

The Tacit Understanding Between the Ancient Religions of the West and the Ancient Cultures of China

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Abstract: This work discusses Maimonides's and Lao Tzu's understanding of God/Tao. Maimonides is a leading figure in Jewish philosophy that takes a rather different analytical approach to the Torah from his predecessors. Instead of directly taking Torah and related religious books as guidance, Maimonides believes the right way to interpret Torah is to treat the stories in Torah as metaphors and use wisdom given by God to dig out the meaning behind the metaphor. Differently, Lao Tzu does not belong to any religion, while Lao Tzu found his only philosophy of how to live a better life by avoiding possible harm. After Lao Tzu's analysis of the change of the matter and the observation of the relationships between matters... Lao Tzu has written his famous work – Tao Te Qing. In this book, he tries to teach people the philosophy of Tao to make them live better. By comparing Maimonides and Lao Tzu, I find that there are many similarities between Lao Tzu and Maimonides's understanding of the transcendent being despite their rather different backgrounds. This essay will focus on three areas: their theories on the creation of the creatures and the inexpressible feature of God/Tao, and the emotionless nature of God/ Tao.

Keywords: Philosophy, Tao Te Qing, Lao Tzu, Jewish philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Taoism, Maimonides, Religion

1. Introduction

As one of the leading figures of Taoism, Lao Tzu has left us with his work “Tao Te Ching” with the purpose of teaching us how to behave in accordance with Tao. Likewise, the great Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, has provided guidance for the Jewish community in his book “Guide for the Perplexed”. In fact, many alleged stories exist about the writer of “Lao Tzu”, while the information we know for sure is that the book is written between the early 5th or 6th B.C.E. [1]. Whereas Moses Maimonides was born in Spain around 1138 A.D. [2]. Surprisingly, despite their totally different living environments, they have many common thoughts on the interpretation of God or Tao. In this essay, I will compare two great works on their theories about the creation of creatures and of the principle, inexpressible and emotionless nature of God/Tao.

1.1. Introduction of Tao

In order to avoid confusion, the term “Taoism” has to be clarified. In English, “Taoism” may be interpreted as including both the school and the religion of Taoism, whereas in Chinese, they are

described in separate terms. The school of Taoism is a non-religious school, to which Lao Tzu belonged [3]. Within the background of an unstable society and frequent wars, Lao Tzu's theory sought to teach people the principles of Tao to alleviate the stress of living in a crowd. However, Lao Tzu never referred to his theory as Taoism because he did not establish the Taoism school. Instead, the official term 'Taoism' was coined after his death by his descendants who combined together with similar thoughts from Zhuang Tzu and Lao Tzu. Religious Taoism, on the other hand, originated from divine ideas but because of the lack of a systematic theory, religious Taoism has had difficulties in passing down its heritage and thus borrowed the Taoism school's theory for heritage purposes. It is said that because Lao Tzu did not have any official religious belief, his book was not for any religious purpose but aimed to teach people how to come to a state of avoiding pain and seeking happiness. Hence what Lao Tzu called Tao is the being that existed before the existence of the world. Moreover, Tao contains everything in the universe including their relationship, essence... In contrast to Lao Tzu, Maimonides believed in a monotheism religion – Judaism, and his book "Guide for the Perplexed" is a religious-based book with the purpose of explaining two things – some words and the ambiguous metaphor from the book of the prophecy. Hence, a firm belief in God is a premise for religious people to read this book and better understand their religion.

"Tao" is the main focus of Daoism. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia, "... Surprisingly, the almost universal translation in English uses one of the smallest, simplest, most familiar and least consciously noticed terms of the language — 'way' [4]. According to Chad, the word "Tao" in Chinese include but is not limited to the meaning of ways. While distinct from ways, "Tao", in Chinese, does not have a plural form, Tao does have plural meanings in semantics. In other words, with a singular form, Tao exists all over mankind's lives. Because the translation "way" may not be so accurate, this article will use its original form – Tao.

At the beginning of Tao Te Qing, Lao Tzu mentions, "The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name" [5]. This first sentence in the book gives us some clues about Tao that, for Laozi, the Tao cannot be fully interpreted by one language, which will be discussed later in this article and Tao will be brought into finite from infinite once we describe it with words.

In detail, the paper written by Qingqing Wang from Hunan Normal university mentions that the extended meaning of Tao, from Lao Tzu, includes three layers – transcendent Tao, the Tao of conception, and the Tao of expression, of meaning. The Tao of conception and expression is a presentation of Tao that was deduced by people in human language and logic [6]. While, ontologically, Tao is referring to the formless and invisible transcendent being.

1.2. Introduction of Maimonides

Maimonides is a controversial leading figure in Judaism. He wrote the great piece, Guides of the Perplexed, for the Judaism believers who are confused after an in-depth study of Judaism and philosophy. Differing from many religious works, Maimonides does not interpret Torah mysteriously. Instead, he points out that words can possess multiple meanings and the metaphorical technique used in Torah. Thus, many stories could make believers confused. Thus, Maimonides states that the purpose of this book – Guide of the Perplexed, is to give explanations and clarify the meaning of the words with multiple extensions [7].

Many stories in Torah have been recognized as metaphors by Maimonides. Thus, most of his approaches and interpretations are close to the demythologized religion. According to Seeskin, "The Guide has long been considered a controversial work and in some rabbinic circles was originally banned". Moreover, many rabbis have questioned whether Maimonides's understanding of the Torah and God corresponds with the prophet's understanding [2].

In Maimonides's book, he uses many philosophical and rational ways of thinking. He considers the existence of God, laws, etc. not only within the context of Judaism but also by checking other religions for further understanding of Judaism. In considering the theory of the origin of the world, he even refers to natural philosophers such as Aristotle. Perhaps Maimonides' work received a lot of skepticism in his early years, but his work had a very profound influence on later generations of Judaism during the Enlightenment periods later.

Comparing the two-great works, a distinct difference may be the purpose of their books. In detail, Tao Te Ching is human-oriented because it aims to help humans live a better life and although Lao Tzu thought we should obey the Tao should be obeyed, he did not have any religious attachment to the transcendent nature of religion. His obedience to the Tao was founded on the idea that obedience can bring a better life. In contrast, Maimonides's work was orientated towards religion because, in the introduction of the first part, he specifically recommended that the reader of the book should be a religious man with a clear concept of the validity of Jewish Law [7]. In contrast to Lao Tzu, Maimonides's work was for a religious purpose, yet in spite of the distinct differences in the purposes of their work, many of their interpretations are very similar.

2. Materials and Methods

Despite the rather distinct living condition and religious background, many similarities in the world's origin and the principle of God/ Tao could be found in Maimonides's Guide of the Perplexed and Lao Tzu's Tao Te Qing.

2.1. On the Creation of Creatures

Maimonides' theory on the creation of creatures is rather different from other philosophers of Judaism, especially on the interpretation of "Genesis". When most Judaism directly take the story recorded in Genesis as the world's origin, Maimonides takes it only as a metaphor. In detail, Figure 1 demonstrates Maimonides's interpretation that instead of the eternal theory of the universe, God brought the universe into existence by motion, and God is not in any motion [8].

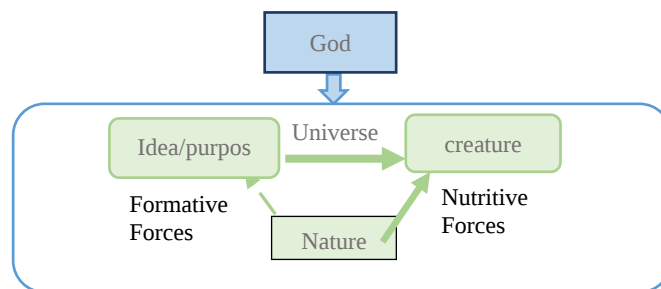


Figure 1: Maimonides's theory of the world origin.

Similarly, Lao Tzu also uses Tao and motion to explain the creation of the world, but with a different method. In chapter 42 of Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu writes, "The Tao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things. All things leave behind them the Obscurity (out of which they have come) and go forward to embrace the Brightness (into which they have emerged), while they are harmonized by the Breath of Vacancy" [5]. Lao Tzu's idea can be concluded in Figure 2.

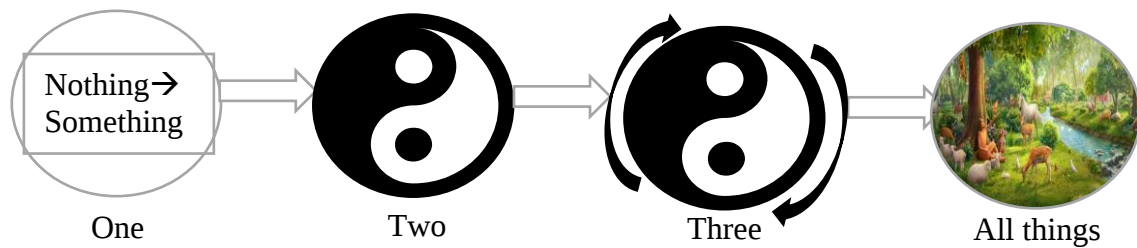


Figure 2: the system of one, two, and three. Self-made chart, image [9]

As Figure 2 shows, “one” is the process of creating something from nothing. Yet, Lao Tzu is not the first one who proposes this system of “one to two to three”. In fact, many scholars believe that this is what Lao Tzu learned from I Ching. Thus, many different interpretations of this exist in Chinese philosophy. Some scholars believe that one, two, and three represent the numbers. This paper will discuss this sentence specifically in discussion.

2.2. On the Inexpressible Principle of God/ Tao

At the beginning of the book, Lao Tzu writes, “The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name” [5]. The first sentence contains the warning from Lao Tzu that Tao is so profound and inscrutable that it cannot be described by language because of the limitation of language and our comprehension.

Maimonides, according to Sandford Encyclopedia, has similar thoughts, “He recognizes that when one is first exposed to Bible stories and the ritual of daily prayer, one may need anthropomorphic descriptions of God and promises of material reward” [2]; Maimonides also believes that the language, we used to describe God, is normal human language. This is easier for humans to understand and pass it on. Yet, it is important for people to recognize and overcome the limitation of human language. For instance, large numbers of metaphors exist in Torah. For instance, when saying God is close, people does not mean that God is physically close to them. Instead, this is a metaphor, and the actual meaning is an intellectual comprehension. Thus, for Judaism believers to recognize these metaphors, abandoning the surface meaning and pursuing intellectual comprehension is essential [2].

2.3. On the Emotionless Nature of God/ Tao

Moreover, Lao Tzu also talks about the emotionless principle of God by saying, “Heaven and earth do not act from (the impulse of) any wish to be benevolent; they deal with all things as the dogs of grass are dealt with. The sages do not act from (any wish to be) benevolent; they deal with the people as the dogs of grass are dealt with” [5]. Lao Tzu has used the grass dog as a metaphor here.

Likewise, Maimonides thinks God is perfect and that his actions do not contain any anger or emotion; he considers, however, that some actions that people interpret as God’s anger are actually his fair punishment towards evil [7].

3. Results

This essay finds that Lao Tzu and Maimonides, as the leading figure from rather different backgrounds, hold very similar interpretations of God. First, they both give a systematic explanation of the origin of the world and its creatures. Second, when it comes to metaphysical beings, Lao Tzu and Maimonides did not use an anthropomorphic means to describe God. Instead, they both agree that God/Tao cannot be fully captured by human language and that God/Tao is emotionless.

4. Discussion

4.1. On the Creation of the Creature

Instead of fully accepting the literal meaning of “Genesis”, Maimonides thought we should use reason and natural science to analyze the origin of the world. After considering Aristotle’s theory about the eternal world and other religious thoughts, Maimonides thought that “Genesis” was actually a metaphor for how God created the world, and Figure 1 may be helpful for understanding. Figure 1 demonstrates that although God gives nature the right to make movements within the universe, God is still. Moreover, as the graph demonstrates, God rules the universe as its essential part and gives the universe the motion to dominate other beings. Within the universe, nature manages the order of creatures’ life circles by using formative forces to bring them into existence and nutritive forces to help them last [8]. The arrows represent the motion that brings beings into existence. In simple words, God creates the universe and uses nature to govern it.

This view on the creation of the creatures is very similar to Lao Tzu. In detail, as Figure 2 demonstrates, there are one, two and three in Lao Tzu’s theory of the creation. While some scholars believe one, two, and three represent the order and steps [10]. Yet, most scholars believe that Lao Tzu thinks two represent everything created, reflecting the belief that all must contain both states of Yin and Yang. In detail, Yin and Yang are opposites: facing away from the sun, and representing night is Yin, whilst facing towards the sun and signifying day is Yang. Whilst many people erroneously think that women represent Yin and men represent Yang, Lao Tzu thinks that both Yin and Yang must exist in one’s essence in varying proportions, while sometimes only one of them flows on the phenomenon level, such as gender or personalities. Three indicates Yin and Yang plus the circular movements of Yin and Yang, thus all things have been created with these movements, which is similar to what Maimonides called motion. Moreover, Lao Tzu thinks all things have the desire to “hug” the brightness and back away from the darkness. Finally, the last sentence about the relationship between “harmonized” and “breath of Vacancy” can be explained by likening harmonizing to the process of mixing Yin and Yang together.

To illustrate this, we can consider that in making cocktails, for example, the bartender usually just pours the alcohol into one side of the cocktail shaker but both sides of the shaker are needed to provide the vacancy required for the bartender to shake and mix the cocktail. Similarly, mixing the two elements of Yin and Yang together requires space and the “breath of vacancy” becomes the necessary condition for Yin and Yang to harmonize. In general, Maimonides and Lao Tzu both think the creation of all creatures requires transcendent nature and consistent motion to bring creatures into existence. However, the inference processes are different.

4.2. On the Inexpressible Principle of God/ Tao

Before comparing the principle, it is important to remember that both philosophers think God is one and is not directly involved in any motion. Writing the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu was concerned with the fact that people are being “trapped” by the phenomenal. By phenomenal, I mean the simple speculation of things, which stays on a surface understanding of the thing. Hence, the purpose of the book is to break the phenomenon and teach people Tao. Yet, Lao Tzu is also concerned that people will shift from the worship of phenomenon towards the worship of his description Tao.

While one term should be clarified before explaining the meaning. In the original Chinese text, Lao Tzu says, “Tao Ke Tao”. This small phrase means Tao can be Tao. The first Tao refers to the transcendent being Tao and the second Tao refers to the verb “express”. This is the meaning of the first half-sentence, “Tao can be trodden” [5]. Yet, he thinks this expression of Tao, “is not the enduring and unchanging Tao” [5]. Readers may think this is contradictory because Lao Tzu agrees

that Tao can be expressed and denies this expression at the same time. In fact, the reader will not be so confused once the different extensions of Tao are clarified.

Specifically, as mentioned before, Lao Tzu's Tao has three layers of extension meaning, transcendent Tao, the Tao of conception, and the Tao of expression [6]. By transcendent being, Lao Tzu believes all things are born from the Tao, and the Tao is the master of all things and is an infinite being. Tao is formless, existing as a whole, and cannot be described by either space or time. Yet, humans are finite beings, and humans communicate through language, which is a symbolic system using as a means of communication. Thus, language itself has limitations. Because of this finite limitation and this infinite feature of Tao, our knowledge of Tao is solely our cognition instead of the ontological Tao. In other words, Tao immediately becomes the object of human cognition when it is recognized because we are putting Tao into the framework of language when we use words to describe Tao. Hence, although Lao Tzu tries to explain Tao with his own words, he thinks his interpretation can never equal the transcendent Tao.

Similarly, Maimonides also has the same concern. As this essay states earlier, Maimonides believes normal human language cannot capture the feature of God. While, Maimonides has provided us with an alternative means – using negation instead of affirmations to describe God, so avoiding the boundaries and possibilities attributable to affirmation and also preventing the allocation to God of particular qualities or characteristics. To be specific, Maimonides claims that attributes are adjuncts besides the essence, which conflicts with God's essence of inseparable one [7]. Moreover, even when they use what they consider to be the most beautiful words to describe God, these beauties are only based on the human scale. God can never be measured by any human yardstick [7]. However, negations, as an alternative way, only eliminate what cannot be the truth but will not limit or separate God's essence because there are infinite kinds of possibilities.

A well-known story, the blind man and the elephant, may be helpful in understanding. Six blind men try to know the image of an elephant by touching the various part of the elephant's body and every blind man tried to make an affirmative statement. The first man who touches the elephant's sturdy side thinks it looks like a wall; the second man who touches the elephant's tusk thinks it should be a spear; the third man who touches the trunk thinks it looks like a huge python; the fourth man who touches the elephant's knee believes elephant is a tree; the fifth man who touches the elephant's ear identify it as a fan, and the last man who touches the tail thinks that the elephant looks like a rope. Their companion says, "None of you see the whole body of the elephant but you all think you have got the whole picture" [11]. Clearly, no man is speaking the objective truth because they can only gather very limited information resting on their limited tactile sensation. Any affirmation statement of the whole made based on limited information contains the risk of being narrow and incorrect.

However, the statements will be accurate if the blind man uses negation, such as the elephant is not liquid, identifying that even the form of an elephant is open to interpretation. Similarly, for Maimonides, humans are in a very similar position to. Humans, as very limited beings, are impossible to be compared with God and grasp all knowledge about God. Thus, any affirmation about God will be narrow and disrespectful. Yet, negation would be acceptable because it can be made with limited knowledge. Thus, both Lao Tzu and Maimonides think that individuals can only grasp a very small portion of God and that, without the full picture, it is impossible for anyone to make an affirmative statement.

4.3. On the Emotionless Nature of God/ Tao

Lao Tzu states, "Heaven and earth do not act from (the impulse of) any wish to be benevolent; they deal with all things as the dogs of grass are dealt with. The sages do not act from (any wish to be) benevolent; they deal with the people as the dogs of grass are dealt with" [5]. The term—grass dog, is essential here. Specifically, grass dog is the tool uses in the ancient Chinese sacrifice rituals. they

are essential components of the ritual and as such, it is imperative that nobody should play around with them [12]. After the rituals are completed, however, the grass dogs become garbage thus demonstrating their possession of the properties of nobility and worthlessness. According to Su Zhe, a Chinese official and scholar of the Song Dynasty, the fact, that people's attitudes towards the grass dog actively change based on its usage, demonstrates that no preference has been attached to the grass dog. This relationship between the grass dog and humans is the same as the relationship between humans and Tao [13]. In other words, Tao does not have a preference for any individuals or the human species. Therefore, nature is selfless, and all creatures emerge themselves and perish themselves. This is also an indication of the emotionless of God. This emotionless, however, only indicates subjectively emotionless. By subjectively emotionless, I mean Tao is not intended to give any favor or preference. Yet, as I mentioned before, Lao Tzu intention in this work is to teach people Tao. By describing and studying Tao, humans are possible to acquire knowledge of natural law. Lao Tzu believes although Tao is emotionless, people can live a better life by obeying and respecting the natural law. Likewise, similar to Maimonides's understanding of "Gensis", Maimonides thinks Judaism should not take the direct meaning of the recorded religious book as the right interpretation. In other words, Maimonides does think that God will send a prophet to certain people via dreams or prophecy by the active intellect. He refers to the flow of thoughts and ideas between the rational and imaginative faculties and believes that those with foresight or intuition will have an extra capacity to help others [8]. It is clear that Maimonides thinks that God will interfere with this world by passing guidance through prophets and he also offers the possibility that God treats humans and other creatures differently. Hence, although both philosophers agree that God is emotionless, they have different interpretations when discussing God's interventions.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is amazing that two philosophers from different traditions and belief systems have similar theories about the world's creation: that motion is what brings creatures into existence, and of the principle, indescribable and emotionless nature of their Gods. As two civilization systems with long histories, Jewish and Chinese civilizations, with no evidence that the two civilizations intersected at the time, we can be surprised to find that they seem to share a mysterious consensus in directions such as material origins. Perhaps, by studying this tacit consensus among civilizations, we can discover more truths about all of humanity.

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