

## THE CONFUCIAN AND TAOIST APPROACHES TO TRUTH AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS.

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This paper aims at understanding the Confucian and Taoist approaches to truth and their contemporary implications. Since our purpose is not to engage in any detailed treatment of truth or to have any particular methodological framework or theory of truth in mind, we shall avoid, as far as possible, any controversial views about various concepts of truth. Our emphasis will be on cultural differences regarding truth and their implications. However, we need to consider Hans George Gadamer's contention seriously in this regard. In his introduction to *Truth and Method*, he argues that the phenomenon of understanding is not concerned primarily with the method of amassing knowledge and truth. He further says:

"The phenomenon of understanding not only pervades all human relations to the world. It also has an independent validity within science and resists any attempt to change it into a method of science. The following investigation starts with the resistance within modern science against the universal claim of scientific method. It is concerned to seek that experience of truth that transcends the sphere of the control of scientific method wherever it is to be found, and to inquire into its legitimacy. Hence the human sciences are joined with modes of experience which lie outside science, with experience of philosophy, of art and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that can not be verified by the methodological means proper to science."<sup>1</sup>

The point is that the truth could also be communicated through

other modes of experiences which cannot be verified by science. It could also be the state or quality of being in accord with fact or reality. Thus, to put it in more humanistic tone, truth could signify the state or quality of being in accordance with a norm or principle aspired after by cultural heroes in a particular historical context. Confucius, Lao Tzu can be taken as such cultural heroes like Plato and Jesus Christ. We are taking truth in this sense and thus not engaging in various theories of truth in modern epistemology.

What then is the truth communicated through the Confucian and Taoist modes of experience? But before we discuss the same, we must keep in mind the dramatic contrast between Chinese and Western modes of philosophic thinking grounded in contrasting assumptions of their classical cultures. As the well known Chinese philosopher Lin Yutang notes, "China's peculiar contribution to philosophy is therefore the distrust of systematic philosophy, which is the hallmark of Western philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Western mode of philosophising seeks out being of things, the essential unity behind appearances, whereas primary concern of Chinese philosophy is establishment of and cultivation of harmonious relationships within the social structure. Compared to Anglo-European philosophic traditions, the thinking of the Chinese is far more concrete. This worldly and above all practical Western civilization gives priority to logical reasoning, whereas Chinese civilization is largely indifferent to abstract analysis. The Chinese tradition is, unlike the Western, less interested in dispassionate speculation for acquisition, organisation and transmission of knowledge about the nature of things. In the West, mathematical order has been thought the purest. In China by contrast, such an abstract order is of decreasing relevance. Rational order depends upon a single ordered cosmos that presumes determining principles as transcendental sources of order. In China, the cosmos is simply ten thousand things. They believe that things of nature may be ordered in any number of ways. In contrast to rational or logical thinking grounded in analytical, dialectical and analogical argumentation that stresses explanatory powers of physical causation, Chinese way of thinking may be called correlative thinking grounded in

informal and ad-hoc analogical procedures presupposing both association and differentiation. For example, Yin and Yang are not to be understood as cosmic principles of ontological contrasts rooted in the very nature of things. Rather, they are heuristics helpful in reading and characterizing the world as concretely experienced in variety of ways. Correlative descriptions are, in fact, prescriptions which orient human beings in a very practical manner to their external surroundings. Thus, Chinese categorical definitions are not framed in terms of essential features and formal class membership; instead, they tend to be metaphorical, and invariably entail the human subject and human values. This difference between Western and Chinese way of thinking may not be absolute, but a difference in the degree of emphasis leading to different approaches to truth, as Lin Yutang puts it, "there is a definite difference in approach between Chinese and Western philosophy, the approach of values and approach of facts."<sup>3</sup>

Since we are suffering not from lack of facts, but rather from too many and from lack of judgement, it is worthwhile to understand two main Chinese approaches to truth: Confucian and Taoist.

### ***The Confucian Approach to Truth***

According to correspondence theory of truth, knowing involves true correspondence between thought and an objective reality and knowledge then, is presentation of state of affairs as it really is. But for Confucius, reality is immanent, relative and contingent. It is something achieved rather than recognized. Thus, reality is not independent of realizer. Therefore, truth can not be result of simple correspondence. Rather, as Deutsch argues, truth is to be seen as qualitative achievement which involves something like "appropriateness" or "genuineness".<sup>4</sup> Such a paradigm of truth is, unlike the dominant Western model, personal in nature in two senses.<sup>5</sup> Outwardly, it is a kind of sincerity in which one brackets one's own private preferences in favour of optimizing the feelings of all interested persons. Inwardly, it alienates one to the self one ought to be. These two referents of the notion are tightly fused. It is primarily by indentifying with the feelings of others (developing Zen) that one be-

comes a chuntzu (the self one should be). Hustan Smith has described such a notion of truth as "a kind of performative".<sup>6</sup> An act or utterance is true to the extent that it resolves the ingredients of a situation in a way that furthers a desired outcome- in case of Confucius, social harmony. It can be defined even in stronger terms.: "Truth is speech and deed that effects an intended consequence".<sup>7</sup> In any case, truth is not given; it is to be realized.

The Confucian concept of truth is expressed in terms of Tao (the way). In the *Analects*, the prevalence or non-prevalence of the Tao is frequently mentioned.<sup>8</sup> By the Tao, Confucius refers to the way of human being to achieve a normative socio-political order which was not practised during his time but could be recovered with efforts from the past. The prevalence of the way presupposes a kind of universal kingship. When the way is established, the Emperor is the source of music, rites and punitive measures and the commoners do not express critical views about politics. Thus, it appears that democracy is not favoured for practice of the way. But this can be due to political norm at his time. The more important thing is that Confucian way is a socio-political order that at one time existed in this human world and not in a transcendent world. This refers not only to the proper familial and socio-political roles, statuses and ranks but also to the objective prescriptions of proper behaviour-ritual, ceremonial and ethical - that governs the relationship among these roles. Thus the Confucian way can not be separated from the ideal performance of human roles in their proper socio-political contexts.

Compared to the Christian approach to truth, the Confucian way is relatively this-worldly in its orientation. In the Bible, the way is related to the eternal truth and most often refers to the individual moral life; normally it is not considered to be associated with this world and its socio-political order. But, for Confucius, the ideal order had appeared in the past and hopefully could emerge again in future. As a result, the Confucian tends to be more optimistic about this secular world.

Though Tao is the normative socio-political order from the past, yet

it is not the state of nature but the fruit of cultural endeavours. This is in sharp contrast to the Biblical Garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve are not only physically naked but devoid of any social roles, status and all the machinery of a complex society.<sup>9</sup> Thus, culture seems to play a far more important and constructive role in Confucianism than in Christianity. In the words of Confucius : "It is man who is capable of broadening the way. It is not the way that is capable of broadening Man."<sup>10</sup> It means human effort is what makes the way possible.

For a Confucian, not to go astray and to walk properly, the role of culture, education and moral efforts is of paramount importance. His concern is not to choose between different alternatives but to follow the path mapped out for him by the ancient sages. Herbert Fingarette aptly characterizes the Confucian way as "a way without a crossroad."<sup>11</sup> Thus, in Confucian approach to truth, the ultimate value of human experience lies in becoming a quality person through education and cultivation.

### ***The Taoist Approach To Truth***

The Taoist approach to truth uses the term Tao in an entirely different meaning compared with that in Confucianism. The Taoist way does not refer to the ideal socio-political order of the golden age to be recovered by the Confucian sage in the present. It still refers to some sort of pattern, prevalent in nature, but its meaning is somewhat elusive and could not be described in language. This is because of the very fundamental characteristic of Taoism which is a distrust of language and argumentation as a means of attaining reliable knowledge or approaching truth. For them, a language is a set of limitations imposed upon the individual by the social and cultural environment in which he grows up. Even if an universal language were possible, it would still be restricted by the finite viewpoint, for after all it is a human language. What is true of the human world may not be true of other worlds, the worlds of monkeys, deer, fish and like. In short, for the Taoists human knowledge is the limited knowledge and the human viewpoint is only a finite viewpoint. Human culture is but a crystallization of human bias, finitude and partiality.

Since absolute knowledge is the knowledge of Tao,' the Tao that can be spoken of is not the absolute Tao', Lao Tzu says. Though Tao as a metaphysical concept stands for the ultimate reality of the universe, it does not imply any notion of material substance like water, air or fire. But it is also not entirely abstract like Platonic forms. Due to its immaterial nature, Tao can not be qualified by words which usually characterize material objects. Lao Tzu did try to use hints, suggestions and metaphors to characterize Tao :

"Tao, being a hollow vessel is never exhaustible in use;  
Fathomless Perhaps the fountainhead of all existence."<sup>12</sup>

Does it suggest that Tao is emptiness, nothingness or non-being? But many passages (Ta0 Te Chinng, 21) clearly suggest that though, Tao is not a sharply demarcated corporal substance of determinate being, it is 'something rather than pure nothingness'. Then, the question is; what are the characteristics of this something? Lao, Tzu gives us an answer:

The above passage suggests that Tao created the universe and gave birth to all existence. This had let many scholars to compare Tao with God in the Judiac-Christian tradition. While doing so, we should keep in mind that Chinese culture is far less religious as compared to Western or Hindu cultures and our interpretation of Tao in terms of God, or a Divine being may undermine the humanistic spirit of Chinese culture and the naturalistic flavour of Taoism. The most significant difference between the concept of Tao and the concept of God in Judiac-Christian tradition is that latter is a Deity of tremendous actions, while the former is an embodiment of the principle of non-action. Lao Tzu emphatically declared that "the principle of Tao is sportaneity."<sup>14</sup> The Second difference is that God in the Judiac-Christian tradition is a personal Deity while Tao is impersonal and naturalisitic. Tao has never exercised authority to assert its power like the God in the Old Testament. Another difference is that God is an object of worship, while Tao has never been one. Tao is neither religiously available, nor is it even religiously relevant. It appears that Tao is a metaphysical principle rather than a deity and can be compared

with the concept of God as interpreted by some philosophers like Spinoza or Whitehead. Since Tao is a metaphysical principle which requires rare philosophical talent to understand its meaning, the principle of Tao can hardly be popularized. The common people are more receptive to Confucian values. When the absolute is unattainable, we have to be content with the relative.

Although, Tao could be taken in different ways, in its dynamic sense it is basically universally binding principle. It is said to stand alone and does not change.<sup>15</sup> But if it is constant, why there is reference to the decline of Tao?<sup>16</sup> The answer is that the principle of Tao is supposed to be binding in the non-human realm, man, due to his free will, has the option of following or not following the Tao. And this following and not following is also part of the nature of Tao. Without this possibility of man's deviation from the way, there would be no need to heed Taoist advice.

It is interesting to note that Lao Tzu is completely at odds with the Confucian project of morality. For him, Confucian morality represents 'cleverness' and great 'artificiality' which merely express symptoms of ills of civilization and not the solutions to the social problems. Disharmonious family relationships and chaotic state of affairs result in the need of Confucian to promote the virtues of filial piety and loyalty to the ruler.

Despite his aversion to morality and civilization, Lao Tzu presents a rather high-profile political philosophy. His statements such as "Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish"<sup>17</sup> and "It is because he does not contend that none in the empire is in a position to contend with him"<sup>18</sup> do suggest the minimalistic government philosophy. However, the general message throughout is that the political order can not remedy the human plight which is rooted in the individual mind itself.<sup>19</sup>

Our foregoing discussion leads to the conclusion that the two approaches to truth, the Confucian and the Taoist are diametrically distinct from each other. Confucians deal with human relationships in an ideal social order, while Taoists are more concerned with spiritual yearnings

and imaginative flights of which the human soul is capable. Confucians worship culture and reason, Taoists reject them in favour of nature and intuition. Confucius can be termed as a positivist, Lao Tzu a mystic.<sup>20</sup> After a man has been good son, dutiful father and provider of the family, there remains the beauty and mystery of universe, the meaning of life and death, the pursuit of which is more exciting. That is why the two approaches are seldom mutually exclusive and often complement to each other in Chinese culture. A Chinese may be more of a Confucian or a Taoist, but is always under the influence of both.

### ***Contemporary Implications Of The Two Approaches To Truth***

In view of the Huntington's thesis on cultural clashes, it is important to look into the contemporary implications of the Confucian and Taoist approaches to truth.

Confucian approach to truth is basically moral. It should be commonly shared and freely accessed by all. The difference between assessing or not accessing the truth depends on personal efforts in learning how to follow the way and not in illuminating light of God or divine Grace. In Confucian classics, there are relatively few details of moral prescriptions. For example, in the Analects, the teaching of filial piety does not elaborate upon its practice in specific situations. This leaves much scope for flexibility in applying the teachings to various circumstances. For a Confucian, truth is not something for us to contemplate or worship at a distance, but for us to apply, get involved in and embrace in actual human situations. Due to these characteristics, East Asians have been proficient at utilizing and improving upon the technological discoveries originating in the west and turning them into commercial products at competitive prices. The situational nature of Confucian ethics, in the economic sphere, poses less hindrance and requires minimum adjustment to the kind of life stipulated in a modern commercial society. On the other hand, the notion of copy and patent rights is probably somewhat alien to Confucian culture and westerners have often accused Confucian East Asians of infringing upon their intellectual properties.



A Taoist, as a close observer of nature has the natural tendency to develop interest in arts and literature. On the philosophical level, the Taoist is an individualist who often rebels against the oppressive forces of the uniform values and cultural lifestyles of Confucian societies. A Taoist may unwillingly contribute to the peace and freedom of life and promote man's harmony with nature, but it is not his concern to promote economic growth or to fit into a society.

Prof. Kenneth K. Inada has forcefully and persuasively argued for Eastern approach to truth as "becoming rather than being" in his highly stimulating essay "The Challenge of Buddho-Taoist Metaphysics of Experience"<sup>21</sup> In his opinion, westerners have been unduly influenced by Plato's cogent argument 'for the absolute nature of things, i.e. the nature of being over becoming'. For Asiatics, becoming is the most basic and primitive nature of experience. Experiences take place as a becoming process. So with becoming as the experiential basis, being and non-being become two rubrics of the function of becoming. Where the West expanded and envisioned becoming in terms of the nature of being, the East took becoming to be essentially in the nature of non-being, which is the locus of any discourse of being.

Looking at the contemporary implications of the two different approaches to truth, we find that the Easterners tend to be more holistic in their approaches of business, politics and other social aspects of life. While they may appear to be not analytical and precise enough, they are also less liable to be limited and narrow in their orientations. For example, business relations are more than just contractual relations but embrace all aspects of interactions. The metaphysical attention to becoming rather than being has made Easterners more flexible in many areas. For them, truth as a process of becoming should be dynamic and applicable to various situations, and not taken in absolute and static sense. The situated nature of Confucian ethics is one good example. But the Confucian flexibility and adaptability have their merits and demerits. The ability to fit in and adjust easily is useful on many occasions but may also

tend to bend principles to suit individual situations whenever the principles become inconvenient. This may be regarded as unduly compromising and, from a Western viewpoint, as utterly dishonest.

Our effort above to treat both, the Confucian and the Taoist approaches to truth as part of a general Eastern approach and to compare the same with the Western approach to truth should not be viewed that these cultural distinctions are in any way absolute and the clashes are inevitable, though some aspect of international scene may appear to have confirmed Samuel Huntington's celebrated thesis. Our hopes lie in creation of multi-cultural setting in the world. We can refer to Singapore's harmonious multicultural society and revival of Christianity in a somewhat Confucian South Korea. The two examples are sufficient to point towards promising direction where the Confucian and the Taoist approaches to truth have meaningful contribution to make. There is no reason to envision the East-West dichotomy in terms of an exclusive 'either/or'. It is more conducive to the development of mankind to consider the contrast between East and West to be 'both/and'. The world today is shrinking both physically and mentally, due to advancement in tele communications and transportation. What we need is an attempt not only to understand the two different thought tendencies as analogous but to preserve the differences. As in the metaphor of the Yin and the Yang, East and West require each other for their own existence, and future development depends not on one system of thought replacing the other, but on an integrated growth which maintains and expands both tendencies.

### NOTES

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