

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE *DAODEJING*

KILE JONES\*

## ABSTRACT

One of the main texts of Daoism, the Daodejing, presents scholars (specifically Western) with many difficulties. Most Western scholars in the tradition of Wittgenstein, Russell, and Frege would dissect the sentences of the Daodejing into truth value, internal consistency, and propositional attitude which are a far cry, methodologically speaking, from what the Daodejing was meant for and concerned with; therefore, approaching the philosophy of this text as a Western-minded individual places me in the humbling position of wrestling through this ancient book and searching for its meaning. Since it is obvious that the methodology of the West and the East differs so radically a few comments are in order about the way in which this paper will be structured. Rather than approaching this text as an 'other' that needs to be opposed and eventually refuted, I will attempt to lay out what I feel the Daodejing itself considers primary. Upon reading this text it becomes apparent that a few concepts are extremely important, not just for Western concerns, but for the concerns of the writer(s) themselves. These few concepts are the Dao, the One, the nature of Paradox, Ziran, and Wu Wei.

Keywords: Daodejing, the Dao, the One, Ziran, Wu Wei

\* M.T.S. Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

[www.kilejones.com](http://www.kilejones.com)

## I. INTRODUCTION

For those of us still stuck in the spiritually backward perspective of trying to ‘make sense’ of the text, the *Daodejing* presents numerous paradoxes.<sup>1</sup>

Philip Ivanhoe hit the nail on the head regarding the difficulties facing Western scholarship in its attempt to ‘make sense’ out of the *Daodejing*. This ancient Eastern text does not contain the Western philosophical categories employed by the Greeks, Neo-Platonists, Medieval’s, Enlightenment thinkers, and contemporary European and American philosophers and thus finds itself landing on confused and sometimes calloused minds. This is why when the *Daodejing* says things like “what is there arises from what is not there”,<sup>2</sup> “without going out the door, one can know the whole world”,<sup>3</sup> and “straightforward words seem paradoxical”,<sup>4</sup> a baffled look comes across the faces of Western scholars. Most Western scholars in the tradition of Wittgenstein, Russell, and Frege would dissect these sentences into truth value, internal consistency, and propositional attitude which are a far cry, methodologically speaking, from what the *Daodejing* was meant for and concerned with; therefore, approaching the philosophy of this text as a Western-minded individual places me in the humbling position of wrestling through this ancient book and searching for its meaning.

## II. METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Since it is obvious that the methodology of the West and the East differs so radically a few comments are in order about the way in which this paper will be structured. Rather than approaching this text as an ‘other’ that needs to be opposed and eventually refuted, I will attempt to lay out what I feel the *Daodejing* itself considers primary. Upon reading this text it becomes apparent that a few concepts are extremely important, not just for Western concerns, but for the concerns of the writer(s) themselves. These few concepts are the Dao, the One, the nature of Paradox, Ziran, and Wu Wei. Of course there are many more teachings which the *Daodejing* promotes, specifically regarding politics and social history that will be left out; this

is more due to time and space than anything, especially considering that many great scholars have tackled these issues with immense detail.

### A. The Dao

Of central concern to the *Daodejing* is the concept of the *dao*, which is usually translated as “Way”, “Path”, or “Method.” The *Daodejing* describes the *dao* as an “empty vessel”,<sup>5</sup> as “vague and elusive”,<sup>6</sup> and as the “mother of heaven and earth”,<sup>7</sup> yet ironically the *dao* is “forever nameless”<sup>8</sup> and “without name.”<sup>9</sup> As a psychological definition, LaFargue describes the *dao* as a “hypostatized internal presence”, “force”, or “power”, which has the ability to “bring people a true understanding of things”,<sup>10</sup> and as a cosmological definition Wong describes the *dao* as “an impersonal and unnamed force behind the workings of the universe.”<sup>11</sup> Alan Chan concludes that the *dao* is thought of as “the source of all being” yet that “it cannot be itself a being”, for then “the problem of infinite regress cannot be overcome.”<sup>12</sup> Each of these definitions, though fair to the *Daodejing* and Taoism in general, are only able to give partially definitive and denotative surety due to the elusive nature of the *dao* and the inability of language to penetrate its true essence. This is true of all definitions, yet, as was shown earlier, the *Daodejing* makes many attempts at doing so.

Therefore, the next question we must ask is whether or not we can make any philosophical sense out of the concept of the *dao*, or attribute to it any positive predicate. Is the *dao* a being, entity, thing, or have any ontological predicates at all? Or is it a non-being, abstraction, or phantasm? Could we liken it to Hegel’s *Zeitgeist*, Emerson’s *Over-soul*, or the Hindu Brahman? All of these questions reveal the difficulty of defining the *dao*, and should place any scholar in a place of careful study. What is known is that the *Daodejing* thinks of the *dao* as the greatest principle, whether internal or external, psychological or cosmological, that people should align themselves with in order to see things as they truly are. This is why there is such a strong emphasis on the *dao* in the *Daodejing*, for the impetus towards it is the impetus towards self-discovery, knowledge, and ultimate reality.

5 Ibid, chapter 4, 4.

6 Ibid, chapter 21, 21.

7 Ibid, chapter 25, 25.

8 Ibid, chapter 32, 32.

9 Ibid, chapter 41, 44.

10 Michael LaFargue. *Tao and Method* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 222.

11 Eva Wong. *The Shambhala Guide to Taoism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997), 23.

12 Chan, Alan, under “Laozi” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, article found at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/#5>

1 Philip Ivanhoe. *The Daodejing of Laozi* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), Introduction, 27.

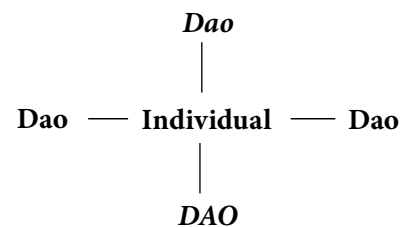
2 Ibid, chapter 40, 43.

3 Ibid, chapter 47, 50.

4 Ibid, chapter 78, 81.

### III. PSYCHOLOGICAL DAO

One of the many ways in which the *dao* can be thought of is as a psychological force that produces and is reached by self-cultivation, meditation, health, and various other mental states. This way of looking at the *dao* is sometimes referred to as ‘practical’, ‘alchemical’, or ‘earthly Taoism’, for it focuses more on the ways in which individuals interact with the *dao* than any kind of grand scale Meta-narrative of the cosmos. Thus we have the *Daodejing* saying, in regard to personal piety and self-cultivation, that “only the *dao* is good at providing [for persons] and completing [persons];”<sup>13</sup> that there “were those good at practicing the *dao*,”<sup>14</sup> and to “embody the *dao* is to be long lived.”<sup>15</sup> The Psychological *dao* would be visualized as such:



These and many more passages seem to speak of the *dao* as something that should be followed and entered into. This way of viewing the *dao* is similar to the Christian’s view of the Holy Spirit and the Cabbalist’s view of the Serifot, where the higher spirit, force, or principle is to be followed for the sake of material and spiritual blessings. There is conflict, however, between this emphasis in the *Daodejing* and other passages which promote non-action (wu-wei) and emphasize the unattainable nature of the *dao*.<sup>16</sup> Yet, without being taken to extremes, the *Daodejing* could be interpreted as promoting action and striving in one sense and time and promoting its opposite (wu-wei) in another sense and time.

13 Ivanhoe, *The Daodejing of Laozi*, op. Cit., chapter 41, 44.

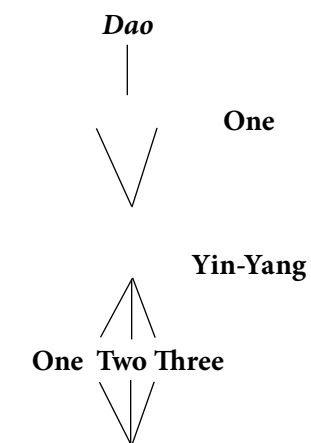
14 Ibid, chapter 65, 68.

15 Ibid, chapter 16, 16.

16 Such as the “embellishment of the *dao*” (chapter 38).

### IV. COSMOLOGICAL DAO

Another way in which the *Daodejing* describes the *dao* is as a cosmological force involved in creating and sustaining the universe. Such is the idea when the *Daodejing* says, “The *dao* produces the One. The One produces the two. Two produces three. Three produces the myriad creatures.”<sup>17</sup> This cosmological framework would look something like what follows:



### V. COSMOS

Not only is the world produced by the *dao*; it runs towards it: “streams and torrents flow into rivers and oceans, just as the world flows into the *dao*.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the *dao* providentially upholds the cosmos; “the myriad creatures rely upon it [*dao*] for life”<sup>19</sup> and “it [*dao*] takes from what has excess; it augments what is deficient.”<sup>20</sup> Here we have the *dao* revealed in strikingly theistic terms, yet one should not think of the *dao* as a transcendent deity, but as Huston Smith wisely put it, as the “above all, behind all, beneath all...Womb from which all life springs and to which it returns.”<sup>21</sup> The *dao*, according to Liu Xiaogan, “is God but without an active and defining consciousness to it”, for the *dao* is “void and indefinitely open” whereas God is “full and definite.”<sup>22</sup>

17 Ibid, chapter 42, 45.

18 Ibid, chapter 32, 32.

19 Ibid, chapter 34, 34.

20 Ibid, chapter 77, 80.

21 Huston Smith. *The World’s Religions* (San Francisco: Harper Publishing, 1991), 198. I would add to Smith’s definition ‘in all’, for, according to the *Daodejing*, the *dao* permeates all of creation and all of its inhabitants.

22 Kohn and LaFargue, *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, op. cit., 1998, 215.

## VI. THE ONE

Similar to the concept of the *dao* is, though of less importance, is the idea of the “One.” As was noted earlier, the *Daodejing* speaks of how the *dao* “produced the One” and that from this “One” came the multiplicity of the cosmos. From a linear time-based model it would seem that the *dao* created the One and the One created the two in a discursive, chronological, and ontological sense. If uncritical, we might be led to think of the *dao* and as a ‘thing’ or ‘substance’ which would not be consistent with it being described as “empty.” We must always remember that the *dao* is non-being, negation, and nothingness, and therefore cannot be categorized in ontological terms. The question now arises whether the One, which was produced by the *dao*, is a substance? There are really two ways to answer this question. The first is to believe that the non-being (*dao*) produced a being (One) and that from this original unified substance came all of the diverse objects in the universe. The second is to think that the difference between the *dao* and the One is only conceptual and not ontological.

The first explanation aligns itself with proto-typical religious cosmology, the only difference being an Eastern being-from-non-being model. Under this model the ‘One’ is the unified cradle of life in which the yin and yang forces operate and in which all life lives and moves. While discussing Ho-shang-kung’s (179-59 B.C.E.) commentary on the *Daodejing*, Alan Chan describes the One as the “original substance of life itself, energy in its most pure and potent form” since it is considered the “vital essence of the Tao.”<sup>23</sup> The second way in which the One is thought of is as another concept of the *dao* itself, only put in a different manner. The famous ancient commentator on the *Daodejing* and the *I Ching*, Wang Pi (226-49 C.E.), thinks that the concept of the One ultimately falls back into non-being, since the One is only a metaphor for a concept and not to be understood univocally. Chan likewise comments on Wang Pi’s thoughts:

For Wang Pi the question of beginning cannot be resolved unless the absolute otherness of Tao is taken seriously. Dialectically understood, the concept of “One” ultimately rejoins that of nonbeing. Cosmological interpretations in general and Ho-shang-kung’s in particular are thus philosophically untenable, for they project a false image of “nonbeing.” It is entirely appropriate

<sup>23</sup> Chan, Alan, *A Tale of Two Commentaries in Lao-tzu and the Tao-teching*, State University of New York Press: New York, 1998, 93.

to portray Tao conceptually and metaphorically as “beginning,” “One,” or the “root” of all beings; but serious misunderstanding arises when what is conceptual and metaphoric is misread literally to represent a kind of original substance or energy.<sup>24</sup>

Thus we have two ways of looking at the concept of the One: it could be understood as the original substance and energy from which all life came, or it can be thought of as another symbol for the *dao* and thus non-being.

## VII. THE NATURE OF PARADOX

A third primary philosophy in the *Daodejing* can rightly be called paradox. In the *Daodejing* there are numerous occasions in which linguistic and epistemic paradoxes occur and how one explains them is ultimately how one interprets the text itself. Some scholars feel that the *Daodejing* contains outright contradictions (Kaltenmark); other feel that it uses paradoxes to reveal the limits of language (Hansen); and still others think that the paradoxes reveal the Taoist focus on balancing opposites, much like its yin/yang philosophy (Hall, Ames). The reactionary and satirical nature of the *Daodejing* makes one ask which of these ways best answers its paradoxical statements and thus reveals what meaning the text is attempting to convey. Therefore, I will start off by explaining the difference between paradox and contradiction in the *Daodejing*, then comment on the *Daodejing*’s philosophy of language and finally, give a few notes on the thesis that connects paradox with the philosophy of yin/yang.

First and foremost it must be said that paradoxes and contradictions are completely different things. To say that A is –A in the same time and in the same way is a contradiction; to say that A is –A at a different time and in a different way may seem paradoxical but it is not a contradiction; the latter proposition takes into account time, change, and perspective. For instance, if I were to say that a caterpillar is physically identical with a butterfly always and in the same way, I would be contradicting myself; yet if I were to simply state that a caterpillar and a butterfly are ‘the same thing’, it would sound as if I had contradicted myself, yet under further inspection what I actually mean is that a caterpillar and a butterfly are ‘the same thing, but one changes into the other over time’, I would not be contradicting myself. Thus

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 106.

when we look at the apparent contradictions in the *Daodejing* we must take into account this distinction, even if at the end of the day we feel that the text deliberately contradicts itself.

We see a paradox right in the first chapter of the *Daodejing* when describing cosmology it states: “Nameless, it is the beginning of heaven and earth.”<sup>25</sup> At this point we might ask, “Isn’t calling something ‘Nameless’ naming it?” Strictly speaking one might say that this is a contradiction: for thesis (A) would be ‘the beginning of heaven and earth is Nameless’, and its antithesis (-A) would be, ‘I just named the Nameless.’ Yet in a more semantic and contextual manner, it seems that this way of looking at the text is too obvious. Of course naming the unnamable is a contradiction, this is not something new and it misses the point completely. The question we should ask is not ‘what does the text literally and mathematically say’, as if interpreting the *Daodejing* is like adding numbers, but rather ‘what does the text *mean*?’ Under this question we can easily note that this passage in chapter 1 means that the beginning of heaven and earth cannot be restricted, or reducible to, any single name. This semantic/contextual hermeneutic ties perfectly into the *Daodejing*’s overall philosophy of language, which will now be commented on.

The philosophy of language explicated by the *Daodejing* is overtly anti-conventional and denotative. Some have even titled the *Daodejing*’s philosophy of language as relative, skeptical, or even nihilistic. In all of this it can easily be said that the *Daodejing* claims that ultimate reality (*dao*) is beyond language and that once we try to contain the *dao* with language we lose it. Edward Ch’ine, while commenting on the Taoist and Buddhist use of paradox, notes that,

Neither the Buddhists nor the Taoists did away with language entirely. To say that the ultimate reality is unsayable is already a form of saying. In fact, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu and Virnalakirti all said a good deal more than that. In doing so, however, they were not necessarily contradicting themselves, for...the mode of language that they each used and affirmed not only is consistent with but actually articulates their linguistically skeptical belief that the ultimate reality is ineffable.<sup>26</sup>

What Ch’ine is aware of, is that given the overall worldview of Taoism, saying that the *dao* is ineffable is entirely consistent, specifically regarding its philosophy of language. We may, according to the *Daodejing*, speak about the *dao*, but that speaking is only a tentative

symbol which points towards the object, and not any essential denotation. Thus we have a connection between an ancient Eastern text (*Daodejing*) and modern Western philosophy of language which begun under Wittgenstein’s critique of denotation and continues in Putnam and Kripke.

The final interpretation of the *Daodejing*’s philosophy of language is one which sees there use of paradox as connected to their view of yin/yang. This theory thinks that the Taoist emphasis on polarity, opposites, and paradox is an attempt to put into language a cosmological doctrine of complimenting forces. This interpretation sees the thesis/antithesis put forward in the *Daodejing* not as contradictions but as complimentary, symbiotic propositions which reflect macro-cosmic movements. This theory is highly plausible, for the yin/yang philosophy permeates the whole text of the *Daodejing*; from cosmology, to anthropology, and ending in philosophy of language.

## VIII. ZIRAN

In the ideas of the *dao*, the One, and yin/yang lies the idea of Ziran, most often translated as ‘naturalness’, but also containing the ideas of spontaneity and self-unfolding. The literal translation of Ziran is ‘selfso’, basically meaning ‘the self [or any other object] as it is naturally.’<sup>27</sup>

This concept is most often associated with the natural ways in which the world and the people within it move. There are really three ways in which one could analyze this concept: firstly, it can be thought of cosmologically, where the cosmos are described as naturally unfolding; secondly, it can be described politically, where the ruler of the people stops trying to fight against the natural order of the world; and thirdly, it can be viewed as an ethical admonishment towards peace, tranquility, and serenity, when an individual recognizes her or his place within the world. I will take this order and describe what the *Daodejing* says concerning Ziran in these various contexts.

Firstly, and probably most importantly, the *Daodejing* describes Ziran in terms the natural operation of the world. The *Daodejing* says that “the *dao* models itself on what is natural [Ziran]; and that “the *dao* is revered and Virtue honored...because it is natural [Ziran].”<sup>28</sup> What these passages indicate is that Ziran is considered some sort of law, not a

<sup>25</sup> Ivanhoe, *The Daodejing of Laozi*, op. cit., chapter 1, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Ch’ine. “The Conception of Language and the use of Paradox in Buddhism and Taoism”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 11 (1984), 375.

<sup>27</sup> This basic definition was one laid out by Wolfgang Bauer in his *China and the Search for Happiness*, 1976.

<sup>28</sup> Ivanhoe, op. cit., chapter 25, 25 and chapter 51, 54.

law in the strict and determinative sense, but as the way things operate naturally. Thus even the unnamable and enigmatic *dao* follows the *dao* of Ziran (way of naturalness). Moeller describes the concept of Ziran in juxtaposition to a classical theistic worldview which sees God as sovereignty controlling the universe: “The Dao does not create the world or manage it. And it does not invent a species of “assistant managers.” Quite the opposite is the case: the Dao lets things happen “self-so,” [Ziran] and if human beings want to succeed, then, according to the *Laozi*, they should try to follow its “non-creative” way.”<sup>29</sup> This natural order is to be considered non-teleological and determined, for Ziran is the way things are in and of themselves, not as they are in relationship to something divine beyond themselves. This gives inherent worth to the cosmos as they conform to the natural ways in which they are constituted, a constitution that Lau and Ames call “unique, processional, and boundless.”<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, the concept of Ziran has political ramifications. It is commonly agreed upon that the *Daodejing* is a text seeking to counteract the seemingly despotic and ‘unnatural’ ways in which the Emperors ruled ancient mainland China. In the *Daodejing* the rulers are described as a “shadowy presence”,<sup>31</sup> the military is associated with “the rites of mourning”,<sup>32</sup> and the multiplication of laws is considered the cause of there being more “thieves and robbers.”<sup>33</sup> All that to say, the Daoist concept of Ziran implies a movement away from the vices of the state to a Rousseau-like ‘return to nature’ where small communities govern themselves by the virtues naturally inherent within them. It may be likened to a *lasses-faire* political and economic philosophy with a few exceptions. Firstly, the Daoist not only desires to flee the problems of the state by journeying to the country, she also desires political change within the already established bureaucratic systems. In this sense the Daoist is not *lasses-faire*. Secondly, the *Daodejing* is not as radically excited about political revolution as the Communist Manifesto. It realizes that the state is established, and though it is considered the source of many of our troubles, it nonetheless has a place as long as the rulers conform their actions to Ziran.

Thirdly, the concept of Ziran has ethical implications. Because there is, from the assumptions of the writers of the *Daodejing*, a natural order to the world which balances itself, we must not seek to fight against it but embrace the ever-changing readjustments of the world.

If there is something ‘natural’ then there is something ‘unnatural’ which the *Daodejing* strongly fights against. These tendencies to be unnatural, if followed, result in strife, injustice, stress, unrest, and eventual social entropy, for they are centered upon the desire of an individual to get more of everything. Money, social hierarchy, big business, unjust distribution of wealth and benefits, excessive material goods, and ecological destruction are seen as the negative effects of the state which should be counteracted by a return to simplicity, small community, and an open understanding to the differences between people. All of these ethical encouragements tie in closely to the next philosophical concept of this paper, Wu Wei.

## IX. WU WEI

Once we have understood that according to the *Daodejing* the “self-so” character of reality is ideal, we can then better comprehend the ethical doctrine of Wu Wei. Wu Wei translated literally means “does not exist (wu)- for the sake of (wei).” This idea can be explained in a couple of different ways. Wu Wei can imply not doing any action for any specific purpose or it can imply “non-action” and other forms of passivism. Thus in the *Daodejing* we have praises for Wu Wei; the great sages are said to “abide in non-action” (wu-wei), to “enact non-action” (wu-wei), for they realize the “advantages of non-action” (wu-wei).<sup>34</sup> Wu Wei can also imply spontaneous action; J. J. Clarke comments:

It [wu wei] literally means ‘not doing’, but as a philosophical concept it is used to characterize spontaneity and naturalness of action devoid of conscious premeditation, and implies non-intervention in the natural flow of things.<sup>35</sup>

Thus Wu Wei is characteristic of spontaneous, uncontrived, natural, non-premeditated action. The question we must now ask is how this ethical philosophy actually works. Does the *Daodejing* actually promote not doing anything? Or is Wu Wei concerned more with intention than utility?

Firstly, it must be noted that on a practical level the *Daodejing* does not advocate complete literal non-action. This is just too impractical for any classical Chinese philosophy. It is

29 Hans-Georg Moeller. *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 52.

30 Lau and Ames, *The Chinese Worldview in Tracing Dao to its Source*, found at: <http://academic.udayton.edu/WilliamRichards/Eastern%20essays/Lau%20and%20Ames.%20Chinese%20Worldview.htm>

31 Ivanhoe, *The Daodejing of Laozi*, op. cit., chapter 17, 17.

32 Ibid, chapter 31, 31.

33 Ibid, chapter 57, 60.

34 Ivanhoe, Philip, *The Daodejing of Laozi*, op. cit., chapter 2, 2, chapter 3, 3, chapter 43, 46.

35 J. J. Clarke. *The Tao of the West* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 84.

obvious upon reading the *Daodejing* that the ideal for humanity is small communities who govern themselves by simple and practical ethics. This is the difference between Daoism and extreme forms of Buddhism and Chinese asceticism. This being the case, what exactly does Wu Wei imply? Wu Wei certainly cannot mean continuing action in the Confucian ritualism, for this is what the text is aiming against. This being the case, we must determine some of the distinctive characteristics of Wu Wei in order to clarify its meaning and goal.

Firstly, Wu Wei should be seen as juxtaposed to Confucian ritualism. In ancient China Confucius has established a system of ritual and ethics that held an iron tight hold on the masses. There were proper ways to honor birth, marriage, death, and family. These actions eventually became formulas for appropriate ways of acting within the family and within the society. The problem that this system had, as with all other ritualistic systems that have hegemony within any society, is that they leave no room for emotive and situational spontaneous action. Instead of the heart, they have manuals; instead of freedom, there is duty; and instead of progress, there is tradition. This is the social atmosphere that the writer(s) of the *Daodejing* found themselves christened into. Thus we have the strong reaction contained within it, which finds its zenith in the doctrine of Wu Wei.

For the writer(s) of the *Daodejing* ritualism takes the place of true heart-felt action and stifles the natural changing processes of the created order. That is why “those who use it [the world] ruin it. Those who grab hold of it lose it.”<sup>36</sup> All action, according to the *Daodejing*, must be done with meekness, acceptance, passivity, and embrace of the *dao*. To this Nietzsche and Rand would be quite upset. We should not, as they taught, use the world for our own aims by strength and fortitude, but accept the changing world as it is. This comes back to our earlier troubles. Because one is to ‘accept’ the nature of the world ‘as it is’, does not mean that one simply does nothing. Clearly the *Daodejing* itself is doing something by fighting against the rigid social ethics of the Confucians. With this in mind, it seems to me that the idea of Wu Wei is an attack on power, manipulation, and strife, yet balanced with a humble, communal ethic that desires free choices and, as the famed bumper sticker says, ‘random acts of kindness.’

This is indeed a nice and friendly definition of Wu Wei, free of criticism and attack. There are other Western scholars who would have a divergent methodology. They would attempt the *reduction ad absurdum* pertaining to Wu Wei, concluding that this ethical theory leaves individuals immorally sitting back on the sidelines watching injustice happen. They would note that ‘to do nothing’ leads to acceptance of injustice and all other forms of vices.

This method, I feel, is the problem of applying Western forms of analysis to Eastern texts. As was mentioned before, the *Daodejing* should not be read as a mathematics textbook, but as a whole philosophy of life which is tempered by an understanding of balance. This is not to say that there are not difficulties with this ethical theory, as with all others, yet Wu Wei is not to be misconstrued as a creedal dogma closed off to revision, but as an ethical theory which balances the extremes of voluntarism and nihilism, which sought to rebuke the rigidity of Confucian ritualism and the power hungry politicians in the totalitarian house of the Emperor.

## X. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen only a minute and brief account of the philosophy of the *Daodejing*. Each one of these philosophical concepts could be analyzed *in finitum* and have been done so by many gifted scholars of the field. From the perspective of the Western analytic tradition, Daoism, specifically explicated in the *Daodejing*, is still fighting for a place of consideration. The West, specifically since Locke, Hume, and Russell, has been primarily concerned with issues of epistemology, logical analysis, and the scientific method, all of which are not clearly addressed in Eastern texts like the *Daodejing*. Thus, there has been a great disconnect between the philosophy of the East and West. Yet times are changing. There has been a Western interest in Eastern philosophy since Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger, which has blossomed primarily in the now cultivated field of Philosophy of Religion. There are now many Western thinkers who give texts like the *Daodejing* a noteworthy place in the history of philosophy. They have realized that the Eastern emphasis on ethics, politics, and meaning are not only significant philosophically, but also practically.

In the light of this progress, the *Daodejing* should be viewed not as an awkward looking foreigner, but as a fellow comrade in the long legacy of the history of ideas. From the concept of the *dao* to Wu Wei, the *Daodejing* presents us with a unique perspective on life and its apparent meaning. It promotes a serene and tranquil self-cultivation with the passivism of a Gandhi and the spontaneity of a Dadaist. Rarely have scholars ever seen such a text; one which balances ethical rigor and free decision making, action and non-action, embrace of and distaste for the situation of the world, and optimism and nihilism. This may be seen as the *Daodejing's* attempt to balance opposites in an ever polarizing and dogmatizing philosophical landscape. Yet as with all philosophical and religious texts, there are those who are critical

<sup>36</sup> Ivanhoe, Philip, *The Daodejing of Laozi*, op. cit., chapter 29, 29.

and apologetic. I can understand this position, for rational thinking and reasoning should be employed by all who are on the quest of philosophy. Yet, it is of my opinion that sometimes this mentality can lead one to close off from the gold mine of a different and alien text. There must be the admonishment to both think and learn critically while investigating any particular text; and if one chooses to attempt this with the *Daodejing*, it is my opinion that such a person is in for a challenging philosophical treat.