

## Tao criticism in an *Essay on Man*

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### ABSTRACT

Taoism, as a distinct type of philosophy, radically differs from many other philosophies in China, such as Confucianism and Mohism, by taking a much broader, much greater and more transcendental view of the world. Many similar notions of Tao have been found in the “An Essay on Man” in four epistles penned by Alexander Pope. Therefore, a challenging and daring approach to employ Taoist perspectives to interpret *An Essay on Man* penned would shed light upon new ways of undertaking literary criticism, namely, using non-western philosophical outlooks to re-read western literary works. The Taoist ideas used herein include oneness, small knowledge, instrumental mentality, and yin-yang. The method of using Taoism to read literary texts is dubbed Tao criticism.

## INTRODUCTION

### Validity of Tao criticism

How can Chinese philosophies be used to analyse Western texts? Is it over-interpretation? It seems that few people have tried this kind of interpretation. My confidence lies in the belief that we (the Easterners and the Westerners) share much common knowledge although we are distinguished by skin colours, languages, and cultural traditions. That “common knowledge” might be a vantage point for us to overcome this cross-cultural barrier. Furthermore, ancient Chinese philosophies are not merely sets of doctrines. They are ancient Chinese people’s concern of the utmost questions, say, human nature, nature of the world, relationship between man and his surroundings, the society and the universe, and so on. The philosophies are also sets of methodology, which will give us fresh and distinct perspectives in reviewing the world, even though they were born in the distant ancient times.

Taoism is such a kind of Chinese philosophy. And *Tao Te Ching*, one of the most influential classics in China, is the second most widely translated book in the West, after *The Holy Bible*.<sup>1</sup> The Taoist philosophy has been studied by lots of famous Western philosophers like Kant and Heidegger. Tao itself does not mean anything religious. In Osho’s (1980) words, “Tao simply means the ultimate principle that binds the whole existence together” (p.3). Karyn L. Lai (2008) understands Tao in terms of “a metaphysical concept, as a deeper, underlying primordial reality” (p.156). Therefore, ancient Chinese philosophies, especially Taoism, are very universally applicable.

Furthermore, European literary theories and philosophies have been used quite often to interpret both Western texts AND Chinese texts, why can’t we try this reversed direction? This cross-cultural and cross-philosophical interpretation will be a “path-blazing” try, both interesting and challenging.

In recently years, scholars in China have perceived the existence of Taoist notions in some literary works. For example, as Gao X. (2017)

noticed, “Eugene O’Neil drew nourishment from Taoism, an embodiment of ancient Chinese wisdom, trying to seek a way of existence for people to step out of confusion, pain and distress and a path of salvation for the western psychological crisis, whose works overflow with Taoist philosophy and glitter with the wisdom and brilliance of Tao” (p.109). Wei X. (2018) pointed out that the Taoist idea of “respecting the heaven and knowing one’s fate” in both eastern and western literary works (p.213). Pan T (2016) noticed striking similarities between the way the world was formed in *The Silmarillion* by J. R. R. Tolkien and in the *Tao Te Ching* (p.204). Xiong Zh (2018) discovered the similar views of death between Virginia Woolf’s novels and Taoist philosophy (p.56-57).

Therefore, by noticing the similarities between western and eastern thoughts or approaching western literary works from a non-western perspective we can probably gain more insight into the truths of the world. This analysis is also being undertaken with such a consideration.

### Oneness of God and Tao

The idea of God in Pope has gone beyond merely a personified figure as usually portrayed in the *Holy Bible* to the idea of “Godhead” in Western theology and philosophy. Godhead means godhood, the essential nature of God or divine nature, though it may signify differently in religions. Theologians and philosophers have questioned the essential nature of God for a long time in history, but without definite answers. But it is generally agreed that it is not a personified figure, but rather a kind of metaphysical state. To Pope, God is “the soul”, omnipresent in the natural world. He has become an idea, a “general ORDER,” or a metaphysical state. In this respect, God or Godhead and Tao are similar and in fact this kind of similarity can extend beyond God and Tao.

It is not the first time for people to relate Tao with some western concepts. Hu Shi, a modern Chinese scholar, equates Lao Tzu’s “Heavenly Tao” with the Western law of nature, which governs the evolution of

heavenly bodies and the common fate of living, aging and death of plants and animals (1999, p.60). Here the law of nature does not concern human conduct in its moral or political sense, and it is used “to signify any general rule which we observe to obtain in the works of nature, independently of the wills of men” (Bunnin and Yu, 2004, p.380). Zhang Longxi (1992), a contemporary Chinese scholar, associates Tao with Logos, stating that the word Tao “exactly captures the duality of thinking and speaking” as with Logos (p.26).

Osho, an Indian philosopher and spiritual teacher, connects other concepts with Tao, God included, and regards them as but its alternatives: “If you have some other name --God, LOGOS, DHARMA, truth, NIRVANA--you can choose from those names; they are all beautiful because it has no name of its own so any name will do” (1980, p.18). These concepts are all but “names”, which probably point to the “same” thing, “felt” by different cultures and named and expressed in different ways. That “same” thing in fact cannot be uttered in words but Man gives it a name in order to know it, as Man can know a thing only by the name it is associated with otherwise he cannot perceive and make sense of its existence. All these names given by Man perhaps all mean the “same” thing which has no name of its own and even cannot be named. God is one of the names and so is Tao.

Thus, these terms probably in fact are One. This “Oneness” best qualifies this Taoist approach to read western literary works.

## TEXTUAL ANALYSIS VIA TAOCRITICISM

### *Human Intelligence as “Small Knowledge”*

In the opening of “An Essay on Man,” Pope first clearly articulates his purpose of writing this “Essay”, that is to “vindicate the ways of God to Man” (I, line 16).<sup>2</sup> Then he begins to question the reliability of Man’s reasoning capacity and potence, which are the reason for Man’s anthropocentric pride since he always proudly gives himself such definition: “*homo est animal bipes rationale*.”<sup>3</sup> Does Man’s reasoning catch the universal truth? Probably Pope would frown at this “presumptuous” idea, since he asks “I. Say first, of God above, or Man below,/ What can we reason, but from what we know?” (I, 17-18). We always reason from a certain vantage point, which is often our own, so how can we expect to reason “of God above, or Man below”? Man’s reasoning capacity not only gives him such pompous look before all the other creatures on this planet but also prompts him to daringly assume the power of God. But Pope asks, “Is the great chain, that draws all to agree,/ And drawn supports, upheld by God, or thee?” (I, 33-34). The great chain of being, or the circle of life, is created by God and also upheld by him to be a systematic unity. But the proud Mankind, unsatisfied with his present state as one of God’s creatures, challenges his creator. The word “thee,” in Pope’s time usually addressed to a socially inferior person, say, a servant, clearly expresses his contemptuous attitudes towards Man.

According to Pope, reason springs from pride and at the same time largely enhances pride. By this faculty of reasoning and the sin of pride, Man deems himself superior to all the other animals and as the centre of creation:

V. Ask for what end the heavenly bodies shine,  
Earth for whose use? Pride answers, ‘Tis for mine:  
For me kind Nature wakes her genial power,  
Suckles each herb, and spreads out every flower;  
Annual for me, the grape, the rose renew  
The juice nectareous, and the balmy dew  
For me, the mine a thousand treasures brings  
For me, health gushes from a thousand springs  
Seas roll to waft me, suns to light me rise;  
My footstool earth, my canopy the skies.’ (I, 131-140)

Man’s anthropocentrism is most clearly demonstrated in this section. The personified “Pride” is in fact Man himself, who claims that the heavenly bodies shine for his end and the Earth is for his use. The word “mine” and the repetitive “me” indicate Man’s egocentrism, as if he is the centre of the universe. For “me”, nature brings fruits and flowers, the mine a thousand treasures, and springs fresh and healthy waters; and seas roll gently to give “me” pleasure and suns give “me” light. The last line most effectively summarises man’s anthropocentrism: “My footstool earth, my canopy the skies” (I, 140). Reason and pride,

no matter which one is the centre of Man’s error, are both referred to by Pope as one error that he aims to rectify: “In pride, in reasoning pride, our error lies” (I, 123-124), and “reasoning to err” (II, 10). Pope resolves to correct this error by denouncing Man’s reasoning capacity.

Is Man the most rational animal on this planet? According to Pope, Man occupies the middle rank in the “Great Chain of Being”, or the “ladder of nature” (Latin: *scala naturae*), which is a concept derived from Plato and Aristotle. As Schumacher noted, “The ancient view begins with the Divine and sees the downward Chain of Being as moving an ever-increasing distance from the Center, with a progressive loss of qualities” (p.15) The Great Chain of Being in his Essay is defined in this manner:

Vast chain of being! which from God began,  
Natures ethereal, human, angel, man  
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see  
No glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,  
From thee to nothing. (I, 237-241)

But what decides this hierarchical order? According to the American philosopher Arthur. O. Lovejoy (1964), “all beings in the world are not equal with regard to their metaphysical or ontological status” (p.192). In Pope’s words it is reason that decides this hierarchical order and makes man differ from other animals. But can reason justify this human supremacy? Is it a proof of Pope’s idea of anthropocentrism? No. Man’s intelligence and reasoning are indeed higher than the “grovelling swine” (I, 221) and the “half-reasoning elephant” (I, 222). In reasoning Man is indeed higher in order than the other animals in the Great Chain of Being, but he is also lower than some other beings, God, “Natures ethereal, human, [and] angel[s].” God is the creator who occupies the top of the ladder, like a monarch, while the “natures ethereal, human” are divine beings and other beings in the human shape who occupy other planets. The divine beings are the “Superior beings” that Pope later talks about in his second epistle:

Superior beings, when of late they saw  
A mortal man unfold all nature’s law,  
Admired such wisdom in an earthly shape  
And showed a Newton as we show an ape. (II, 31-34)

To Pope, the “Superior beings” are immortal beings dwelling outside of this world and are beyond human knowledge. They are more intelligent than mankind, and even the earthly genius Sir Isaac Newton is deemed as “an ape” in comparison with them. Though Pope uses the “Superior beings” to refer to celestial beings like God, “Natures ethereal,” or the angels, he also implies the “Natures human,” which is some unknown intelligent being. Pope believes the existence of other extraterrestrial intelligent beings: “varied being peoples every star” (I, 27) and “Then, in the scale of reasoning life, ‘tis plain/ There must be, somewhere, such a rank as Man” (I, 47-48). Man is not so qualified to be proud of his rationality since he just occupies the middle place of this “ladder of nature.” This relativity of rationality disqualifies Man’s anthropocentric pride in terms of reason.

This relativity of rationality or intelligence is also addressed in the book of *Chuang Tzu*, though not quite the same. Man is so proud of his reasoning superiority; however, according to Chuang Tzu, human knowledge and reasoning are but relatively “small knowledge” and there are some “great knowledge” beyond human beings’ comprehension. Perhaps Man is no more than the cicada or the young dove who laughs at the *Peng* in *Chuang Tzu*. *Peng* is a gigantic bird of many thousand *li* in breadth, who transformed from a gigantic fish of many thousand *li* in size. The bird is moving to the Southern Ocean, the Celestial Lake, and it ascends on a whirlwind up to a height of ninety thousand *li*, for a flight of six months’ duration. But a cicada and a young dove laugh at the *Peng*, saying: “When we make an effort, we fly up to the trees. Sometimes, not able to reach, we fall to the ground midway. What is the use of going up ninety thousand *li* in order to start for the south?”<sup>4</sup> The cicada and the young dove are tiny beings of limited intelligence, knowledge and capacity, they cannot understand how such a gigantic bird is possible to exist and how this bird can fly up to a height of ninety thousand *li*. Then Chuang Tzu goes on to say: “Small knowledge is not to be compared with the great nor short life to a long one.”<sup>5</sup> Man, as the cicada and the young dove, is bound by his temporal and spatial limitations and thus he always reasons from his own understanding, which recalls us Pope’s statement: “What can we reason, but from what we know.” Man always reasons from a certain perspec-

tive, often from his own perspective, by adopting a theory which he is most fond of. According to Chuang Tzu, all perspectives and theories are not reliable, because they are “man-made” and so they are tinted with one’s preference and prejudice and thus cannot avoid being unbiased and unjust. In the seventeenth chapter titled “Autumn Floods,” there are two interesting parables. When the time of the autumn floods arrives, the Earl of the Yellow River is delighted to see the huge onrushing current of his river and congratulates himself at having complete and sole possession of all excellence under heaven. However, after witnessing the greatness of the sea he sighs at his pettiness and realizes how he might be ridiculed and laughed at if he has not come to the sea. There is another interesting conversation between a well-frog and a sea turtle. The frog lives in a collapsed well but he feels not a little of his poor conditions. On the contrary, he is very contented with his life. He enjoys the life in the well and thinks that he has got enough freedom and happiness. He believes that his life is incomparable and his happiness insurmountable: “Turning around, I see crayfish and tadpoles, but none of them is a match for me. Furthermore, I have sole possession of all the water in this hole and straddle all the joy in this broken-down well. This is the ultimate!”<sup>6</sup> Then he invites the sea turtle to come into the well to have a look; however, before the turtle can get his left foot in, his right knee has already got stuck. Then the sea turtle begins to relate the sea to the well-frog, of which he has never heard: “A distance of a thousand tricents is insufficient to span its breadth; a height of a thousand fathoms is insufficient to plumb its depth... Hence, not to shift or change with time, not to advance or recede regardless of amount—this is the great joy of the Eastern Sea.”<sup>7</sup> Upon hearing this, the frog who is accustomed to living in a narrow well and is sufficiently contented with the happiness of living therein is utterly startled and lost himself in bewilderment. In comparison with the great joy of the sea, the joy of a broken-down well appears so “mean” and even minimal. Thus the parables of the *Peng* and the cicada and the young dove, the Earl of the Yellow River, and the sea turtle and the well-frog, are all instances to show the relativity of knowledge and the limitation of human perception. Chuang Tzu shifts the normally monistic Man-centered perspective to multiple and larger perspectives. Actually, Chuang Tzu opens up infinite possibilities.

Viewed from this perspective, Man’s “reasoning pride” is no more than the fancy of the well-frog, who, with little brains and petty understanding, dwells on “meaner things” and cannot comprehend the ways of heaven. As Pope writes, “Say what the use, were finer optics given,/ T’inspect a mite, not comprehend the heaven?” Science is the best embodiment of human reasoning or knowledge and wisdom; however, in effect it makes Man neglect greater knowledge and wisdom by probing into specifics. The “great knowledge” of “the heaven” is sacrificed and abandoned for the sake of the “small knowledge.” Therefore, Man is in fact dwindled and cheated by his “proud science.”

The Earl of the Yellow River is afraid of being laughed at has he not seen the great sea; however, Man, in his blind arrogance probably has already been ridiculed and laughed at by other more intelligent beings, as Pope says, “Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;/ Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:/ The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!” (II, 16-18). Man is both a giant and a dwarf. He measures all values and judges truth from his own standing point. However, the more he reasons, the more he errs, as the reasoning of the cicada, the young dove and the frog only shows their narrow-mindedness. By his limited intelligence and narcissism Man is unconscious of his situation and deems himself to be an “imperial race.” However, before the “great knowledge” of some unknown beings, Man’s reasoning and intelligence seem so “mean” and ridiculous. Man is no more than the well-frog, and his reasoning and intelligence only make him end up being laughed at as a “jest of the world.”

### **Science as Source of Instrumental Mentality**

Reasoning has been praised as the distinctive characteristic of what is Man. Science, as the pride of human reasoning, has dominated over philosophy and religion in the human society. However, Pope manifests his disapproval of science in his “Essay.” He refers to science as “proud science,” which, as Man’s “small knowledge,” in Pope’s belief only increases Man’s pride and insatiety. The Indians, whom Pope uses to juxtapose the civilized, religious and scientific but proud and greedy Europeans, are actually admired by Pope:

Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutored mind  
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind;

His soul proud science never taught to stray  
Far as the solar walk, or milky way;  
Yet simple nature to his hope has given,  
Behind the cloud-topped hill, an humbler heaven;  
Some safer world in depth of woods embraced,  
Some happier island in the watery waste,  
Where slaves once more their native land behold,  
No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold!  
To be, contents his natural desire,  
He asks no angel’s wing, no seraph’s fire;  
But thinks, admitted to that equal sky,  
His faithful dog shall bear him company. (I, 99-112)

Though the Indians with “untutored mind” are only partially aware of the existence of God and do not know science at all, they are happy and contented with their small world. Perhaps they are somewhat like the well-frog but they are not mentally corrupted by the so-called civilisation since they are closely embraced by nature, which purifies their mind. However, the civilised, science-guided Christians, who are supposed to have purer mind but in fact are insatiable, morally corrupted and sinning. The Indians, merited chiefly for his contentment with life, would also be admitted to “that equal sky” which is Heaven though they are not baptised, as Pope states, “To each unthinking being, Heaven a friend” (III, 71). Science does not help but impede the atonement of mankind since it greatly increases Man’s anthropocentric pride. In this way, Man has sinned against God and is led astray of the ways of God.

Lao Tzu also favours such simple-minded people as the Indians, because they live in a natural state, without the mind being exposed to desires and thus being corrupted. He advocates that people should be knowledgeable and desireless. Their hearts should be emptied, bellies stuffed, ambitions weakened, and bones strengthened. Without the interference of clever leaders, people will naturally live a harmonious life. Without being exposed to desires, people will remain simple-minded and not competitive with each other. As Lao Tzu says, “If the people never see such things as excite desire, their hearts will remain placid and undisturbed.”<sup>8</sup> Lao Tzu further targets human knowledge and wisdom as the root of the downfall of morality: ”

It was when the Great Way declined  
That human kindness and morality arose;  
It was when intelligence and knowledge appeared  
That the Great Artifice began.<sup>9</sup>

Human morality is resulted from the decline of Great Tao, which is the ideal state, where there is no need to propagate morality and everyone is unconsciously moral. After Tao declines, people begin to have the concept of morality and to distinguish good deeds from bad deeds. However, as artificial intelligence and knowledge appear, people cease to be simple-minded and sincere and start to be hypocritical and tricky. They invent a lot of polite rules and social etiquette, but in fact they are not as moral as they appear to be. Lao Tzu’s idea of the decline of human society from the society of Tao to the society of morality to the society of hypocrisy after the appearance of artificial knowledge and wisdom can be paralleled by the decline of the human society in the ancient Greek notion from the Golden Age, an era of primordial peace and innocence, to the Silver Age, to the Bronze Age, down to the Iron Age, in a sequence of declination. The Golden Age is very similar to Lao Tzu’s ideal society of the Tao, while in other ages people have lost their original innocence and begin to be insincere, cunning, immoral and hypocritical. In the *Holy Bible*, Adam and Eve at first live in perfect innocence and harmony in the Garden of Eden, but afterwards they are expelled from it after they eat the fruit of knowledge. Such a view of the human society in a sequence of declination is also shared by other cultures, such as Ancient India and the Middle East. Sometimes, we can find striking similarities in seemingly diverging cultures.

Pope juxtaposes the Indians and the European Christians: the former is in the second state where everyone lives naturally and is exposed to much fewer desires. They are more savage-like but more genuine, both in love and in hate. They have no beautiful language, especially written, to express their emotions, but their emotions expressed are what they heartily feel. The civilised European Christians, on the contrary, brought both gospels and sabres to the uncivilised Indians. They have beautiful

language to express their emotions, both sincere and insincere, and also to justify and eulogise their monstrous deeds. However, they have been corrupted inside. Greed and pride are just two among their seen deadly sins or capital vices. So we can say that the more capable of reasoning, the more corrupted of morality. Reasoning, as human knowledge and wisdom, will lead to a disturbance of the placidity of mind. It has already driven Man mad, as Pope disdains and ridicules Man's blind worship of science:

Go, wondrous creature! mount where science guides,  
Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;  
Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,  
Correct old time, and regulate the sun;  
Go, soar with Plato to th' empyreal sphere,  
To the first good, first perfect, and first fair;  
Or tread the mazy round his followers trod  
And quitting sense call imitating God;  
As Eastern priests in giddy circles run,  
And turn their heads to imitate the sun.  
Go, teach eternal wisdom how to rule—  
Then drop into thyself, and be a fool! (II, 19-30)

Man is indeed mad, since he superstitiously believes the omnipotence of his science and thus of himself. Superstition is not only confined to blind belief in religions but also related to any kind of "over-belief" without further questioning and reflection. Man's blind worship of science, therefore, is superstition *de facto*. Pope's tone is both contemptuous, challenging, sarcastic and condescending, as if he were the spokesman of God to ridicule and mock the petty mankind's worship of science and narcissism of himself. "A wondrous creature as you boast yourself to be but can you do such and such?", as if Pope is questioning and mocking Man, who stands trembling before him. Of course, Man cannot "measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides" or do other things at his will, but he dares to imitate God and even teach "eternal wisdom how to rule," which only makes him "a fool" before higher wisdom. Man was created and he can never create. This is the point Pope wants to make. Science cannot endow Man with extraordinary creative power but only disturbs his heart and drives him to craziness. Without a humble heart, science can only increase Man's pride and accelerate the downfall of human morality.

The term *ke-xue* (science) was not invented in Lao Tzu's time and it is only one chief kind of human knowledge and wisdom. In the book of *Chuang Tzu*, though there is still no equivalent word for it, science, as its application is machines or instruments, is considered a danger since it causes the *ji-xin*, or literally mechanical heart. A story in it runs like this: when Tzukung, or Zi Gong, a pupil of Confucius's, saw an elderly gardener working with great difficulty to bring the water from the well to water his garden, whose labour is great but result little. Thus he proposed to the old man a machine called a well-sweep which would greatly increase the efficiency of labour and reduce the exertions. However, the old man flushed up at his words and said:

I have heard from my teacher that those who have cunning implements are cunning in their dealings, and that those who are cunning in their dealings have cunning in their hearts, and that those who have cunning in their hearts cannot be pure and incorrupt, and that those who are not pure and incorrupt are restless in spirit, and that those who are restless in spirit are not fit vehicles for Tao. It is not that I do not know of these things. I should be ashamed to use them.<sup>10</sup>

This old man, as a fit vehicle of Tao, shuns away from using any technology which, he believes, will cause *ji-xin* (cunning in the heart). This kind of denunciation may sound very unnecessary, far-fetched, and extreme. But this is also the charm and extraordinariness of Tao that makes it so different from other philosophies in China. What Zi Gong proposes to the old man is science which reckons a great facility to Man. However, he refuses to use it, since he recognises those machines as "cunning implements", which will result in cunning in the heart, and hence he cannot remain pure and uncorrupted. Furthermore he will become restless in spirit and thus will no longer be the "fit vehicle for Tao." Here science, as is believed in *Chuang Tzu*, will corrupt Man's original simplicity and authenticity. Since by resorting to ingenious means Man also becomes ingenious and even cunning in the heart. Consequently, he will become restless to insatiably pursue goals in life. This is also the point that Pope

makes in his "Essay", Man, prompted by his reasoning and "proud science", wants to accomplish all and even ventures to assume God's power.

Vincent Shen (2009) remarks that "Science and technology, as based on instrumental rationality, if not promoted to the level of *dao* (*ji-jin-yu-dao* 技進於道), would be judged by Zhuang Zi as unworthy of the *dao*, and their abuse might finally lead to a loss of support from the *dao*, and bring about the decay of human existence" (p.248). With the aid of the ingenious technologies of science, Man also becomes ingenious and cunning. He has become a "foe to nature" in his restless exploitation of it (III, 163). He "murders their species [other creatures], and betrays his own" (163). This instrumental mentality has indeed driven him wild. His blood-thirsty "fury-passions" have transformed to a fiercer savage than other uncivilised savages. "Vile worm!-- oh madness, pride, impiety" are Pope's labels for Man (I, 258). Man, since the appearance of artificial knowledge and wisdom, and especially with the aid of his science, has accelerated his downfall from a formerly inhabitant of paradise to a morally debased "vile worm."

Therefore, artificial reasoning and intelligence are seen by both Pope and Lao Tzu and Zhuang Zi as "small knowledge" and science as being capable of corrupting the mind. They, instead of being a unique human merit that needs to be rejoiced and boasted of, are in fact the culprit of murdering Man's original simplicity and innocence. Science, in particular, contributes to the downfall of human morality.

Thus human reasoning pride should be humbled and even human reasoning and intelligence denounced. Pope points to the mankind that the solution is to tread on "the ways of God", since "to reason right is to submit" to the omniscience and omnipotence of God (I, 165). Pope thinks that Man indeed has over-reasoned and is led astray of the ways of God by his over-reasoning. Instead, Man should apply to overarching God's reasoning, "One truth is clear, 'Whatever is, is right'" (I, 294). God has set everything all right. Man can never outsmart God and thus he should live in the "ways of God."

This denunciation of the human capacity of reasoning corresponds to Lao Tzu's idea of banishing human knowledge and wisdom. Human wisdom and knowledge are such kind of artificiality, in opposition to the ideal society of the Tao. As Lao Tzu says in Chapter 19,

Banish wisdom, discard knowledge,  
And the people will be benefited a hundredfold.  
Banish human kindness, discard human morality,  
And the people will be dutiful and compassionate.<sup>11</sup>

Human wisdom and knowledge (*sheng* and *zhi*) are specially valued by Man as the chief traits that distinguish him from animals, however Lao Tzu opposes them and considers them as impediments to people's welfare. Human knowledge and wisdom, referred to by Fu Peirong (2007) as "artificial ingenious wit" (人為巧智, p.171), are viewed by Lao Tzu as the very cause of human immorality, while the deliberate propaganda of human kindness and morality in fact contributes to mankind's hypocrisy. Therefore, not only human knowledge and wisdom but also human kindness and morality should be banished all together, then people will regain their natural state of filial duty and love.

Both Pope and Lao Tzu link human intelligence and reasoning or human knowledge and wisdom with Man's loss of innocence and simplicity and consider them as the cause of mankind's moral degradation, though in slightly different ways. They both advocate the denunciation of human knowledge and wisdom. Perhaps this denunciation will make Man forget his instrumental mentality and restore him to a simpler state of mind. There is no need to propagate morality, and it will be naturally restored. People will naturally undergo a process of self-transformation, without the need of any teaching. This is a process of returning to the original happiness and also to the union with Tao.

### Yin-Yang and Binary Opposition

The binary oppositions in Pope's "Essay" conform the trend of this Western logocentric tradition which has nourished Man's anthropocentrism. Through distinguishing, Man estimates himself superior to all the other creatures on Earth. We can summarise in Pope's "Essay" several binary opposites: "Man" and "nature," "self-love" and "reason," "self-love" and "social love," "little" and "great," "rational" and "irrational," as well as "perfect" and "imperfect." The first three pairs are classified as complementary antonyms while the last three pairs gradable ant-

onyms, since the meanings of the latter three do not lie in a continuous spectrum and are absolute contrasts while the meanings of the former three lie in a continuous spectrum and are contrasts in degree. The Western logocentric tradition is to discriminate one from the other and set an hierarchical order. For instance, in the common Man-nature polarity, Man deems himself more rational than all other creatures. Therefore, nature becomes a “foe” for Man to tame and conquer. While in the other oppositions, both reason and social love are over self-love, great over little, rational over irrational and perfect over imperfect. However, Pope in fact deconstructs this hierarchical order and unifies the traditional simple binary oppositions. This process of unification of the oppositions can be analysed through the Taoist *yin-yang* way of thinking.

*Yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽) in their original sense mean the shady side and sunny side of a hill. The term *yin-yang* was not originally mentioned in the texts of *I Ching* or *The Book of Changes*. It only has the signs (*yao* 爻) of “-” and “—”, which later Confucius identifies as *yin* and *yang* in his *Appendices* to the book. Lao Tzu only once names it in his *Tao Te Ching* or *Lao Tzu*. Even so, obviously the principle of *yin-yang* is central to his book. The concept of *yin-yang* was later enriched by the *Yin-Yang* school in the Warring States period. *Yin-yang* can be applied to a vast range of seeming opposites but in fact relatively existing concepts, the most common are the positive and the negative, heaven and earth, the masculine and the feminine, the strong and the weak, the firm and the yielding, the light and the dark, etc.. *Yin-yang* is a traditional Chinese view of the world comprised of two essential aspects. When Chung-ying Cheng talks of the *Yin-yang* in *I Ching*, he says, “The idea is that the world is composed of activities of *yin* and *yang* forces which systematically form world-situations in which we find ourselves” (2009, p.72). As Lao Tzu says,

The Way [Tao] produces the One.

The One produces two.

Two produces three.

Three produces the myriad creatures.

The myriad creatures shoulder *yin* and embrace *yang*, and by blending these *qi* “vital energies” they attain harmony.<sup>12</sup>

They both view *yin* and *yang* as essential to the formation and existence of the world. As Confucius says in the *Appendix to I Ching*, “the becoming of the *yin* and the *yang* is defined as the Tao.”<sup>13</sup> *Yin and yang* constitute the world and attain harmony. *Yin-yang* is also a way of viewing a thing or a problem from two different perspectives and dividing it from constituent parts which are opposite from each other. This is a great difference between the Chinese culture and other cultures: “In the metaphors of other cultures, light is at war with darkness, life with death, good with evil, and the positive with the negative, and thus an idealism to cultivate the former and be rid of the latter flourishes throughout the world” (Watts, 1976, p.19-20). These opposites are not binary oppositions, they can co-exist with each other and achieve harmony. But in the Western culture, there is always a consciousness of cultivating one while eliminating the other.

The *yin-yang* can be first applied to the Man-nature opposition in Pope’s “Essay.” Man is *yang* as he is the active side who strives persistently to better himself while nature is *yin* as she remains inactive for Man to act upon. Man conceits himself as a sole rational being and sets himself in opposition to nature. Thus he undertakes to transform and even destroy nature for his use. But in this “Essay,” Man has also learned many things for nature as the *yang* also relies on *yin* for its development, say, what fruit is edible from the birds, the sports of the field from the beasts, the arts of building from the bee, how to plow from the mole, how to weave from the worm and how to sail from the little nautilus, enabled by his “copy instinct,” which is a trait that belongs to nature but not human reasoning. Nature is Man’s best teacher and even human society is instructed by it: “Great Nature spoke; observant men obeyed;/ Cities were built, societies were made” (III, 199-200). Man as the *yang* side is also an inseparable constituent to nature, the *yin* side, which relies on Man for its biological diversity. Man and all the other creatures formed the Great Chain of Being or the “ladder of nature.” Each link in the circle is indispensable: “From Nature’s chain whatever link you strike;/ tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike” (I, 245-246). Thus Man as *yang* while nature as *yin* rely on each other for development and they together form a harmonious *tai-chi* (太極) circle. However, Man in his step by step conquering of nature eliminated many other species. He has broken the natural balance of the

food chain and is getting paid back. In this *yin-yang* way of thinking, the relationship of Man and nature is no longer the traditional “the conqueror” and “the conquered.” There is a kind of mutual reliance as the *yin* and *yang* are interdependent. This Man-nature opposition is also that of the culture-nature opposition, since culture is “man-made.” Nature and culture are not at odd opposition but they co-exist and complement each other. Man cultivates his culture by destroying nature and will also destroy his culture and himself. Nature is always a source of inspiration for Man to create his culture. Man and the other creatures are indispensable part of the “stupendous whole” nature and they together constitute this wholeness and Oneness. There should be a harmonious way of co-existence between them as this *yin-yang* way of thinking suggests, which will reward long-term benefits to Man. As Thomé H. Fang (1986) suggests, “Nature is a continuous process of creation and Men are con creators within this realm of Nature. Nature and human nature are two in one, giving form to what I have called the comprehensive harmony, a harmony between ingrowing parts as well as a harmony with surroundings” (p.14). Furthermore, he says, “Nature and Man are congenial with each other” (p.19). He emphasises the harmony between nature and Man, his human nature and even his culture. They formed a “comprehensive harmony” instead of conflicting with each other. Thus Man and nature as the *yin* and *yang* rely on and complement each other, and they exist in a very concordant way. So there is a wholeness and also “Oneness” of the Great Chain of Being, which is incomplete if anyone of its members is artificially eliminated. This *yin-yang* way of thinking challenges the traditional Western way of thinking, advocating a harmonious co-existence between Man and nature. In this way, it will greatly benefit human beings’ long-term welfare.

Another *yin-yang* pair in Pope’s “Essay” is self-love and reason. Reason is boasted as a distinctive human characteristic. As if standing aloof, it coldly looks down upon and pooh-poohs all the other natural human passions, which are “Modes of self-love” (II, 93). However, Pope thinks that both reason and self-love are inextricably bound in human nature: “Self-love, the spring of motion, acts the soul;/ Reason’s comparing balance rules the whole” (II, 59-60). In this pair, self-love is *yang* because it activates the human body and mind and is obvious while reason is *yin* because it negates self-love’s effects and is hard to perceive. They are sides of one human nature or the human soul, which is like a balance with self-love on one side and reason on the other. Self-love is the cause of human actions. It motivates Man to strive and to toil. This is the reason why Man often acts too much and is anthropocentric. Reason’s work is to counteract self-love’s active force when it is superfluous and even harmful as the *yang* balances *yin*. But this does not mean that reason is more important since self-love is a harmful quality. Self-love can also negate negative effects of over-reasoning as *yin* balances *yang*. The “cold-hearted” reason needs to be enamored by the “warm-hearted” self-love, otherwise it will go mad. For instance, in many modern fictions the figures of doctor as the incarnation of reason often appear very cold-hearted and cynical, seemingly detached of human passions. In addition, the Nazi Holocaust was also grounded on plausible reasons. Reason when turning extreme will become inhuman and even monstrous. Furthermore, self-love and reason are unified in one common end: “Self-love and reason to one end aspire;/ Pain their aversion, pleasure their desire” (II, 87-88). This, actually not so dissimilar from each other, are interrelated in human nature as *yin* and *yang* are united in a *tai-chi* circle, since they all aspire to desire pleasure and avoid pain. These two principles like the *tai-chi* mode constitute the wholeness and “Oneness” of human nature.

Another *yin-yang* pair that can be identified in Pope’s “Essay” is self-love and social-love in Epistle II. Self-love and social love are also a pair of seemingly irresolvable binary oppositions. The term “self-love” with different opposites appears twice in the pairs that I have identified. This is not self-contradictory, because “Epistemologically, we must also observe that *yin* and *yang* forces could be experienced as a matter of degrees of contrast and therefore as a relation rather than as a quality” (Cheng, 2009, p.75). In other words, *yin* and *yang* are not absolute qualities but relative contrasts. In this pair, self-love is identified as *yin*, different from its last pair, while social-love is identified as *yang*. The reason is that the relationship of self-love and social-love is that of nature and culture. Self-love is deemed to be human nature by Pope and also Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson, while social-love is a conscious act of cultivation. Self-love is a kind of natural instinct while social-love “artificial” fostering. Self-love and social-love seem to be a binary opposition which are at war with each

other. Self-love solely aims at egoistic interests and concerns while social-love aims at outer-ego interests and concerns. Self-love is a kind of instinct and social-love is charity. They seem to be in unsolvable conflicts. But self-love and social-love are not only opposing but also complementary like the relationship between *yin* and *yang*. First, self-love and social-love have the same origin and also the same end:

IV. Nor think, in Nature's State they blindly trod;

The state of nature was the reign of God:

Self-love and social at her birth began,

Union the bond of all things, and of Man. (III, 147-150)

Self-love and social-love all come from nature which is "the reign of God". This linear development can be shown as follows: God Nature Self-love + Social-love. This precisely corresponds to the birth of *yin-yang*: "The Way [Tao] produces the One./ The One produces two." The Oneness of self-love and social-love is further demonstrated in their equal ends: "Union the bond of all things, and of Man." The Oneness also shows that self-love and social-love are not contradictory: "On mutual wants built mutual happiness" (III, 112) and "Each loves itself, but not itself alone./ Each sex desires alike, till two are one" (III, 121-122). Each creature has some basic wants but each is powerless before nature, so they have to cooperate in order to survive. Each desires the opposite sex and so they join to union. Each creature not only loves itself but also its mate. In this way self-love converts to social-love as *yin* and *yang* can mutually convert. To Pope it is the divine force that brings forth this conversion: "Ev'n mean self-love becomes, by force divine./ The scale to measure others' wants by thine" (II, 291-292). And Pope oxymoronically states: "But all mankind's concern is charity" (III, 308). All mankind's concern is primarily himself but now it turns into charity. Furthermore, social-love can become self-love as well. By fulfilling others' wants, the self's wants are also fulfilled. Thus self-love and social-love can mutually convert as the *yin* and *yang* and they are not contradictory as it originally seems. In Pope's words, "true SELF-LOVE and SOCIAL are the same" (IV, 396). This Oneness of self-love and social-love indicates the human nature of self-love can have better ends. It can turn personal happiness to collective happiness. Man's interests are no longer the centre of his concern and Man himself is no longer the centre of his living environments as he proudly deems to be.

These opposing pairs: "Man" and "nature," "self-love" and "reason" and "self-love" and "social love" as the *yin-yang* pair are interdependent and complementary of each other. They form a harmonious union or Oneness, which is different from the traditional binary oppositions and thus no superiority of each one in the pairs is presumed. This "Man" and "nature" pair is the *yin-yang* relationship on the Earth in general while "Self-love" and "reason" is the *yin-yang* in human nature and "self-love" and "social love" is the *yin-yang* in the human emotions. There is a kind of mutual reliance, mutual balance, interdependence and complementarity in their relationships, which are all moving towards a kind of wholeness and Oneness. The two polarities of the opposites also tend to move towards each and hence the difference between them is not so obvious as they appear to be. They even can mutually convert as the *yin* and *yang* principles do.

The other opposing pairs, including "little" and "great," "rational" and "irrational," as well as "perfect" and "imperfect," are gradable antonyms and they are characterized by their relativity of being. According to Pope, Man deems himself a giant, though he is not physically a great figure. He looks down upon all the other creatures, as if he is the solely great in the entire universe. However, not only does Pope expose the pettiness and limitation of his reasoning, but also he reduces the magnitude of Man's existence in the universe: "His time a moment, and a point his space" (I, 72). Man, like all the other creatures, appears so minimal before the great nature. The problem of rationality, as I have already said, is also an issue of relativity: Man is only comparatively rational. And he does not feel content with his perfection as he ought to be. Man thinks of himself rather imperfect and blames that it is heaven's fault. He, insatiable and "pleased with nothing" (I, 188), is always in want of possessing other creatures' superior qualities: "To want the strength of bulls, the fur of bears" (I, 176) and the "microscopic eye" (I, 193). Pope criticises this greed of Man's, insisting that heaven has bestowed due perfection on him: "Man's as perfect as he ought" (I, 70). Man's relative perfection of intelligence is balanced by his relative imperfection of physicality. This relativity of being corresponds to Chinese Taoist Philosopher Chuang Tzu's views of relativity in his "The Identity of Contraries":

There is nothing under the canopy of heaven greater than the tip of an autumn spikelet. A vast mountain is a small thing. Neither is there any age greater than that of a child cut off in infancy. P'êng Tsu himself died young. The universe and I came into being together; and I, and everything therein, are One.<sup>14</sup>

This is a kind of relativity of existence. Size and longevity are all of relative significance. The world can be no greater than the tip of an autumn hair; a vast mountain or the Mount T'ai (泰山) is very small. A child who dies young can be regarded as of most advanced age; P'êng Tsu who aged more than 800 years old is also short-lived. Man's lifespan, however long, compared with the infinitude of time, seems so transient; Man's intelligence, however great, when being compared with those unknown and unknowable beings, seems so petty; and Man's size, however gigantic, in comparison with the vast universe, appears so minimal. Therefore, these contraries are all obliterated, identified and unified in the Great Tao.

Furthermore, according to Lao Tzu, these contraries or relative concepts are the products of Man's distinguishing. When the concept of "beauty" comes into being, the concept of "ugliness" comes along with it. So is the case of "virtue" and "wickedness." The concepts of "being" and "not-being," "difficult" and "easy," "long" and "short," "high" and "low," "pitch" and "mode" (or "note" and "rhythm" more precisely), and "front" and "back" all beget each other and co-exist with each other. There are virtually no such contraries in the original state and they come out as the human knowledge and wisdom appear. Man's distinguishing capacity is an aspect of Man's intelligence, and thus it also contributes to the downfall human society. It causes these contraries or opposites: "Man" and "nature," "self-love" and "reason," "self-love" and "social love," "little" and "great," "rational" and "irrational," as well as "perfect" and "imperfect," which in effect turn to be very problematic to the human society. Chuang Tzu advocates the identity of all the contraries and their union in Tao while Lao Tzu proposes a returning process: Myriad things  $\Rightarrow$  Three (*yin*, *yang*, and their blending)  $\Rightarrow$  Two (*yin* and *yang*)  $\Rightarrow$  One  $\Rightarrow$  Tao. As Lao Tzu says, "Returning is the motion of the Tao."<sup>15</sup> This returning is both a returning to its opposite, as the mutual conversion of the *yin-yang* pairs, and also a returning to its primary source: Tao. Lao Tzu states this returning movement: "The ten thousand things are born of being./ Being is born of not being."<sup>16</sup> The ten thousand things that have been distinguished and studied by Man, through the classification of numerous categories, also undergo a returning process, from diversified beings to an identified union or Oneness. These problematic opposites, covering "Man" and "nature," "self-love" and "reason," and "self-love" and "social love," "little" and "great," "rational" and "irrational," and "perfect" and "imperfect," finally converge back to the same starting point. Even the things and the self will be identified as one, as Chuang Tzu says. This union of these artificial or "man-made" contraries will also bring forth an identification of values, in terms of which the myriad things are all equal. To Derrida (1994), the binary oppositions contribute to the Western logocentric tradition and hence he takes it to blur the differences and deconstruct the hierarchical order of these oppositions. The words "union" or "identification" are not his terminology, but instead he uses "neutralisation." When commenting Rousseau's "Essay on the Origin of Languages" he writes, "What Rousseau thus reveals is the neutral origin of all ethico-political conceptuality, its field of objectivity, and its axiological system. All the oppositions that follow in the wake of the classical philosophy of history, culture, and society must therefore be neutralized" (p.188-189). We can discern somewhat a convergence of thoughts in the West and China, though with slight differences, in Derrida's advocacy of the neutralisation of binary oppositions.

Man through distinguishing deems himself the paragon of animals and the centre of universe. But after all the oppositions and differences which build up the validity of his anthropocentric pride have been deconstructed or identified, how can his anthropocentric pride still take a firm foothold, and where can it be again grounded on? He is no more than a quintessence of dust, a link in the great chain of being and a grain of sand in the vast universe.

## CONCLUSION

This monumental poem of Alexander Pope's has thus been re-approached from a Chinese Taoist view. By using this novel perspective, we see how the petty knowledge of human intelligence impedes man from comprehending the more overwhelming truth that grounds on the level of Tao or God and science, as instrumental mentality, only serves to corrupt man's inborn joy and simplicity of mind. The *ying-yang* notion helps to reconcile the conflicting pairs found in the poem and indicates harmonious existence between human beings and nature.

Taoism proposes to think and act in the way of Tao, that is, by following the nature of things. Thus human beings, if their thinking and actions are accordant with the Tao, can live a wholesome life of supreme good and "comprehensive harmony." In other words, this is a "Union between Heaven and Man." This goal, as the axis of Chinese philosophy, better deals with this crisis of human existence than the humble submission of Man to God in the West and achieves what is the best for mortal Man to achieve in an earthly life.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Referred from Fu Huisheng's words (1999) "In the West, the translations of *Laozi* are only next to that of Bible in number" in Introduction to *Laozi (Chinese-English)*. Trans. Authur Waley. Ed. Fu Huisheng. Changsha: Hunan people's Publishing House, p. 65.
- 2 Alexander Pope. (2008) *Alexander Pope: The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 270-309. All subsequent references are from this edition.
- 3 Man is a two-footed reasoning animal (Boëthius, a Roman Christian philosopher).
- 4 Chuang Tzū. (1931) "The Happy Excursion", Part 1 of *Chuang Tzū*, trans. Fung Yu-lan. Shanghai: The Commercial Press, p. 29. The original text is as follows: "我決起而飛，檜榆枋而止，時則不至而控於地而已矣，奚以之九萬里而南為?"
- 5 Trans. Fung Yu-lan, p. 30. The original text is as follows: "小知不及大知，小年不及大年".
- 6 Chuang Tzu. (1994) *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. trans. Victor H. Mairs. New York: Bantam Books, p. 161.
- 7 Ibid. p. 161-163.
- 8 Lao Tzu. (1997) *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Arthur Waley. London: Wordsworth Edition Limited, chap. 3, p. 3. The original text is as follows: "不見可欲，使民心不亂".
- 9 Trans. Arthur Waley, chap. 18, p. 18. The original text is as follows: "大道廢，有仁義；智慧出，有大偽"
- 10 Chuang Tzū'. (1889) *The Identity of Contraries, Part 2 of Chuang Tzū*, trans. Herbert Allen Giles London: Bernard Quaritch p. 147-148.
- 11 Trans. Arthur Waley, p. 38, chap. 19. The original text is as follows: "絕聖棄智，民利百倍。絕仁棄義，民復孝慈".
- 12 Trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe, chap. 42, p. 180. The original text is as follows: "道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和".
- 13 一陰一陽謂之道。 Confucius. (2013) *Zhou Yi*, translated and annotated by Guo Yu. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, p.360.
- 14 Chuang Tzū'. (1889) *The Identity of Contraries, Part 2 of Chuang Tzū*, trans. Herbert Allen Giles London: Bernard Quaritch, p. 23. The original text is as follows: "天下莫大於秋豪之末，而太山為小；莫壽於殤子，而彭祖為夭。天地與我并生，而萬物與我為一".
- 15 Trans. Gia Fu Feng and Jane English. Chap. 40 of the *Tao Te Ching*. The original text is as follows: "反者道之動".
- 16 Trans. Gia Fu Feng and Jane English. Chap. 40, p. 56.. The original text is as follows: "天下萬物生於有，有生於無".

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