostensibly link them together. We have all-but lost the ability to see the seamless process from out of which we construct

the world of things and events. We like to think that things and events are clearly defined, yet the reality is that one concept merges into another without crisp outlines. Even the process of observing the world and perceiving objects and events is far fuzzier than 'common sense' suggests (see the opening chapters of Trubshaw 2012b for a summary of current cognitive science).

Western languages construct a world wherein 'things' are connected by 'events'. The sentence 'I am thinking' ostensibly describes a 'thing' ('I') who is 'doing' ('thinking'), even though perhaps the 'event' here is less self-apparent than when 'I am walking' or 'I am eating'.

But there is a reverse flow such that the sense of 'I' is the self-awareness of the body which is walking, eating or thinking – or indeed multi-tasking. The English language and its Indo-European relations insist on noun-verb constructions, even when they lead to such constructions as 'It is raining', 'It is cloudy' and 'It is snowing'. Unless spoken by someone with exceptionally panentheistic beliefs these (pro)noun-verb constructions are expressions of the ontological tautology 'The rain is raining' and 'The snow is snowing'. There is no 'it' other than that which is 'it-ing'. And if there are ontological problems with the 'it' in 'It is snowing', then just how sound is the distinction between the 'I' and 'thinking' in 'I am thinking'? In other words, take away the thinking and just what am 'I'? After all the verb 'knowing' always implies a living entity who 'knows', and typically we only use the construction 'I know' to affirm particular awareness, and the construction 'I am knowing' seems rather strained.

Similarly there is no 'thing' that is consciousness or self, only a delightfully complex renewing of the processes of consciousness and self-awareness. There is no 'I' except in some much as the self-awareness of the body which is walking, eating or whatevering. But the problem is not simply one of how we construct a sense of self and self-awareness – more 'concrete' aspects of reality are equally problematical. There is no 'thing' that is a whirlpool – you can't take a whirlpool home in a big bucket any more than a breeze can be put in a bag – there is only water that is whirlpooling. Likewise there is

Whirlpools and candle flames are not things. They are processes.

no 'thing' that is a candle flame, only a constantly renewing stream of incandescent particles.

The Chinese language has fewer such dilemmas. The word for 'cup' also means 'cupping'. This is not a cultural fondness for the gerunding of nouns, but a fundamental absence of the thing:event / noun:verb dualism which underpins Western languages; indeed the Chinese language also straddles the divides separating Western nouns from adjectives and verbs from adverbs. And who is to say which language is ontologically less devious? From the perspective of the *longue durée*, the heterogeneous mineral particles collectively identified as 'clay' that have been shaped and fired are indeed 'cupping' (pending some as-yet unknown future degradation) every bit as much as they are 'a cup'.

Not only does the noun:verb dualism underpin Western languages, it also underpins Western cosmology and is supported by the ontologies constructed by Western philosophers since Plato. Furthermore the 'is' in 'It is snowing' and the 'am' in 'I am thinking' are no less problematical. All such variants of the verb 'to be' are cognitive constructions because we never observe anything 'being', we only ever observe what things are *doing*. It is perfectly possible – although it takes a little bit of learning! – to avoid all variants of the verb 'to be' (i.e. 'are', 'am', 'is', 'was', 'be') and still use the English language in a manner that does not appear stilted (Carroll 1995 (1997: 94–101 and *passim*)).

If this section is leaving you a little unsure of what you think you know when you say you think you know then this little ditty quoted by (and quite probably composed by) Alan Watts might help:

> There was a young man who said, 'Though
> It seems that I know what I know,
> What I *would* like to see
> Is the 'I' that knows 'me'
> When I *know* that I know that I know.'
> (Watts 1966 (1972: 50))

Until the twentieth century Western philosophers maintained the Platonic tradition and assumed that language accurately mirrored or mapped the structure of 'reality'. 'Reality' was made up of things and events (nouns and verbs) while the verb 'to be' is synonymous with Plato's concept of 'essences' (the 'higher *being*' of a specific class of objects). Some of the weaknesses in the Platonic worldview were addressed by Hegel and then, in a conflicting approach, by Heidegger, who considered that Being is the ultimate manifestation of reality because it erased object:subject dualisms. But not until Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of 1921 were these (perhaps inevitable) linguistically-led assumptions fundamentally questioned in the West, although a fuller understanding of the problem was not achieved in Wittgenstein's lifetime. That fuller understanding arrived in the 1970s when Derridean deconstruction dismantled all the linguistic biases underlying philosophical issues to the extent that every founding assumption of Western philosophy was undermined. The iconoclasm was completed by Richard Rorty's early 1980s books which extensively argue that any philosophical system can only be an expression of *prior* assumptions and not – as so many philosophers have claimed – an attempt to access the 'reality' behind our assumptions. For Rorty the problem of how we know something is fundamental:

> Perhaps a new form of systematic philosophy will be found which has nothing whatever to do with epistemology but which nevertheless makes normal philosophical inquiry possible.
>
> (Rorty cited Lucas 1989: vi)

Rorty's post-epistemological philosophy has however yet to make itself known.

Early Eastern cosmologies

Pioneering Asian philosophers also assumed that the structure of their languages mirrored the structure of 'reality'. But this lead to Asian cosmologies being based – at least in their earliest recognisable versions – around the notion of 'process' rather than making things and events primary.

Sufi followers belongs to a *tariqa*. This word commonly means 'path' or 'way' but also has the sense of 'course', 'rule of life', 'line', 'streak', 'chief of a tribe', 'order of dervishes' or 'means'. In dervish lore:

> The tariqa is the Path and also the leadership of the group, in which resides the transmission. It is a rule of living, a thin line within ordinary life, sometimes maintained through a note of music, expressed visually by the *palm tree*. The tariqa itself opens the Path, and is connected with meditation, silent thinking, as when a man sits in prayer during the silences of the darkness. It is both the aim and the method.
> (Shah 1964: 397)

The nearest approximation to the sense of this word is 'way' in English – the way of doing a thing, the way upon which a person is travelling, the way as an individual and 'I am the Way' in a mystical sense. (Shah 1964: 397)

Despite the tantalising similarities between *tariqa* and Tao (both their overlapping meanings and as possibly cognate words) there are no surviving precursors of the Sufi system which extend back to the mid-first millennium BCE.

The paradoxical relationship between an underlying 'process' (or 'way') and the 'multitude of everythings' which arise when distinctions are made is expressed fairly succinctly in some of the quotations from the *Tao te Ching* I quoted in Chapter Three. It is expressed more clearly in the aphorism:

> No wave without water
>
> No water that cannot be a wave.

Indeed could this early Neolithic concern with water be a precursor to Thales' belief that matter is mostly water – or the Taoist and Heraclitian concern with 'flow' as the defining principle of creation?

In passing I would note that the 'No water that cannot be a wave' observation, while seemingly a timeless Taoist excerpt, is probably modern and inspired by twentieth century physicists who established that – paradoxically – photons exhibit both wave-like and particle-like properties. As all matter is made of sub-atomic particles and all of them are likewise both waves and particles then the entire manifest universe is as much 'wave' as it is 'water'.

Beyond dualisms

Making a further observation from Native American cultures, while there is a rich symbolism this is far more complex than the list of dualisms given above would suggest. For example among the Yekuana people (who live in the dense rain forest of the upper Orinoco of Venezuela and adjoining countries) the structure and decoration of houses, bead skirts, baskets, canoes, drums and such like all represent core cultural beliefs. And it works the other way – to recount the *Watunna*, the Yekuana creation epic, is unimaginable if the retelling is not simultaneously being woven into the baskets being made by narrator.

Baskets are ubiquitous in every aspect of traditional Yekuana life and everyone must be a skilled basket-maker – a man cannot be 'properly' married unless he is produces a set of beautifully-made baskets for his wife during the first year of their relationship. Some baskets are made from two types of cane regarded as potentially life-threatening spirits – and these are used for processing and serving cassava (which is toxic

A Yekuana basket for serving cassava – the design represents a poisonous snake. (After Guss 1989.)

unless carefully prepared). Not surprisingly the decorations on such baskets depict poisonous snakes (Guss 1989).

The circularity of their houses, baskets, drums and skirts is not 'merely' a practical or functional matter but reflects the deep sense of circularity which underpins all aspects of their worldview and culture. When eating, the people gather round the circular baskets in a circular group. Implicitly this represents the way Yekuana society minimises hierarchies and attempts to give each member an equally-valid viewpoint.

Contrast this with Victorian and Edwardian mealtimes when the patriarch sat at the head of the table, with the youngest children furthest away, and the servants beyond them (or, in more affluent households, eating in a different room altogether). The material expression of this social structure requires rectangular rather than circular dining tables. The epitome of this era – the Sunday lunch – is of course founded on deeply-rooted religious beliefs, and linked with the requirement to fast on Fridays, which atrophied into the custom of eating fish rather than meat that day. Contrast both of these with our secular age of 'TV suppers' where the sense of family 'togetherness' is often so fragmented that parents and children rarely eat at the same time and place except

A squeaky-clean family eating around a dining table. An enactment of the social order idealised in the West.

when in a fast-food outlet. The material culture changes too – individual lap trays are now more important for eating than shared tables.

Both of these examples of Western eating habits reflect deep 'myths' about Western societies just as much as the Yekuana families sharing food in an egalitarian circle. I am dwelling on the contrasts between Yekuana and Western eating habits not out of any intrinsic interest (although that is not say to say they are not intrinsically interesting!) but to demonstrate three things. Firstly, that 'material' culture and 'performed' culture are seamlessly woven together – even though it may take an outsider's perspective to recognise this. Secondly, both material and performed culture are inseparable from a society's deep-seated 'myths' (and here an outsider's perspective is almost essential as such myths have been compared to lenses we look through but rarely look at (Flood 1996; cited Danser 2005: 9)). Thirdly, and most importantly to this essay, these 'deep structures' are not inherently dualistic –

although they can be shoehorned into such by Western academic thinking.

Earlier in this chapter I showed a parallel between pre-conquest Native Americans from Minnesota and European Neolithic lifestyles. Suffice to say that it would be just as easy to draw similar parallels between traditional Yekuana culture – both material and performed – and Old World lifestyles before the Iron Age. Basket using – and making – was likely to have been just as extensive. Why shouldn't someone retelling the creation myth of a Neolithic society also have been weaving it into a basket at the same time? The circularity of henges and such like contrast with the sub-rectangular shapes of houses and chamber tombs – suggesting that the social structures in the Neolithic were perhaps not entirely homogenous. While the limited evidence for the Neolithic can be interpreted with limitless variations and analogies, suffice to say that while anything is to some extent possible, this does mean that we should refrain from trying to establish what might be plausible.

Evidence for 'process thinking' in the Neolithic

Whether, as scholars such as Thomas, Tilley and Parker Pearson have suggested, the onset of dualistic thinking can be traced back to Neolithic society is an open question and not relevant to my interests here. But if early Greek and Taoist thinking did have origins long before the first written versions then there should also be evidence for thinking about 'flow' and 'process'. Apart from the rather vague association between henges and water previously mentioned, is there any *substantiative* evidence for 'process thinking'? And what form would such 'evidence' take? Clearly the survival of 'things' – material culture – gives only a limited sense of the events and processes by which they were created, traded, used and disposed.

A moment of inspiration came after reviewing a collection of conference papers from 2004 which were developed into the chapters of *Prehistoric Journeys* (Cummings and Johnston 2007; Trubshaw 2010). The contributors offer overlapping arguments which combine to reveal that prehistoric thinking about travel and the places being travelled – whether to, from or through – are seemingly greatly different from

modern notions of 'getting from A to B'. Modern minds are concerned with travel as a means to an end, dominated by the destination and the 'task' of getting there, even though there is an acceptance that this 'task' might be for 'ritual' rather than more practical reasons. In contrast, for pre-modern people leaving and arriving may be important, but the experiences in-between are potentially more significant. Indeed some journeys may not have an anticipated destination – or the expected end may not be reached.

In the light of *Prehistoric Journeys* we should no longer think of prehistoric people simply going from place to place for the sake of getting from one location to another locality. For hunter-gathering people life was one long road trip. In more sedentary cultures journeys enabled artefacts (whether everyday or high-status, such as polished axes) to be re-distributed. Likewise they enabled the dispersal of ideas (even though the direct evidence is usually lacking). And, to state the obvious, journeys are necessary for genetic diversity. Despite modern mental baggage to the contrary, mobility and travel could not have been exceptional in prehistoric societies – they were integral aspects of those societies. Ethnographic studies of nomadic and semi-nomadic cultures confirms that life 'happens' while travelling. Subsistence activities are accomplished. Goods are traded. Relatives and other people are met. Children are conceived and born. And travel fulfils a love of change and exploration – which are not modern aspirations anachronistic in earlier times.

Something of this 'worldview' of places and landscapes being the 'setting' for the whole of life had been explored in the context of modern culture in Tim Ingold's remarkable work *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* (Ingold 2000). He summarises his approach thus:

> We may admit that humans are, indeed, just like other animals: not, however, insofar as they exist as organisms rather than persons, as constituent entities in an objective world of nature presented as a spectacle to detached scientific observation, but by virtue of their mutual involvement, as

> undivided centres of action and awareness, within a continuous life process. In this process, the relations that human beings have with one another form just one part of the total field of relations embracing all living things.
>
> There can, then, be no radical break between social and ecological relations; rather, the former constitute a *subset* of the latter. What this suggests is the possibility of a new kind of ecological anthropology, one that would take as its starting point the active, perceptual engagement of human beings with the constituents of their world – for it is only from a position of such engagement that they can launch their imaginative speculations concerning what the world is like. The first step in the establishment of this ecological anthropology would be to recongise that the relations with which it deals, between human beings and their environments, are not confined to the domain of 'nature', separate from, and given independently of, the domain in which they lead their lives as persons. For hunter-gathers as for the rest of us, life is given in engagement, not in disengagement, and in that very engagement the real world ceases to be 'nature' and is revealed to us as an environment for people. Environments are constituted in life, not just in thought, and it is only because we live in an environment that we can think at all. (Ingold 2000: 59–60)

Life as a journey

Leaving Ingold to take his first steps towards a new kind of ecological anthropology, let us stay with his idea that, as our lives are lived entirely in 'environments', therefore our journeys through our environment are deeply engaged with how we think about our environment. Taking our cue from the contributors to *Prehistoric Journeys*, what would our 'environment' be like if it was not predicated on 'places' (such as homes and offices) and the 'necessity' of getting from A to B? What would our experience of our environment be if, as Ingold contends and *Prehistoric Journeys* convincingly illustrates, our

environment is instead where 'all life happens'? And, as Ingold fully appreciates, 'all life' includes how we think about our environment. If journeys are not 'necessary evils' for the sake of getting from A to B but much more fundamentally part of the process of living and – as seems to be much more the case in the Neolithic than for modern people who are not nomadic – movement through the environment was integral to the 'process of living', then just how distinct was the sense of this process from awareness of life in a more metaphysical sense?

If we accept Ingold's assertion that life and environment are just two aspects of the same process, and we are convinced that prehistoric life was inseparably interwoven with journeying through the environment then, by bridging these two assumptions, we can plausibly perceive that Neolithic thinking saw 'the big picture', if not as a 'process', then as an all-embracing 'flow' from which one could not deviate. Is this 'the all-changing changeless which is all embracing', as an idiomatic translation of the *Tao te Ching* chapter 16 would aver? Flow is associated above all with water, the 'dialectical' counterpart of many henges. Is this the 'timeless flow' of the *Tao te Ching* chapter 14:

> Stay with the timeless flow
>
> Stay with the ancient Tao.

(I have explored ideas about prehistoric journeys more fully in *Singing Up the Country* (Trubshaw 2011).)

The 'potential' energy which links cultures

As a further example of traditional worldviews which are so prevalent as to suggest an early origin – yet which fails to be fully understood by modern Western materialism – I will briefly summarise a discussion of *kami, ch'i, óðr,* which I have published elsewhere (Trubshaw 2012a: 12–16). As that fairly concise overview is as readily available online as this essay is, then what follows is perhaps overly-concise!

The Japanese 'national religion', Shinto, has no gods, scriptures or a founder, so it fits in poorly with Western notions of religion. Shinto rituals honour *kami* – which denotes a combination of transcendent

A Japanese tree noted for its kami.

power, otherness and mystery – which manifests through all sorts of forms and places, as a tree or a rock or through a powerful person. There are also three other 'lesser' forms of *kami* in the Shinto worldview.

The Japanese concept of *kami* can be recognised in other cultures. The most significant aspect of *kami* is that it exists 'out there' (in a usually undefined 'spirit otherworld') but *manifests* through something such as a rock or tree, or such people as a powerful politician or business leader. For reasons that will become clearer, think of *kami* as 'potency' rather than by overused words such as 'energy' or 'power'.

The pre-Buddhist Bön rituals of Tibet have rituals for drawing down *tse* – which is, among other things, what empowers the body of the deities who dwell in powerful places in the landscape. Among Polynesians the same sense of *kami* or *tse* is referred to as *mana*, 'an impersonal force or quality that resides in people, animals, and… inanimate objects.' New World tribes either side of the Canadian border speak not of *mana* but of *manitou*. Among the Osage (one of the Sioux-speaking tribes) the word *Wah'Kon* denotes the 'mystery force'. In West African traditions and their diaspora the word *ashe* (or *ache* or *ase* etc) denotes a power which can be 'stimulated and utilised as if it were a vitalising force. (Harvey 2005: 131)

If we look at Hindu beliefs, all the gods – even the most powerful ones – acquire their power and 'potency', *shakti* or *prakriti,* from the divine female creative power (often known, understandably, as Shakti).

Shiva and Shakti.

While the Chinese word *ch'i* (or *qi*) has the literal meaning of 'breath', 'air' or 'gas' it is understood as the life energy or life force of any living creature. Practitioners of Chinese martial arts are encouraged to develop this *ch'i*; however it is also key to traditional Chinese medicine and the system of geomancy known as *feng shui*. Strip away a great many Western misconceptions about *ch'i* and what is clear is that this is something which is 'out there', manifesting in various different ways. *Ch'i* seems to be all-but synonymous with early Taoist's concept of *ching* which is a key feature of their cosmologies as 'a generative substance of cosmic proportions' usually translated into English as 'vital essence' or 'vital energy'. This is, of course, the eponymous *ching* of the *Tao te Ching*. It resembles – but in some subtle way is distinct from – the *Tao* or 'Way' itself. The *ching* is the 'manifestation' of the more abstract power or force that is the *te*. There is also a related word,

A reliquary made in France about AD 1000.

shen, which refers to the spirits of mountains, rivers and ancestors. *Shen* also has the power to foreknow events – and also seems to have empowered early Chinese 'shamans' (Roth 1999: 101–7).

Contrary to Western misconceptions, similarly we should not think of the local spirit-deities in Japan as the *source* of the *kami*. Instead *kami* – this sense of 'otherworldly potency' – *is manifested through* the local spirit-deity. In the same way the early Church fathers had a word for the power manifested through saints and their relics – *potentia* (see Brown 1981: 107–113). This is cognate with such modern concepts as 'potential energy' and 'electrical potential' – although these can, of course, be measured in a way that a saint's *potentia* cannot. 'Potential' and 'potency' are of course both from the Latin *potentem* ('potent').

This sense of energy from 'out there' manifesting through a local spirit-deity fits perfectly with Christian doctrine – except that in the Christian worldview it is the power of Christ which is transmitted by (and, at least until the Reformation, only by) saints and the clergy. And, in north European Christianity until about the tenth century, local practice varied greatly from diocese to diocese (Carver *et al* 2010). When the local abbot or bishop died, he would often quickly become sanctified (papal intervention in the process of canonisation is much more recent). Such

local saints' shrines – with all the expectations of healing and other miracles which went with – are all-but indistinguishable from the shrines of spirit-deities previously discussed for Buddhism and Shinto.

Sometimes it is easier to understand other people's cultures than the ones closer to home. But the reason saints were venerated in the early medieval era is because of widespread belief in their *potentia*. And, for reasons that are explained in more detail in *Souls, Spirits and Deities* (Trubshaw 2012a) this *potentia* seems to be a continuation of pre-Christian beliefs in *óðr* – the 'potency' of the Scandinavian deities such as Óðinn, whose name literally means '*óðr* (with-)in' but having the sense of 'full of *óðr*. Óðinn becomes Odin or Woden when his followers migrate to the British Isles.

Clearly these ethnographical parallels and even Europe of about 1,000 to 1,500-or-so years ago provide no certain information about earlier beliefs. But because all-but the same belief is seemingly worldwide (with Western materialism the only major exception!) and – if the Chinese word *ching* is indeed synonymous with later words such as *ch'i* – then a decidedly early origin is most probable. Indeed the origin would need to be in the Neolithic era. Which means that the megalithic monuments of northern Europe were, when constructed, considered to as 'full' of *kami* as a Japanese rock-shrine – or just perhaps as full of *óðr* as the earth-fast stones, trees and springs whose worship was famously prohibited in Aelfric's late tenth century edict.

While it seems entirely plausible that Neolithic people held that there was a *potentia* transmitted through significant places in the landscape, I am of course heading off into the realms of pure speculation to link this with the notion of 'flow' which pervades the watery metaphors of Heraclitus and early Taoism. While it is always possible to read early cosmologies according to a number of different 'structures' it seems safest to think that the power of Greek deities and the Chinese concept of *ching* occupy a different ontological zone to the ideas of an all-pervasive 'flow'.

Do Japanese visitors to the prehistoric stone circle at Avebury think the stones have kami*? Did the Anglo-Saxons think they had* óðr*?*

Towards the source

To use an archaeological metaphor, this chapter has done some 'trial trenching' to see what happens if we were to thoroughly excavate down through the strata of ideas deposited by millennia of metaphysical, ontological and cosmological thinking. We know the oldest surviving Western and Eastern cosmologies differ from later Western metaphysical thinking. To what extent – if any – can we extrapolate the earliest metaphysics back into *pre*history? What sort of archaeological 'evidence' would reveal such conceptual thinking?

Frankly, looking for evidence of emergent dualisms tells us more about modern academic concerns with structuralism, which post-structuralism still fails to fully transcend. It is born of a mindset where 'making a distinction' is not seen as of merely one half of a wider world view in which process, flow and interconnectedness are the 'excluded other'.

In all fields of intellectual enquiry, and most certainly within archaeology, it is a truism that researchers can only find what they set out to discover. To my knowledge at the moment no one in archaeology is seeking evidence for 'process metaphysics'. And why should they when they have plenty of other models of the past to test against the evidence? Therefore it must remain an open question as to what evidence for 'process metaphysics' can sensibly be discerned from the archaeological record.

If such evidence was forthcoming, would our conceptual journey – our intellectual process – have arrived at an adequate appreciation of Neolithic cosmology? Or are our modern minds attempting to merely make distinctions in a timeless flow of ideas – the counterpart to attempting to conserve a whirlpool in an archive?

Chapter Six

Process philosophy in the twentieth century

After a lengthy chapter 'noodling' with more-or-less plausible notions of Neolithic cosmologies this chapter will offer a personal overview of the extent to which 'process' has featured in modern Western philosophy. However I make no claims to be an expert in the history of Western philosophical thinking so what follows should be approached as a 'wonky bits and all' personal viewpoint.

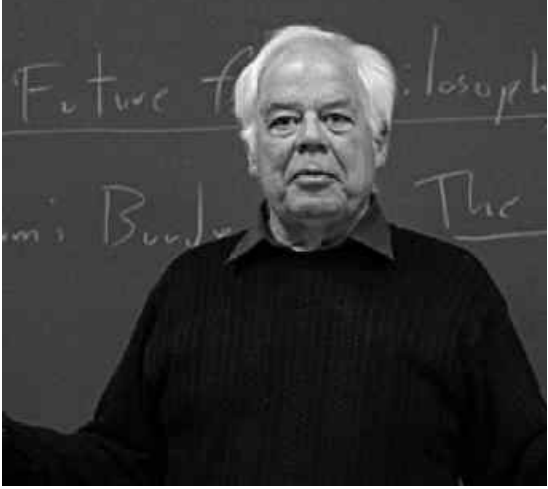
My interest in modern philosophy was awoken in the 1970s. This was a time when logical positivism – especially as expounded by A.J. Ayer and Karl Popper – dominated readily-accessible information. The next level of less accessible philosophy seemed to me mostly intense debates about Ludwig Wittgenstein and how there were, in effect, two or more Wittgensteins. First there was his early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (first published in 1921 but written during the First World War). As the name implies this became a canonical text for the later logical positivists. Then there are the *Philosophical Investigations* (published 1953) and the posthumously-published *Blue and Brown Books* (1958) which open up entirely novel concerns, with all

Ludwig Wittgenstein.

philosophical enquiry regarded as little more than 'language games'. In my own limited way I tried to follow these debates. I was drawn to the *Tractatus* because of its terse style – one which clearly influenced G. Spencer Brown's *Laws of Form* (see page 51). Later on I would recognise that same enigmatic – and at times paradoxical – style in the *Tao te Ching* and the writings of Heraclitus.

Here's an example of Wittgenstein's style from the ending of the *Tractatus* (all the propositions are numbered in a hierarchical manner):

> 6.53 The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – this method would be the only strictly correct one.
>
> 6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed it.



Richard Rorty.

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

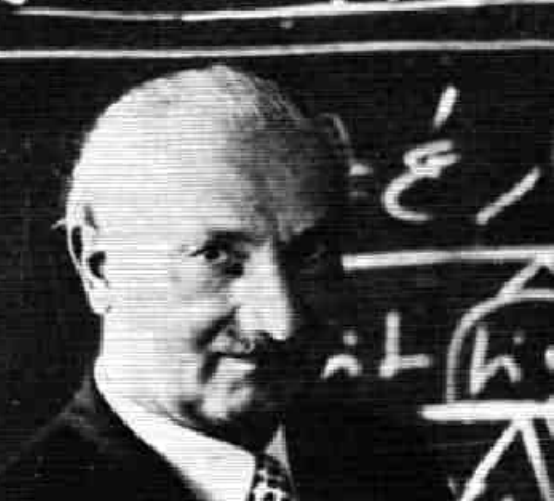
7 What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

As an aside, contrast Wittgenstein's one-way ladder metaphor with Heraclitus's 'the way up is also the way down' metaphor.

At the risk of paring a complex history of ideas down to an impossibly compact 'sound bite', Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* takes nineteenth century rationalism to the extreme point where the underlying irrationalism becomes visible (something Ayer and Popper were unable to accept). A such it is like seeing atheism as the extreme end of the spectrum of possible deisms, rather than the antithesis of deism.

As the 1970s ended then the emergent post-structuralism and post-modernism was about to be translated from French into English, while radical American philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Patricia and Paul Churchland were about to make their considerable mark on the fundamental nature of philosophical enquiry. However I only began to catch up with their thinking in the 1990s.

I make no claims to have followed every turn in the history of ideas which make up Western philosophy. My thinking is clearly influenced by writers who have in their turn been deeply influenced by Hegelian approaches. Interestingly, from the perspective of this essay, the Chinese scholar Chang Chung-yuan noted that in 1815 Hegel discussed the

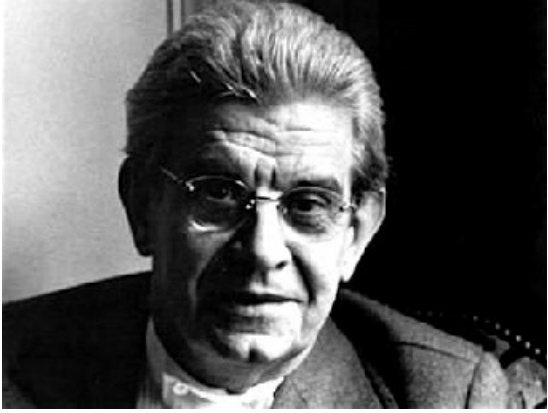


Martin Heidegger.

overlaps between Greek philosophy and Taoism (Chang 1963 (1975: 3–4). Curiously, Edward Hussey noted that Heraclitus influenced two notable opponents of Hegel – Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzche (1844–1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) (Hussey 1999: 360). Indeed Nietzche's respect for Heraclitus is well-established in his writings – for instance in remarks such as when studying Heraclitus he felt 'warmer and better than anywhere else' and 'The world forever needs the truth; hence the world forever needs Heraclitus'. The 'truth' which Heraclitus offered to Nietzsche was that 'being is an empty fiction' (Lambrellis 1989; Vincenzo 1989).

Following along similar lines, Heidegger argued that the world is not an object that can be rationally analysed nor something we can get outside of and stand over. Instead of a dualism between object and subject he invented the notion of *Dasein* ('Being-there') as encompassing both. For Heidegger everything we do is interpretative and *Dasein* requires narratives spanning a long period of time. Understanding and interpreting are diffuse 'processes' with no clear beginning or end, rather than closed conceptual actions. My suspicion is that Heidegger was influenced by various Buddhist writings which regard 'mindfulness' as a process.

Erin O'Connell has discussed in some detail the striking parallels between Heraclitus and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) – both in the way they 'structure' their deeper insights and also in the elaborate rhetoric of their 'poetic' language. Above all change and difference are at the



Jacques Lacan.

heart of both systems of thought (O'Connell 2006: 103–5). However, so far as I am aware, Derrida does not overtly acknowledge any awareness of Heraclitus's thinking.

Frankly my own thinking about dialectical processes owes as much to Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) and, more especially, his numerous followers. It took little effort on my part to see his notions of the 'excluded other' from a more Taoist perspective where such dualisms are part of greater unity – which in turn might also have an excluded other and therefore an even higher-order sense of unity. However, once again, I am not aware of Lacan discussing Heraclitian precedents to this own thinking.

The perils of process philosophy

If you Google for 'process philosophy' you will encounter a number of accounts. They will mention such philosophers as Samuel Alexander, Henri Bergson, Arran Gare, Charles Hartshorne, Martin Heidegger, F.S.C. Northrop, Charles Peirce and Nicholas Rescher. Reduced to a few bare bones, process philosophers regard *process* rather than substance as fundamental. Henri Bergson is regarded as the originator of process philosophy and his main ideas are expounded in *Creative Evolution*, published in 1907. However one early twentieth century philosopher has come to 'epitomise' the idea of process philosophy – Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947). In 1929 he published a book called *Process and Reality*. In it he sees reality as a dualism, with 'creativity' as a driving force. Frankly every online summary of this work seems to be describing a different book (!) and my own recollection of failing to make neither-head-nor-tail of it was that it seemed to be based on the

Alfred North Whitehead.

prior assumption of a higher god – but maybe too many of the overly-subtle arguments had passed me by…

To some extent Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) salvaged aspects of this 'process awareness'. But his philosophical views set the stage for phenomenology rather than a revival of 'processology'. Understandably, post-modern (and post-Rorty) schools of philosophy have seen little or nothing of interest in this 'process' approach to philosophy as it smacks too much of the despised old school 'meta-narratives'.

Put bluntly, my interest in process as an underlying philosophical concept seems to have little or nothing to do with Whitehead. My ideas had been half-formulated long before my attempt to read *Process and Reality* in the early 1990s. (And the title of this essay, *The Process of Reality* was arrived at without any thought of Whitehead's work. Indeed it is only as I write this section of the essay – and it has been drafted in the order it is now published – did the similarity cross my mind! The title was chosen mostly because of the 'echo' of Simon Danser's *The Myths of Reality*.)

While others may see merit in Whitehead's thinking, I am not among them. If he is regarded as a pioneer or champion of process philosophy, to me is little wonder that the entire bathwater was thrown out with his verbose and naïve baby.

However there are passages in *Process and Reality* which seem overly-reminiscent of either Heraclitus or Lao Tsu:

> In our cosmological construction we are, therefore, left with the final opposites, joy and sorrow, good and evil, disjunction and conjunction – that is to say, the many in one – flux and permanence, greatness and triviality, freedom and necessity, God and the World. In this list, the pairs of opposites are in experience with a certain ultimate directness of intuition, except in the case of the last pair. God and the World introduce the note of interpretation.
> (Whitehead 1929: 482–3)

One key difference is that neither Heraclitus nor Lao Tsu would have evoked an otherworldly God in contrast to the world.

This brief chapter serves to acknowledge – although in a bare bones manner – that Heraclitus not only formed the basis of Platonic and Aristotlean thinking (which in turn became key to Renaissance and Enlightenment thinking) but has continued to influence Western thinking. Clearly the Athenian philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, brought about a change of direction compared to their Ionian antecedents. Notably, as Eric Dodds so effectively established in his 1951 book, against all the available evidence the Greeks presumed that the world was inherently rational – a fundamental illusion that still bedevils Western thinking which, at least outside the realms of quantum mechanics, generally regards Aristotlean logic as the basis for scientific enquiry. These Athenian philosophers also constructed a worldview of events and things which reflects not the underlying nature of the world but rather the grammatical structure of languages (such as the Indo-European group) in which verbs and nouns are emphasised.

More subtly, the Athenians began to move away from the monist cosmology of Heraclitus and many other early thinkers and introduced various forms of dualism. One of those, the belief that the realm of god was distinct from the realm of humans, was to become a dominant aspect of medieval Christianity (and still deeply influences seemingly-secular Western approaches to traditional beliefs). Another, which also still features prominently in 'folk ontologies', is the presumed distinction between mind and body.

However, this is not the place to make an exhaustive list of how the assumptions of Plato, Aristotle and their followers continue to construct modern day Western sensibilities. Suffice to point out that there is a real 'watershed' between these Athenians and the earlier pre-Socratic *bathymetes* and *bathyphrons* such as Heraclitus. And, as I hope I have already illustrated, almost the same 'watershed' of ideas continues to separate Western from Chinese philosophical viewpoints.

But all this seems rather akin to continually staring into the rear-view mirror. Instead let's imagine the road ahead…

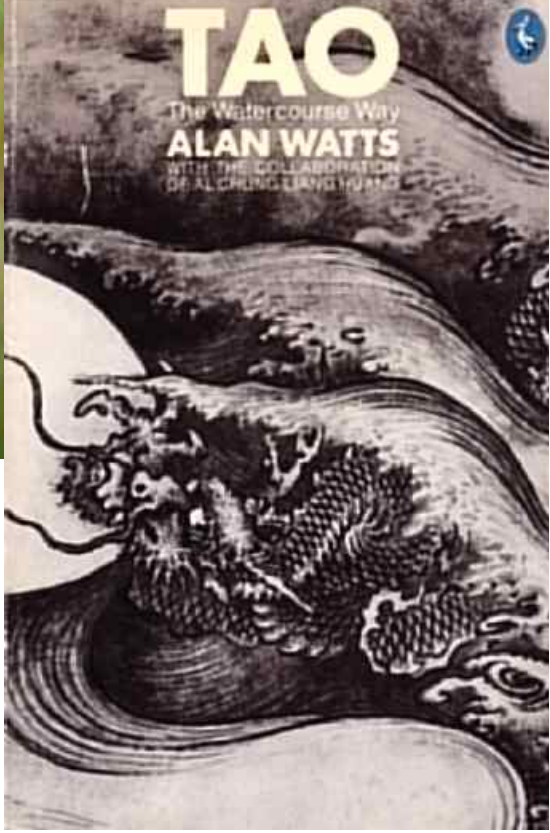
Chapter Seven

Flowing forwards

If this were a book about, say, the historical evidence for Jesus, you would not be surprised for the author to be a practising Christian – although there may be an element of surprise if that author had come across the teachings of Indian Buddhism around the time of the life of Christ and recognised that parallels were uncanny enough to suspect that the Essene sect may have had more than casual contacts with contemporary religious thinking further east.

So it should not surprise you that the previous chapters have been written by someone for whom the idea of 'process reality' has been a lived experience for over thirty years – although the encounter with the uncanny parallels in Heraclitus's teachings only came to my attention in the last five years. Note, however, that I do not think of myself as a 'practising Taoist' – no matter how much my thinking about the nature of underlying reality has been influenced by Westernised popularisations of Taoism, I do not do anything which closely resembles the traditional popular religious practises of Taiwan or Hong Kong, still less practice the meditation techniques of the Taoist adepts. Nevertheless, for about the last thirty years I have thought of myself as part of the Tao, and similarly 'internalised' a number of other Taoist ways of thinking about the world.

My fascination of Taoism was awakened in the early 1980s by Alan Watts' idiosyncratic – but nevertheless inspirational – book, *Tao: The watercourse way* (Watts 1976). This inspired me to purchase Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English's 1970s translations of the *Tao te Ching* and



Above:: *Alan Watts.*

Right: *The cover of the UK edition of Watts'* Tao: The watercourse way

Chuang Tsu. I had previously encountered Chang Chung-yuan's 1963 study *Creativity and Taoism* and the two well-known books about Taoism published by Thames and Hudson in the 1970s: Philip Rawson and Laszlo Legeza's *Tao: the Chinese philosophy of time and change* and Laszlo Legeza's *Tao Magic: The secret language of diagrams and calligraphy* but, truth to tell, the ideas in these books floated on top of a very vague awareness of Taoism that fell well short of understanding.

Soon after reading Watts I also succumbed to the charms of Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh*. As I have clear childhood recollections of my mother and grandmother reading A.A. Milne's original stories to me I could quickly 'join up the dots' between Hoff's writing. I suspect anyone much younger than me who made their first encounter with Winnie the Pooh through the 1977 Disney animation – which has little of the quintessentially English charm of the original accounts of life in Hundred Acre Wood – might have more difficulty with Hoff. And while I'm being more than a little Eyore-ish, may I note that Hoff's sequel,

The Te of Piglet, is best avoided. And as I wrote that last sentence an E.H. Shepard drawing of a hand-lettered wooden sign saying 'BEST AVOYDED' came into my mind…

I hasten to add that my interest in Taoism led to me reading more scholarly accounts than either Watts or Hoff; many of these are cited in the sources to this work. At the same time my reading extended into a wide range of other subject matters. Predictably, I was always intrigued when I encountered the same sort of ideas being expressed by authors as diverse as Peter Carroll, Jeffrey Kripal and Rob Pope – I will come back to these shortly.

Looking from the wrong end of an ontological telescope

In previous chapters I have drawn attention to the connections between the world view of Taoism and Heraclitus with that of modern physics. Among my reading I predictably enough came across a well-beaten path – one established quite explicitly by R.G.H. Siu in *The Tao of Science: an essay on Western knowledge and Eastern wisdom*, first published in 1957 and much more famously by Fritjof Capra in his 1975 book *The Tao of Physics: An exploration of the parallels between modern physics and eastern mysticism*. And these were followed in 1980 by David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* – not a response to Capra but rather a book born of Bohm's own thinking which had evolved over the previous twenty years.

Bohm specifically argues for seeing reality as an underlying process and in a continual process of development. He draws upon Heraclitus and Whitehead when he avers that all is flux – even knowledge itself (Bohm 1980 (2002: xiv; xvii; 61–3)). A key part of his thinking is summarised as the quest for:

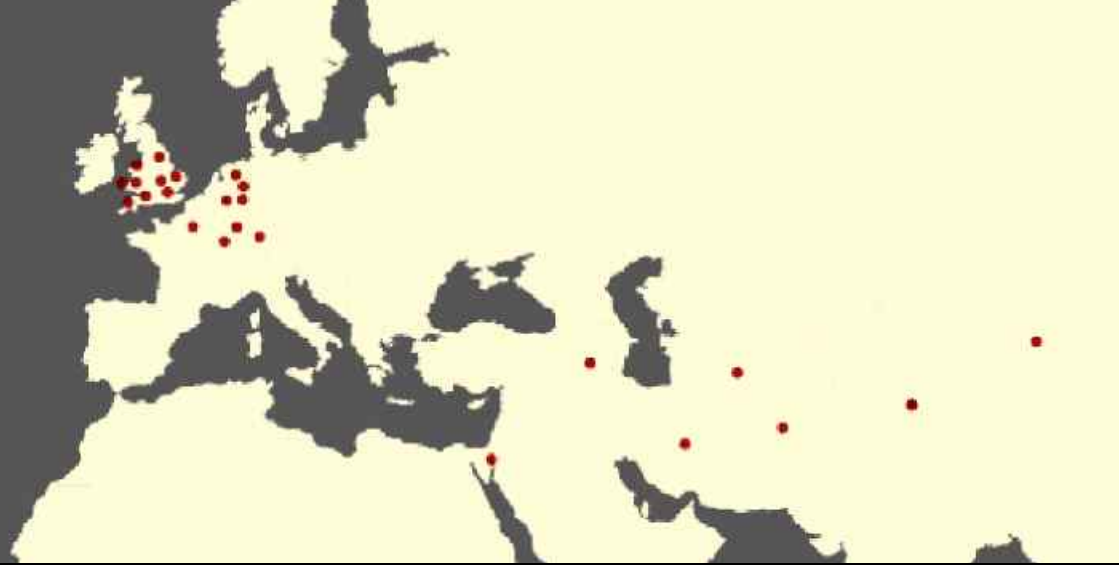
> … new language forms in which the basic role will be given to the verb rather than the noun. Such forms will have as their content a series of actions that flow and merge into each other… Thus, both in form and content, the language will be in harmony with the unbroken flowing movement of existence as a whole.
>
> (Bohm 1980 (2002: xiv))

The *three rabbits or three hares motif.*

Clearly both Bohm and Capra are expressing ideas which I have also approached in previous chapters. But to say that I have been influenced by their books would be to be looking at things from the wrong end, as it were, of a cultural and indeed ontological telescope. The inherent worldview of Capra and Bohm – both of whom made their careers primarily as physicists – is that of Western materialist-reductionism. At the risk of over-exaggeration, it is as if they loudly shout 'Hurray! Some of the mysticism of the Orient seems to fit in with the ontologies of modern physics.' Whereas, from the perspective of Taoism, there is much less excitement about the insights of modern physics. Rather something more akin to the implicit expectation that any half-decent worldview will be compatible with theirs so why did it take the West so long to catch up with ideas which were well established in China by 2,500 years ago? I hope in this essay I have helped to show that the view from this end of the metaphorical telescope is actually more interesting than the one offered by Bohm and Capra.

Back to the Silk Road

I may well have been happy to have simply regarded this as some sort of parallel evolution of ideas in ancient Greece and China had Mercia MacDermott not been researching Romanesque sculpture and noted that several key motifs were clearly borrowed from Indian art. Then, soon after the first edition of her study of green men was published (MacDermott 2003) a different group of researchers published their



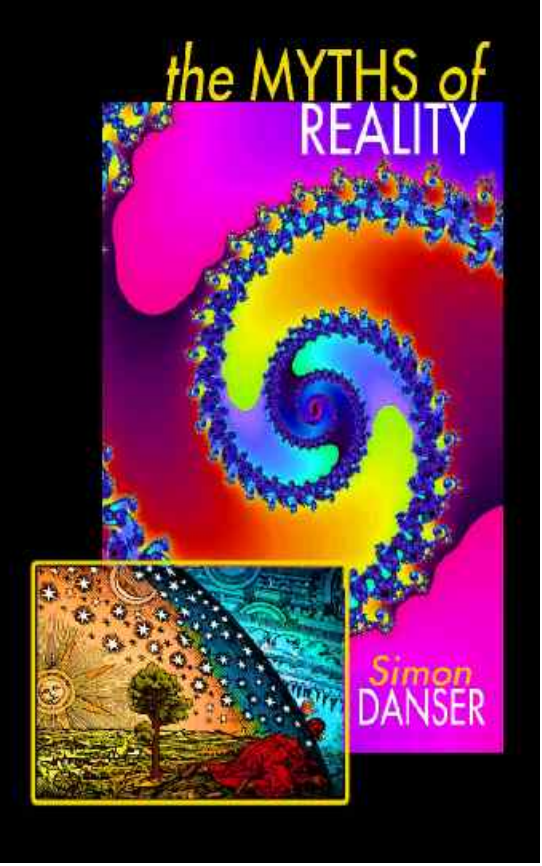
Locations where the distinctive three-rabbits or three-hares motif has been noted.

findings about how the very distinctive so-called 'triple rabbits' or 'triple hares' motif had made its way from western China through the Middle East into western Europe between 600 and 1500 AD. Details of this were added to the second edition of MacDermott's *Explore Green Men*, published in 2006.

Because I was the publisher of *Explore Green Men* and also deeply interested in the history of medieval carvings I began to keep tabs on any references to the trade routes commonly known as the Silk Road and, more especially, on the evidence for the transfer of cultural ideas. What emerged is that these routes go back a long time. A very long time… Their roots may well be in the emerging Neolithic culture of around 10,000 BCE (see Chapter Two for my remarks about Göbekli Tepe and Nevali Çori). This wide-ranging reading eventually led to a more in-depth encounter with the writings of the Ionian philosophers who were living at the western end of this route and clearly being influenced by ideas from Persian – and perhaps further east.

Myths and the construction of social reality

At this point there was a real sense of meeting – very belatedly – a fellow traveller. Heraclitus's notions of flux seemed to be a 'dead spit'



of early Taoist thinking – and, after much deliberation, this present work shaped up.

Something of this same sense of underlying change or 'flux' is present in the ideas of social reality being an ongoing process of construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Searle 1995). However none of the academic authors are seemingly aware of the roots in either Taoist or Heraclitian thinking. Neither do they discuss the 'mechanisms' by which that process of construction takes place. However Simon Danser, in his 2005 book *The Myths of Reality* takes the approach that reality is constructed – and continually reconstructed – by the exchange of 'mythic fragments' which refer to (although rarely extensively) much larger 'deep structures' in society. In other peoples' societies such deep structures are labelled 'myths' – although in our own society these

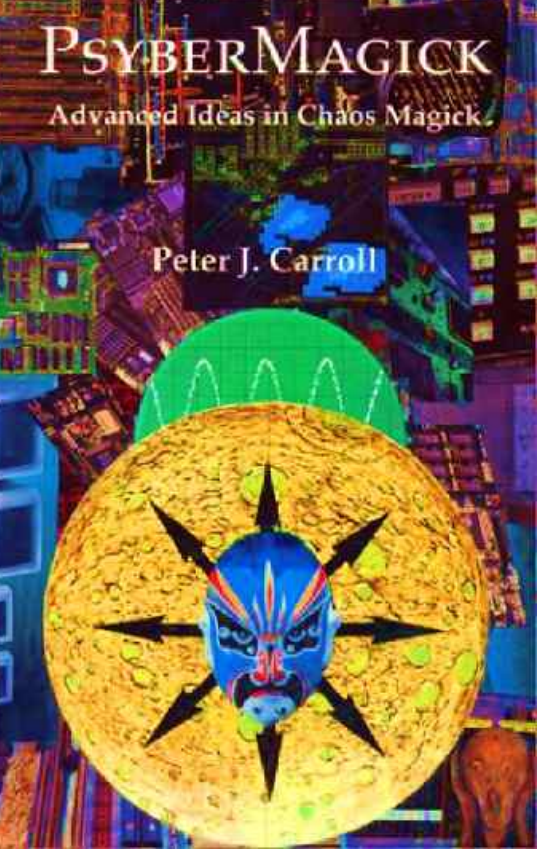
mythic foundations are largely unrecognised. As Danser states, 'myths are like the lenses of spectacles in that we look *through* them rather than *at* them, and they shape our perceptions.' (Danser 2005: 16)

As the publisher of Danser's book I was familiar with earlier versions of these ideas from around 2003. The ideas and approach of *The Myths of Reality* deeply influenced my thinking and writing at the time. Indeed it became something of a 'prospect mound' from which to regard the ideas of other authors, seeing an underlying process that they did not overtly recognise. From this somewhat anomalous viewpoint several works seemed to gain in significance – although they are all 'stand out' works in their own right.

Creativity as an emergent process

The first of these is Rob Pope's 2005 book called *Creativity: Theory, history, practice* which, among many other insights, considers creativity as an 'emergent process' (Pope 2005: 5; 17; 78; 89). As an example of the 'construction of ideas' note that although 'creativity' is a word bandied around commonly it was not used in the sense of 'having the quality or power of creating' until the 1940s and 50s (although it was used, in a different sense, as far back as 1875) – and as an idea was rather dismissed in the 80s and 90s. For the last fifteen or more years Britain has a government keen to support 'creative industries' (such as advertising, film-making and computer games) – which are not to be confused with 'the arts' (I assume because the later have the taint of 'free-thinking subversives' whereas 'creatives' are intrisically subservient to the hegemonic consumerism…).

Be all that as it may, the Western economy has become embroiled with these creative industries – and 'creative accountancy' – on a grand scale! Stripping away the specifics, what underlies the global economies is an ongoing process that is essentially creative. 'The myriad models come and go, but the process remains the same' as a modern day Lao Tsu might say of mobile phone manufacturing or, in the case of the investment banking, 'The myriad transactions come and go, but the process remains the same'.



The paranormal as a creative process

The second book which is even more remarkable from the perspective I have offered takes us into the realms of comic book heroes and pulp fiction. This is Jeffrey Kripal's *Authors of the Impossible*, published in 2010. This is in some ways a sequel to his 2007 book, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic reflections on the study of religion,* and most certainly a prequel to his subsequent work *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Kripal 2011).

Why *Authors of the Impossible*? Kripal explains quite simply that if 'paranormal events are meaning events that work and look a great deal like texts, then it follows that texts can also work and look a great deal like paranormal phenomena.' More specifically, anyone who has a paranormal experience can only share that through speaking or writing. And such texts, which seemingly replicate and even 'realise' the paranormal, is where the paranormal – the 'impossible' from the

perspective of normative culture – is authored. As Kripal fully realises, any researcher writing about the paranormal – himself included – is part of that process of authoring the impossible. Indeed he ups the ante by stating that current materialism, 'faith commitments', cultural relativisms and such like mean that 'we *cannot* know'.

Kripal is clearly – although not explicitly – looking at the construction of social reality. What he is describing are the *processes* creating those social structures. He is so 'in there' with that process – both as an author and in his discussion of other authors – that he simply has no need to step back and, as it were, look at the lenses of the spectacles he is looking through. Although it has to be said that he is most certainly aware of the deep structures – the philosophical underpinings, if you like – of his approach.

One of Kripal's asides is that, from his viewpoint, reality is 'magical' and not rational. Here he seems stepping, I am sure unwittingly, into the similar mindset pioneered by Peter J. Carroll in his books about chaos magic (Carroll 1987; 1992; 1995; 2008). Carroll's perspective is, to say the least, individual. His terse idiom makes assumptions of prior knowledge which, intentionally, exclude the 'casual' reader (but the same could be said of Heraclitus and Lao Tsu…) and includes an awareness of Taoism, While offering any sort of 'summary' of the thinking in Carroll's books could not be done without adding at least another chapter, this 'passing mention' serves to acknowledge the influence that these books have had on finding ways of 'working' with Taoist ideas in modern society.

Magic as a creative process

One reason why any summary of chaos magic cannot be brief is the wide gulf that exists between the likes of Carroll and popular perceptions of the word 'magic'. Understandably, most people's first thoughts will be of a boy in round-framed spectacles pointing a wand and saying something like *'Egredere et multiplicari!'* Such is magic in the mass media. In both senses. Firstly, the idea that magic is all about wand-waving and faux Latin. And, secondly, the way that the media have the 'magical' ability to make ideas go forth and multiply faster than any sorcerer's apprentice.

Think instead of Jason Louv's approach:

> Rule Number One of living in the twenty-first century
>
> Whether or not you believe in magic or not, and whether or not magic is viable as a scientific discipline, and whether or not magic is 'real' or not is your own opinion, but *It doesn't matter one single bit*. Because politics, pop culture and advertising don't work along any rules *except the rules of magic*.
>
> (Louv 2006: 113)

Arcane knowledge was equated to 'magical powers' many millennia before Michel Foucault opined that knowledge equates to power. Graham Harvey, an academic specialising in modern religions, offers two ways of thinking about magic. One level is about changing realities according to 'the will of the magician'. On another level it is about changing consciousness according to their will. In practice it is about both at the same time (Harvey 2007: 47–8). For example, one of Aleister Crowley's cruder exercises was to create two opposing personalities, such as a vegetarian pacifist and chauvinistic militarist. He would link each persona with a different piece of jewellery (such as a ring) and, depending on what piece of jewellery he was wearing, change his behaviour, his opinions and more subtle inner responses. More recent magical exponents would regard this as very elementary stuff.

Crowley's crude exercise reveals that we should think about our beliefs as not something we possess but instead as entities which possess us – and imprison our thinking. As Louv implies, many of these magical ideas travel incognito. We should not expect too many showy wands, staffs or cloaks. As Ioan Coulinao recognised:

> Nowadays the magician busies himself with public relations, propaganda, market research, sociological surveys, publicity, information, counter-information and misinformation.... [S]cience has... substituted itself for a part of magic while extending its dream and its goals by means

> of technology. Electricity, rapid transport, radio and television, the airplane and computer have carried into effect the promises first formulated by magic... to produce light, move instantaneously from one point to another, to fly through the air, to have infallible memory at one's disposal.
> (Coulinao 1987: 104)

And, with that in mind, these more recent thoughts of Tony Sampson:

> Markets, marketers and politicians are, it seems, beginning to fathom out how to more effectively recognize and reproduce affective atmospheres able to ripen the social mood and make it ready for capricious contagious overspills.
>
> [...]
>
> Neuromarketing ushers in new methods of persuasion designed to sidestep the cognitive realm of visual representation and tap into the implicit, unconscious affective systems of consumption.
>
> (Sampson 2011)

As an example, Sampson notes that 'Celebrity is endemic to a media-engineered desiring-machine marketers and politicians compete with each other to plug into.'

But, just as the mass media can so nimbly construct our desires, we too can perform magic. But first of we need to change reality. Or at least our model of reality. Here begins the alchemical process calcination, dissolution and separation…

Reality as a creative process

At this stage I seem to be venturing into the territory of yet another essay or book.

But, to reiterate, the Taoist way of thinking about reality as an ongoing 'creative process' proves to be both a powerful and rewarding lived experience. And we should think of 'reality' as a very broad term which includes our ways of giving meaning and significance to the 'myriad things' of the physical world.

There seems to me to be four overlapping ways of expressing this concisely:

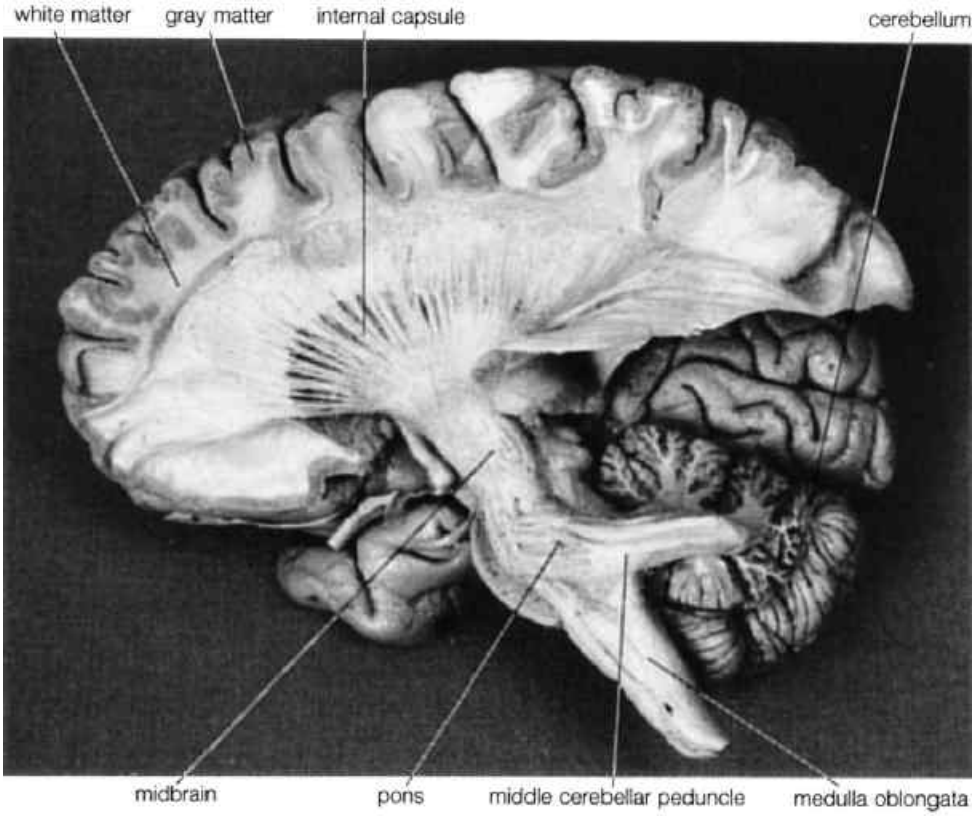
Reality is contingent.
Reality is continually being reconstructed.
Reality is emergent and creative.
Reality is a process.

But, above all, we should not think of this process of reality as something utterly abstract, entirely 'soulless'. As I have begun to explore in Chapter Five (and more extensively in *Souls, Spirits and Deities* (Trubshaw 2012a)), the sense of an all-pervasive *ch'i* or 'vital energy' seems to be worldwide – the only significant exception being Protestant and secular Western societies. It is present in pre-Reformation and Roman Catholic Christianity, where it is referred to as the *potentia* (or 'potency') of saints and their relics – although the Christian exegesis is that ultimately this *potentia* is power of Christ being 'channelled' through the relics, as it is through the priests when they are blessing and healing. Substitute *óðr* or *kami* and this too is for me a lived experience. More pedantically, an experience that I turn on and off as needed – akin to Crowley's personality shifts.

The slicing of the anatomist's knife

My 'lived experience' is also of the underlying monism of Taoism. This is in contrast to the dualism of Christianity, where God, heaven, hell, angels, souls and such like occupy one or more realms which are distinct from the earthly one. From the monist perspective deities – however few or many – and all manner of spirits and souls are part of the human realm (although not necessarily as 'manifest' as that of living beings).

If such dualism seems remote from modern secular viewpoints then think again. This Christian dualism, in which the soul is ontologically distinct from the body, became secularised as the mind:body illusion famously propounded by René Descartes. And we still think of our brains as where our consciousness 'resides' – even though the nerves and synapses inside our skulls are but just a part of an integrated



nervous system that extends down our spinal column all the way to the tips of our toes and the far ends of our fingers. In life this is an unbroken system – only with the slicing of the anatomist's knife do we get the 'separate' organs of brain and spinal column. Stepping outside this illusory dualism, in life our 'mind' extends all the way to our extremities. Indeed our stomachs and hearts have the most complex nerve structures outside the brain. A human stomach has as many neurons as a domestic cat's brain (Mosley 2012).

But from a monist perspective, the idea of a 'mind' as in any way distinct from embodied experience is also illusory… Western 'folk psychology' about consciousness is separated from neuroscientists' ideas about how our brains work by a massive gulf. As I have suggested elsewhere (Trubshaw 2012a; 2012b) these popular conceptions of 'consciousness' are essentially secularised notions of souls which have their origins in medieval Christianity.

Just as the *idea* of an omnipresent god is a useful one, even to those who do not believe in the reality of such a deity, so too the *idea* of a unified consciousness inside our skulls is a useful one – although it seems to be a poor match for how our cognitive processes actually operate! In the absence of any firm evidence to the contrary, the safest approach might be to think of both god and consciousness as equally necessary concepts – but also equally illusory. (For more on the illusion of mind and consciousness see Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Danser 2005: Ch.11)

Flowing forwards

As you may gather, the writing of this essay has been a journey of re-exploring – and sometimes of seeing with new eyes – ideas which have steadily accumulated over three decades. These ideas have been core to my own 'deep structures' – my 'personal myths' if you like – and yet much of time have been secondary or tertiary to whatever other research and writing interests were to the forefront at the time. Combine that with my attempts in this chapter to 'situate myself in my own writing' and this whole project has become something of a 'journey into myself'. And, in attempting to set out the 'utility' of my thinking to the present day, I am venturing into an idiom of writing which is fairly novel for me – where I am being prescriptive rather than descriptive. So, in line with the precedent of two-and-a-half millennia of paradoxical statements, I offer these closing thoughts:

Just as the way up and the way down are the same road, so too the way forward and way back are the same way. We construct our ideas about both the past and the future according to our present-day concerns and beliefs. As our concerns and beliefs evolve – especially when our beliefs about what sort of questions can be asked of the evidence surviving from the past evolve, as they always do – then our ideas about the past change. Similarly the way we project our present-day aspirations and fears onto the future changes the way we hope or expect the future to be (although when the present day moves on enough to become what was once the future it rarely conforms to predictions or expectations).

I have long considered the 'narratives of the past' written by historians and archaeologists to be a less-literary sub-genre of SciFi. And on the same basis the earlier chapters of this work – predominately looking backwards in time – can be thought of as attempts to look forward in time. This is, *stricto sensu*, a fact – as for anyone else to ever think of the past in similar ways to my earlier chapters is, at the time of my writing this, firmly in the future. Once we think of ideas and reality as some sort of 'process' then we must come to terms with the ways in which such processes always flows both up and down, backwards and forwards – and perhaps in a multiplicity of 'directions' rather than merely in some binary dualism. And, above all, it is the synthesis of this dialectical process – finding the 'one' among the 'several' or the 'many' – which is key to understanding. And from understanding comes the possibility of wisdom…

Epilogue

The *Tao te Ching* refers to the Tao as an empty vessel that is used but not filled. Both Lao Tsu and Chuang Tsu express this through metaphors such as the space inside the hub of a wheel being as important as the spokes and rim, the emptiness of a pot being essential to its use, the space within windows and doorways which is their essential characteristic and even the inner spaces of a house which make it inhabitable.

So too when typing the spaces between the words are as important as the characters for conveying the meaning of the sentence. So too when writing what is left unsaid is at least as important as what is said.

Chapter 8

Cloud hidden with a Taoist immortal

Somewhere high up on a rocky mountain, lost in the low clouds, I rather lost my bearings while exploring various paths through a forest of tall, ancient pine trees. The sound of a waterfall caught my attention so I headed in that direction. There, sitting by the side of the cascading water was someone who could only be a Taoist immortal. I bowed reverently. The old man laughed heartily and said:

'That's enough of that! I suppose you'd like a cup of tea after all that walking… '

After a little too enthusiastically agreeing to his suggestion, I ventured to speak:

'May I ask your name?'

'Well, the folk who, from time to time, venture up here call me the Old Boy. It suits me quite well, don't you think?'

'Indeed! How long have you lived up here?'

'Long enough to watch these pine trees grow from seedlings. And the pine trees before them. I take my pleasure in watching the whole of creation renew itself. The water in this stream renews itself within moments. The mushrooms come anew each autumn. The birds and animals raise a new generation every year or three. The trees take a little longer. The rocks much longer still. But in each and all there is, I can see the vital energy taking form and then returning to

formlessness. I too, of course, are part of that very same process of creation.'

'What do you mean by "vital energy"?'

'Vital energy is neither matter nor spirit. It existed before the world, and everything in the world is only an aspect of it. When condensed it becomes life, and when diluted it becomes indefinite potential. Vital energy gives form to and transforms everything. When heaviest it is found in mountains and rocks. When most ethereal it is found in inner tranquillity.

'Think of vital energy as creation without a creator: defining the form but changing it constantly. The only constant reality is vital energy in its transformations.'

'So it is like an inner power?'

'If we concentrate the vital energy in the depths of our minds – our mind within our mind, so to speak – then we accumulate inner power. By accumulating inner power we become one with the ultimate Way.

'It confuses people when I say that the Way, the inner power and the distilled vital energy are distinct yet the same. But those who accumulate sufficient inner power – you would refer to them as sages – also attain a numinous clarity of mind. This profound state of mind is always fleeting, although less so for a timeless one such as me.'

'How would I know when you are in that state of mind?'

'Oh, you might notice because I'm laughing loudly at everything around me! It may be numinous but it doesn't mean you have to be deadly serious!' *[Laughing loudly]*

'Could I attain that state of mind?'

'Oh I'm sure you could, with enough practice. But I would need to teach you how to meditate in the correct posture, how to centre your thinking, how to control your breath. After some years of practice you may then be able to coil and uncoil the vital energy within you. Once you have mastered these techniques then I would teach you to bring the four directions here into the centre – and, of course, to send them back out again.'

'And then I'd be as one with the Way?'

'No, no!' *[Laughing long and loud...]* 'No, that's the just the beginning. It takes years to perfect. Do you know what most mortals find most difficult?'

'No. Give me a clue... '

'It's when they start to become one with the Way. This means they also become one with the myriad things.'

'Yes, I can see that would be a problem. The mystical sense of 'the ocean slips into a drop of water' and all that can phase people... '

'No, no, people get used to that soon enough! *[More laughter]* What phases them – as you put it – is that when they become one with the myriad things then they also know what all the myriad things are doing. It is as if you have been maniacally consulting the *I Ching*, without so much as casting the yarrow stalks or tossing three coins. Intuitive

knowledge of everything that is happening – that is what mortals find difficult.'

> 'Is this because in becoming as one with the Way you are becoming as one with the process of creativity – the flow of vital energy – which you were telling me about?'

'Indeed, that is one way of trying to make sense of it! You seem to have got a feel for all this. I'll tell you what, as you've let your tea get cold, how about I fetch one of the bottles of rice wine I have stashed away... '

With that the Old Boy wandered off, chortling with his customary laughter. The sound of his laughter echoed off the rocks and, as he walked back to where he kept his stash of wine, the fading laughter merged with the sound of the waterfall.

Many hours later I woke up. At my side were two smallish drinking vessels and an empty wine bottle. I felt refreshed and mentally more alert than I had felt since a child. Looking around at the rocks and the trees, listening to the falling water, all these were sufficient to sustain a deep sense of satisfaction. But there was no other sign that the Old Boy had ever been here…

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