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The Absolute Through Opposition: Hegel and the Tao

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## Abstract

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This thesis presents a case for a unity between the speculative philosophy of Hegel and the philosophy presented by Lao Tze in the Tao. This connection between these two particular philosophies suggest that there is a case where two very different systems have arrived at an analogically similar idea. The absolute as presented by Hegel and Lao Tze represent the same idea. Chapter one discusses the development of the absolute in the history of consciousness as detailed by Hegel. Chapter two covers the notion of the Tao as an absolute seen in the Tao Te Ching. Chapter three views both of the philosophies simultaneously to arrive at a new viewpoint through Hegelian dialectic.

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The great philosophical traditions of East and West stand divided. Both the depth psychologist Carl Jung and the zen scholar D.T. Suzuki have stated that the canons of Eastern and Western philosophy seem to contradict each other. The Western philosophical tradition is concerned with causes and effects while the Eastern seems to be concerned with the whole picture, of wholes in general. While these two differing paths of philosophy move in opposite directions, the speculative tradition in Western philosophy contains some similarities to the general philosophy of the East. One of these comparisons that is particularly enticing is that between Hegel's Absolute Knowing and the Tao as presented in the *Tao Te Ching*.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* tells the story of the development of consciousness through its many forms. During this development, consciousness begins to grasp at the idea of the absolute. Consciousness achieves this understanding through the relation of opposites and attempting to reconcile the difference between those opposites. For Hegel, the only means of obtaining self-knowledge is through this attempted reconciliation, "the pathway of despair" that leads to absolute knowing.

The *Tao Te Ching* describes a mysterious concept known as the Tao. The Tao is absolute, not in the sense that it stands opposed to contingency but in the way that it stands to opposites. The relationship between opposites that constitutes the Tao, does not have an opposite. Understanding things in terms of the Tao allows one to see beyond their superficialities, beyond the artificial qualities bestowed upon them by reason, the elaborations of the mind.

Those distinctly different traditions involve a concept of the absolute. By examining the meanings of the absolute in the sense of each culture, a new perspective can be brought to light. This new perspective may reconcile what have generally been perceived as disparate and distinct.



## Chapter I: Hegel's Absolute

The only Western philosopher to use the term *absolute* repeatedly is Hegel. Other philosophers have avoided the term entirely. It remains a term distinctive to Hegel's philosophy. What meaning does the term *absolute* hold for philosophy? By following Hegel's notion of the absolute through its journey in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we may grasp it as a condition that provides for the possibility of actual self knowledge.

Throughout the *Phenomenology*, a central theme is the reconciliation of two distinct moments of consciousness, that between the knower and the object being known. In Hegel's terminology, these two moments are the in-itself and for-itself. Hegel wishes to bring these two moments into a unity. Hegel attempts to do this by beginning with the most basic forms of consciousness and moving onto more complex and advanced forms. The *Phenomenology* is a narration of the development of consciousness, ultimately suggesting the formation of *Geist* in its highest form of absolute knowing.

The relationship between opposites begins at the earliest stages of consciousness. Consciousness first perceives external objects and attempts to determine where it stands in context of those objects. These objects are differentiated from consciousness in that they seem to be external objects that stand independently of the knower.

When language is used by consciousness to designate the object, it creates imperfect means of communicating individuality. Using words such as "here" and "this" do not signify more than a contingent place and object (par. 110). No word signifies a precise object, as these terms when used to describe objects can be used to describe any object. The inability to differentiate an object from consciousness because of this lack of clarity prevents consciousness from establishing itself as a fixed entity. Consciousness only knows that objects are present to it,

but it cannot describe their particularly in any satisfying matter. This causes consciousness to attempt other means of knowing its object.

Consciousness proceeds from the language of pure sensations, to the attribution of characteristics, to objects in an attempt to give each object a specific identity (par. 120). Objects become chairs, rocks, trees, and other nameable things that contain a specific collection of attributes that allows consciousness to categorize them. This process only complicates the issue further, as consciousness soon realizes that the objects are now described in relative terms. Consciousness describes objects in terms that it has created for the purpose of differentiation. These terms in themselves have no meaning separate from consciousness, and as a result the object becomes a thing that consciousness itself has formed, not something that is known by its own independent characteristics.

As soon consciousness becomes aware of such a distinction, the characteristics become a tool for consciousness to view objects. By understanding this perspective, consciousness moves forward through the realization that the only way it discerns itself from other objects is through itself. In other words, consciousness can only view the external world through its own perspective. Any characteristics of objects are actually characteristics of consciousness. Therefore, the process of differentiation of objects in the world has not revealed a reality apart from consciousness. Consciousness now begins to view itself as what is truly real.

Hegel refutes the notion of prior philosophy that knowledge cannot be obtained regarding objects in experience. He does so by suggesting that the means to knowledge lies within the Understanding. The Understanding functions as consciousness's tool to obtain knowledge. This distinction arises in the interplay between Force and the Understanding which is described as follows:

Perception enables consciousness to posit the unconditioned universal as its object (par. 132). This concept precedes the arrival of the Notion of the True (par. 133). The Notion is the key to understanding reality. Consciousness must first attempt to transform the unconditioned universal into a form that contains content. For consciousness to do so, it must unify two distinct moments of the universal.

Hegel refers to the movement between two moments of the universal as Force (par.136). The initial moment contains the scattering of independent “matters” contained in the universal. Hegel calls this movement the *expression* of Force. Force develops from this content to its negative form (par.142). The true essence of Force only exists in the Understanding. The knowledge of Force can only be known in terms of the Understanding, as it is the only viewpoint through which knowledge can be obtained.

Since consciousness considers itself to be what is real, it turns its examination upon itself, transforming itself into self-consciousness (par. 165). Consciousness that views itself as its own object becomes aware that it does not do so through perception or the Understanding. The awareness of what “what consciousness knows in knowing itself” is a different movement altogether from the simpler forms of consciousness.

Self-consciousness apprehends the truth through its knowledge of itself as the truth. Because self-consciousness no longer determines characteristics at face value, it now begins a process of examination. This examination results in an attempt by self-consciousness for self-determination. The process begins as a dialectical movement between self-consciousness and life, ultimately culminating in a sense of doubt of the ability of self-consciousness to determine the True concerning experience as well as itself (par. 168).

Self-consciousness concludes that all in experience exists as a moment for self-consciousness, that all things sensed have two different aspects to them. Each object has its appearance to self-consciousness while having an internal truth to itself that is not necessarily determinable by self-consciousness (par.177). As this process continues, self-consciousness in itself is aware that it cannot arrive at a satisfactory conclusion in terms of objects that exist solely for it. Thus consciousness looks outward to another consciousness to determine its own being (par.178).

The newest form of opposition arises not in a simple object but in another consciousness. A struggle for domination manifests itself as an attempt at mastery over other beings (par. 187). One consciousness becomes a master over the other (par. 190). The other consciousness becomes a servant, one who is bound to the will of the master. While this may seem like the master has acquired self-determination, the relationship changes as the master realizes that he is dependent on the servant for his successes. While physically dominant, the master is not self-determinant, instead he becomes reliant for survival upon another (par. 191).

On the other hand, the servant has developed a new perspective in his apparent subservience (par. 194). He has acquired the skill and ability to survive on his own. He does not depend on the master except for commands. What he has gained is the Stoic perspective; he can determine his own future based upon his ability, and only a superficial distinction prevents him from setting forth on his own (par.199). The servant's potential for action far exceeds that of the master, and he becomes the sole possessor of his capabilities.

From here consciousness proceeds to its highest individual form, through cycles of different philosophies. First, consciousness follows the natural conclusion of the servant's freedom from the control of the master. Because the servant is capable of surviving on his own,

he becomes free from other consciousnesses. Without shackles to hold him, he perceives himself as able to do as he pleases (par. 201). Within his mind, he can be free to pursue whatever he thinks is good for himself. This is the Stoic perspective, which offers an illusory form of freedom as it fails to recognize the interplay of the external world and society, that the world itself is part of the whole that comprises experience.

What follows from Stoicism is Scepticism, the perspective of doubt that arises when the senses and thought fail to fully satisfy consciousness's search for answers. Consciousness reflected into itself after arriving at Stoicism faces the prospect of eliminating the reality of the outside world that it perceives (par. 206). In doing so, it denies the very prospect of anything physical and abandons the realm of the world for the realm of the mind.

When consciousness turns Scepticism upon itself, it faces a contradiction. It raises the question of whether or not it can deny truth to itself as well as the external world. This question causes a problem for consciousness as it does not know whether it can trust its very own thoughts and existence. This raises the question of whether or not consciousness possesses the means of being free. Instead what has happened is that such a freedom has provided consciousness with the very tool of its own demise, as it begins to question its ability to perceive itself.

These two positions develop a new perspective, that of the unhappy consciousness (par. 207). Because of the doubt instilled by Scepticism, consciousness now faces two possible realities, one of the initial stage where it accepts itself as the means to doubt external reality, and the second of the stage where it can doubt its very own existence. Consciousness cannot immediately rectify this contradiction, as it does not possess the means to on its do so. Instead, it

turns to other conceptions to escape the unfortunate circumstances that have consumed its existence.

As a result of this misfortune, consciousness perceives that its freedom must lie outside of its own existence. Such a notion provides an intense dissatisfaction, because consciousness in its attempts at freedom has discovered that its freedom is contingent on some outside source. Consciousness now holds that the good can be achieved only outside of the realm of experience. Such a notion leads to the conception of religion and the good that lies beyond material existence. Instead of relying upon itself to achieve the good, consciousness turns to the mediator of religion, the priest, who now determines the path that consciousness should take (par. 227).

The mediator does not hold as much weight as initially supposed. Consciousness discovers that the mediator is merely another consciousness and as such holds the same possibility for error that consciousness itself faces (par. 228). The truth that the mediator offers can only be unsatisfactory as it cannot possibly be more absolute than that of consciousness. It suffers from the contingency of the perspective of consciousness. One “truth” can transform into another through self-deception or through willed deceit. Therefore the true lies outside of the realm of the mediator, as he does not hold any form of control over its determination.

Consciousness in this unhappy, unfortunate state must find the route that would allow it to continue its transformative process. Having encountered a stage where it cannot proceed, consciousness must shift its gaze to another perspective. It sees the possible path through reason, the process of thinking and formulating explanations for external and internal activities in experience (par. 230). Reason is a foundation upon which experience is constructed, a similar lens for consciousness that perception served earlier, but even more universal.

Consciousness uses reason to form its observation of objects in experience. Reason serves as a tool to find the purpose of those objects by examining them as wholes. The external characteristics of objects as well as their internal characteristics are viewed in light of a complete picture. Thus the object does not exist as a mere conglomeration of traits; instead its truth lies in how those traits, internal and external, combine to create its specific form. Consciousness attempts to determine the truth of the object in such a manner that the characteristics are a reflection of its inner being, of the truth of its existence.

In its attempts to observe, reason describes things in universal terms. Everything exists as concepts created by reason. Matter does not exist in the sense that there is something outside of reason called matter, instead matter exists as something posited by reason for explanation. (par. 252) Such a concept functions as a new universal description, with a more precise meaning than the simple “here” and “now” of sense certainty. Matter becomes the means by which reason describes the physical realm, as matter becomes subject to laws as observed by reason.

Reason creates laws from observation, from viewing aspects of experience within its scope. The laws themselves seem to hold certain as observation time and time again produces similar results. When consciousness as reason turns from external objects to self-consciousness, reason begins at the base level of the determination of laws. The initial laws are laws of thought and psychological laws (par. 299). Reason expresses laws in the form of individuality, in individual notions and patterns of thinking. Because individuality depends heavily upon the thinker, such ideas of law cannot be the whole truth, but a partial view of what is the true. The laws of thought do contain content, but that content has no connection the physical realm.

By reconciling this notion that psychological laws bear no relation to an absolute sense of truth, reason moves onward to determine what can be true about self-consciousness as well as the

external world. Such attempts bear similar shapes and forms in history, whether through phrenology, or the cutting edge systems of modern neuropsychology. Determining whether the mind can be read like a map through its physical manifestation becomes part of reason's work. Because reason subjects itself to the contingencies of individuality, observers left to their own devices can become mired in the hubris of egotistical, sweeping generalizations when no such connection exists.

Despite the temptation to remain forever as an observer to its hypothesized external causes reason moves onward and begins to view stages of its existence in the form of actions. These actions represent the result of reason in its many forms. A human being behaves in a certain way for the purpose of reason. Actions, therefore, are actualizations of the thought patterns of reason.

Three distinct forms of behavior arise as self-consciousness attempts to determine what lies at its core. The first end of consciousness is that of pleasure. People seek to indulge and pursue the ends that their individualities desire (par 361). It becomes a process of constantly seeking out satisfaction through the means of external entities, of the very objects of which the individual knows nothing. The accumulation of wealth, of material objects, or the possession of other individuals becomes a pursuit without inherent meaning. When sitting atop the pile acquired from one's conquests, the empty throne reveals to consciousness that it can only be determined by that which it is not. Such a conclusion stands as dissatisfying, and other forms of self-consciousness present themselves as alternatives.

A natural extension of the hedonistic form of consciousness that pursues pleasure is the form of consciousness that seeks the fulfillment of its own individuality. This consciousness desires edification, that its individual nature be recognized for the excellence it represents. By



following the sensations of the heart, the individual of this predisposition follows a law that is self-determined (par. 372). Yet the individual encounters many laws that contradict his own. These contradictions must be reconciled as the individual attempts to free himself from the suffering such a contradiction creates. He seeks to maintain his individuality as much as possible. While realizing that to achieve recognition, he must alter himself to match the desires of others.

The man who follows the law of the heart then becomes caught up entirely in fulfilling the desires of others. As he attempts to achieve these own ends, the individual loses any sense of what his original beliefs were, instead supplanting his own desires with those of other people (par 377). What was once supposed to be the fulfillment of individuality through recognition becomes individuality through the means of self-destruction. Such an individual can only be happy by eliminating himself, because the only way he can receive the recognition which he needs desperately is by satisfying others. Like the individual who pursued pleasure preceded him, this individual becomes trapped by the fact that his happiness is not self-determined, but contingent upon entities external to his own consciousness. Ultimately, intense dissatisfaction concludes the attempt to reconcile individuality with the laws of the external realms.

The last person representative of consciousness's attempt to reconcile itself with its world is the knight of virtue. This individual believes that the good exists, but it exists outside of experience itself. This good will be achieved beyond life, essentially guaranteed after death and without any necessary action to support its fulfillment. Such a stance provides this man with comfort and he believes that he should support the good in as efficient a manner as possible. But the good lies beyond experience. Each cause is one of equal importance because he does not need to act in a manner to remedy any ills of the world. His outcries protest the evils inherent in

the world, but he actually does nothing. Instead, he suggests the presence of evil in the world but leaves the job of vanquishing that evil to others and to the belief that all will be saved in the end.

The knight of virtue does not support the achievement of the good because if he does so, he will end up losing that which provides him with fulfillment. He needs the fight against evil to determine his self worth (par. 386). Without the fight, he cannot be satisfied with himself and cannot reconcile the difference between him and the external world. The fight exists as his means to salvation as it demonstrates his virtue.

Virtue for the knight exists as an inalterable aspect to the world. With or without his input, virtue stands uncontested in the end. For virtue exists in the unending battle between good and evil. But the danger of this stance lies in the fact that good and evil are mutable concepts, they shift with the passage of time and grow into something beyond their initial posturing. What was good in the past has shifted based upon changing mores. Good and evil are socially determined concepts and virtue itself becomes a battleground that is based upon a shifting foundation. The achievement of virtue in this sense is an endless pursuit.

With each of these different modes of thinking producing standards of value all placed outside of consciousness, reason becomes mired in attempting to fulfill many different agendas at once. Instead of focusing on one particular course of action or end, reason transforms and becomes caught up in the process of working towards a goal, not necessarily the goal itself. This activity becomes an end in itself, where business becomes the only necessary activity. Individuals become obsessed with staying busy and not necessarily with producing any sort of results.

This behavior can be seen in the so-called trendsetters of the modern area. Individuals who belong to this social sphere find fulfillment in novelty or in the contradiction mainstream

assumptions. The activity of being different produces a continual pursuit of an end that can never be achieved. These people desire no end, instead they actively find means of staying in transition. This action can be seen as ultimately purposeless, as individuality becomes based solely upon other individuals, who are in the mainstream.

The constant desire for change appears as a quest for integrity. What appears as consistency and freedom is actually dependent upon external input for fulfillment. A person desiring novelty can only determine what is novel based upon what is old. Current society determines what older values to uphold. Because society determines this, the seeker of novelty must base his choices entirely upon society. Instead of pursuing something that can be seen as a consistent ideology, the goal itself stands as contingent based upon the fickle nature of other individuals. The expression of individuality is lost as the person becomes absorbed in the values of a collective individuality, what the person originally sought to escape in his pursuit of the newest trends.

Reason changes perspectives once again to overcome these different viewpoints and looks towards laws. Laws are determined from a conglomerate of rational perspectives, the ethics of society (par. 420). These laws carry weight because they hold the beliefs of many different individuals, and are presumed to be the natural result of reason. Because laws are derived from reason, they are regarded as based upon immediate notions of “right and good” (par. 422).

Reason now must be used to determine the value of the laws. The only way that a law can be evaluated is through its application. Its effect must be seen before the law can be determined as properly following from reason. Universal laws are key examples of whether or not laws hold

absolutely. Kant's maxim that everyone "ought to speak to the truth" is an example of such a law (par 424).

What makes universal laws absolute is that in every situation they represent a necessity. If Kant's law were perfect, there would be no exceptions to this rule. However, there are many instances where the law creates further questions that must be answered before it can be followed. For instance, a person can tell a lie unknowingly because he does not know the actual truth of the matter. He can believe a statement to be true regardless of its actual truth value. As a result of this dilemma, the person has now violated what should be an absolute law.

This absolute law, which should be immutable, now has its value determined by conditions that alter its worth. Such a law cannot be universal, if its value is contingent upon factors of experience. When the very definition of a universal law presupposes that it should be followed in all instances, then it should have good consequences regardless of the circumstances surrounding any decision that follows from it. If a law becomes subject to questioning and conditions alter its content substantially, then it no longer holds as a universal law. It becomes contingent and must be altered like any other law as problems arise over time.

As reason continues to determine the limits of its abilities, reason creates laws directly from conceptions of right and good. However, these laws cannot hold the universality that reason presupposes. Instead, the laws are subject to critique and can be altered based upon situations and needs. Reason's purpose with regard to law ultimately changes.

Now reason exists as a means of testing laws. It tests them because laws no longer can merely be stated and followed (par 429). Reason determines that laws must be connected to the details and particular characteristics of the cases they are supposed to guide. Because reason can critique laws, the existence of absolute laws becomes a merely fanciful idea. Every law can hold

as much validity as its opposite when given the proper circumstances (par 430). Since laws are forever dependent upon the circumstances in which they attempt to enforce their rule, they must be carefully examined when applied. Without such consideration, right could very easily become wrong and what is good can easily be transformed into the bad.

The key to determining the value of laws is honesty (par 434). Because people can easily lie about facts, and because their intentions can drastically alter the purpose of laws, honesty provides the consistency that would give laws their validity. Because this honesty cannot be presupposed, laws are left as mere shells of what ought to be done. Instead of holding the significance that to which laws aspire, laws persist at the mercy of human beings whose intentions remain unclear even when their actions stand clearly before them, because laws cannot be seen as anything other than that which must be tested by reason.

With reason's final attempts of determining laws, consciousness has reached its limits in its efforts to reconcile itself with the external world. The truth lies outside of the reach of reason alone, as reason cannot escape the contingency that accompanies external conditions. Laws are limited. Truths can be altered with only a slight shift in perspective, and as such reason cannot bridge the gap between knower and the object known. Everything is perceived through reason, and reason cannot provide the necessary connection that would bring the subject and object together.

When reason finds that it can no longer reconcile the different moments that separate consciousness and the objects it perceives, Hegel moves forward to a more advanced, we form of consciousness, that of Spirit. Spirit, or Geist, does not translate well into English. It does not simply refer to something that is not physical. It has some meaning in common with the English term culture. However, Hegel does discuss culture itself in the Phenomenology, so it would be

best to think of Spirit as a word containing multiple meanings, including at the same time something metaphysical and something cultural. Spirit begins when conscious beings come together and accept that the existence of opposition is actual.

Spirit is first realized as an ethical substance (par 439). Spirit manifests itself when different people gather together and begin to act in a specific manner. Notions that transcend individuality come into play, and collective ideas become the new standards by which the different individuals act. Spirit is a new world, one that escapes the limitations of the singular point of view provided by a single consciousness attempting to perceive and reason its way out of its dissatisfaction with itself and the external world. As such Spirit transforms itself just as consciousness in general does, but it is self-sustaining (par 440). The metamorphosis of Spirit occurs independently of the individuals are encompassed in it.

The initial stage of Spirit occurs through an opposition between the ethics of a community and the smallest unit of ethics, that of the family. The family follows a different set of rules than the community and the contrast between the two sets of rules produces a conflict. When faced with the necessity of resolving contradictions, the family must acquiesce in some degree to the rules of the community or risk alienation. Such alienation prevents the achievement of future goals, which are necessarily a part of the individual wills within a family. At the same time, whenever possible, a family must hold to its own set of rules within the limitations established by society.

The familial ethical order can be seen as a particular set of rules while communal ethics can be seen as a more universal form. The community stands as a cohesion of differing familial views, one that has outgrown and outmoded the traditions established within every individual family. Without careful consideration a family could easily violate the sanctity of the Spirit of

the community, which would result in immediate consequences (par 474). This struggle becomes a similar one to that of different conscious beings, when one seeks to gain mastery over the other as in the dynamic between master and servant.

A community forms its code of ethics from a collection of individual viewpoints. The pieces of this collage come from a wide variety of beliefs and mores. This pluralistic foundation contains contradictory views that must be reconciled. Because contradictions lie within the foundation of communal ethics, the ethical order depends upon relative views. Thus, the viewpoint of the community is contingent upon the beliefs of its individuals. The whole picture can be seen as something independent of the parts, but the freedom of the parts suggests that no community's ethical order is absolute.

Communities can also be seen as parts of a larger whole, for there can always be a larger community formed from a multitude of smaller communities. The same process of opposition occurs between these parts as well, as they attempt to reconcile differences so that they gain benefits while retaining autonomy. Any large federation of states can be seen as a natural extension of such a concept, with a large central government controlling the interests of the confederation on some scale. At the same time, the states themselves remain independent and free to act in a manner appropriate to the powers afforded them by the terms of the pact that binds them together.

A natural extension of the ethical order is the conception of morality. Self-consciousness establishes its own conception of duty when it encounters something alien to it, its opposition (par 599). A characteristic of Nature which would oppose the conception of duty is freedom. Nature must remain free and therefore consciousness remains free of duty (par 601). However, Nature must join with duty in some form of unity because self-consciousness can only achieve

happiness through attaining a consciousness of morality. Self-consciousness can only do this by fulfilling duty, by completing its moral obligation despite its autonomy.

In realizing its duty, consciousness becomes individual; it has taken action to fulfill duty and expressed itself (par 602). This strange conception becomes farther entangled with the conception of freedom. A question arises of how one would remain free while being bound to obligation. The answer lies in that fulfilling obligation is a means to express individuality which in turn demonstrates freedom of self-consciousness. The unity of morality and Nature stands as one that cancels out the old opposition between absolute freedom and absolute duty and instead becomes a process towards another end. Only within precise constraints can real freedom be actualized.

Moral obligations seem to burden individuality because of the sense in which duty binds any individual to a specific action. At the same time, completing one's duty allows one concentrate on other pursuits. The shift in perspective allows one's duties to become the very activity that will realize desire. By acquiescing to the demands placed upon individuality, consciousness can acquire the ability to see other aspects of experience as inessential pursuits. These inessential pursuits become part of consciousness's goals, which remain independent of any notion of obligation. Thus morality binds consciousness to duty in one respect, while providing consciousness with the sight necessary to see its own freedom.

A common question that arises concerning morality in philosophy is whether or not morality exists absolutely. Philosophers have thought that the notion of a moral conception that transcends individuality which does not involve any contingencies as part of its conception. Self-consciousness develops in a manner that answers this question partially, perhaps in an unsatisfactory manner.



When self-consciousness first follows its duty and attempts to unify its free will with the completion of duty, it views such a completion as a “harmony of morality and all reality” (par. 612). This object is created by self-consciousness, but does not grant consciousness any dominance over the world whatsoever. Consciousness thus realizes that the unity of morality and the world lies outside of experience, it is realized only as an ideal contained in thought. The ultimate conclusion of such a line of thinking is that an absolute moral existence lies outside of reality.

A further extension of this notion appears when viewing the opposition of different conceptions of morality to each other. Because a particular morality can easily contradict another morality, the two must be reconciled. However, if one code of morals directly opposes another, would the mere elimination of the opposing code be a determination of an absolute conception of right? Good and bad stand as relative terms. What may be good for one party could be terrible for another. Contradictions and problems of definition create an infinite numbers of disparities between different moralities. Without an absolute means of determining the necessity of one moral code over another, the proof for an absolute set of morals disappears as opposing moral codes cancel each other out.

The development of consciousness continues through the manifestations of opposites until it reaches its final stage, absolute knowing. The philosopher reaches absolute knowing when he realizes that the two sides of experience, the subject and the object cannot be unified. (par.794). This result does not offer dissatisfaction; instead it reveals the true nature of the world. Opposites cannot be unified, they can only be perceived at the same time. After the subject views its opposite and moves back to itself, a new stage of consciousness arises. This process continues endlessly and is inherent in the development of Geist.

Geist will change as opposition continues to create the conflict that gives rise to new and more complex forms. The standards that exist now in philosophy, academia, and any body of knowledge will change. Newer concepts will develop and people will continue to alter their perspectives on experience. This change does not stop because the movement of Geist continues without individual intent. The philosopher who understands this gains self-knowledge and the freedom to act.

Absolute knowing is a new philosophical position which allows anyone who has acquired it to act prudently. Every moment in experience can now be seen as a repetition of the many stages of consciousness. This repetition allows one to understand how experience will continue to unfold. The philosopher with absolute knowing in hand possesses knowledge of the True. With this knowledge the philosopher is able to view each problem that arises in experience and act in a manner that best fits the situation.

The philosopher who has learned the many stages of consciousness sees the world as it is. The illusions that opposition brings forth no longer concern the philosopher. The philosopher then focuses solely upon the issue at hand, the problem that must be addressed at any particular point in time. In doing so, the philosopher becomes aware of his particular abilities and the consequences that his actions may have upon the world.

Absolute knowing is the ultimate result of the *Phenomenology*. In terms of the absolute, philosophers can look beyond opposition and reach the essence of reality. The philosopher equipped with absolute knowing can perceive the real. This perception gives the philosopher the ability to act effectively and meaningfully with every action. The goal of attaining the self-knowledge necessary to act is achieved through absolute knowing.

## Chapter II: The Tao

The *Tao Te Ching* presents a new absolute for experience. This absolute, known as the Way or the Tao, stands above normal human conceptions and offers a new perspective to those who are able to understand it clearly. Philosophical Taoism refers to this central concept as something that cannot be named, but only hinted at through viewing the world through its opposites. Opposition and differentiation are necessary to describe the human realm. People cannot see beyond opposition because the moment something is appraised, the characteristic opposite is implied by necessity. The purpose of the Tao is to return the view of its readers back to a point where those who grasp its wisdom can look at things as they are, and move through life in a manner that does not surrender freedom to opposition. The *Tao Te Ching* provides freedom of will to those who will spend the time to learn the intricacies of experience through its opposites.

Whenever we ascribe characteristics to objects, we imply that the object is not something else. If we deem something beautiful, then it cannot be ugly (Ch. II). The traits of ugliness and beauty cannot exist alone. These concepts only make sense as a relation, and that relation requires comparison. If only one object existed in experience, it could not be ugly or beautiful because there would be nothing with which to provide context for judgment. As the number of people who can appraise objects increases, the overall degrees of variation increase as well. Also, the standards of value become asymmetrical as people begin to appreciate things for different reasons. Ultimately what develops is a complex system of comparisons based upon different standards of value. As a result of this system, people end up arguing over different aspects of experience because they hope to establish a concrete truth without realizing that such a truth depends heavily upon relation and subjective comparisons.

Opposites distract people from seeing the world in the state that the Tao requires. The Tao as a concept is the relation between opposites (Ch I). It has no opposite and as such cannot be named. If the Tao were to be named, its opposite could easily be pointed out. Instead the Tao can be referred to as a true absolute, in the sense that it is not the opposite of something that is ephemeral or contingent. It stands outside of relations without being the third thing that would create an infinite regress. Furthermore, it seems to be filled with contradictions when described in the text, as logic itself does not apply to the Tao. The proper way to view the world according to the Tao is not according to human logic, but a higher logic, one closely attuned to the state of Nature.

In some translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, the Tao can be translated as the Way of Nature. When viewed in this sense the Tao can be seen as something that flows, a river that cuts through the land that is human experience. Water is a common metaphor used in the discussion of the Tao, because it represents many aspects of Nature as a powerful and uncontrollable force (Ch. VIII). Fighting against the current of the Tao is tantamount to resisting the pull of gravity. Understanding the limitations of one's ability is a necessary step to gaining wisdom from the Tao. In most cases, this would mean that one stands below the Tao. One does not manipulate and bend nature according to one's will, instead one adapts to the overall rule of nature. Only in doing so does one become free from the shackles of opposition and gain the ability to act.

The Tao emphasizes acting only when it is necessary: this is the key to wisdom. A lot of human action takes place as a result of unwarranted fears or attempts at fulfillment in aspects of life that cannot be satiated. This leaves the person acting in a state of constant pursuit, a treadmill of instrumentality, where actions become the means for more action in an endless chain. As such, the steps normally taken towards what seem like a goal end up becoming fruitless, adding to the

misery of existence or perhaps even working against the person initiating action. Without any sense of what kinds of actions should be taken, one blindly walks forward along a path without knowing where one is going. A new emphasis on prudence can be seen but only when one understands the Tao completely.

The concept that drives necessary action is *wu wei*, or actionless action (Ch. II). In most cases where people act, the movement itself is unnecessary in the grand scheme of things. Some sicknesses can be cured by rest and many events lie outside of the control of anyone. Recognizing this allows one to focus entirely on the events that can be altered. Actionless action does not mean that one does not act at all, only that one acts in a manner with the least wasted motion. Efficiency is the focus of actionless action, and wasted action can be seen as something to be avoided entirely. *Wu wei* can be seen as a guiding principle for human action in a world dominated by the Tao, or a principle for action subsumed under Nature's laws.

The *Tao Te Ching* shows images that attempt to convey a sense of its underlying message. Describing an absolute in human terms cannot be done in language, and as such the book refers to abstract images to relay an otherwise imperceptible meaning. To name the Tao directly would be to eliminate its characteristic as a true absolute, as something beyond experience. It is likened to an Uncarved Block, an object that remains in an untouched state (Ch. XXVIII). As such the Uncarved Block is not conditioned by any outside influences; instead it represents the state of Nature in its purest state. The Uncarved Block functions as it does because it is unconditioned, allowing one to view the true state of oppositions from a perspective beyond that of the human realm.

The image of the Uncarved Block can be seen as the foundation for conceptions of the Tao. From the idea of the Tao as unconditioned, flows the necessity of opposites. Different

characteristics bring out the aspects of the Tao that human beings can grasp. Earlier the examples of ugliness and beauty were used to describe this necessity. Moving beyond this simpler term, more comparisons are given in the text. Each example serves as a tangent to the concept of the Tao, grazing the surface of its deeper meanings.

The metaphors in the text can be seen as a way of guiding the reader towards a grasp of the Tao. For instance, the sharpest sword can maintain its own condition for only so long, as it will soon become dull with use (Ch IX). The natural state of an object in experience is a perpetually enduring state. Any alterations or act of making of an object into a specific purpose changes the object's ability to last. The elements that compose a sword naturally last a long time, but when repurposed for the sake of cutting, the sword or knife remains useful only so long as it is sharp. Therefore, by attempting to make the sharpest, one has already produced the dullest object. A knife can be sharp for a brief time without the necessity of sharpening it again. This process is perpetual and nothing with an edge remains so without regular maintenance.

The Tao does go beyond simple metaphors and approaches some of the more complex aspects of human existence. When considering the conceptions of wealth, the Tao states that the richest man is the one who has the least to lose. The poor man obviously does not possess great wealth, but if he does not desire wealth then he is the richest man on earth. No one can deny the poor man who does not covet what others have that he is rich beyond all imagination. Without a desire for gold, a person does not seek to accumulate it.

The significance of not desiring material wealth can be seen as a principle restricting unnecessary action. When a wise man determines that he is not in need of rare jewels, fine clothing, or furniture, then he does not need seek them in a meaningless act. If a hungry man simply eats until he is full, then he does not need a luxurious or opulent meal. Simple fulfillment

and satiation are closest to the Tao in terms of human action. Otherwise one transforms oneself from a human being into a peacock strutting about with empty pride and arrogance. Instead of being a human being with simple needs, one becomes a glutton. This gluttonous, hedonistic pursuit wastes the time and effort of the ones who fail to realize its vicious, cyclical nature. No human concerned with fine living as an ultimate purpose can ever be satisfied. The delights of those concerned with opulence are derived from something contingent and this will change with the passing days, months, and years. With such contingencies driving the insatiable appetites of the gluttonous man, he finds himself incapable of sitting still and finds himself wandering aimlessly in search of increasingly ephemeral delights.

The Tao also addresses morality, a distinctly human aspect of experience. The text claims that liars are only created when people become obsessed with truth (Ch. XVII). While this seems to be a rather worthless statement, looking beyond its apparent opaqueness it offers a different interpretation to appear. The importance of truth and the conceptions of good and evil have been established over time as standard values for human society. However, these conceptions change over time. Acts once considered horrific and iniquitous are now completely acceptable in society. Conceptions of marriage and other otherwise sacrosanct institutions are changing as people's beliefs are altered over time. Human rights once allowed for slavery and worse, but today people would not tolerate an ethics that supports them. This suggests that in naming one thing as truth and another as falsity one establishes evil. It would be possible to declare the world itself as one's enemy if one decided to establish one's standards in opposition to it.

The Tao points out the contingency of human values and how they can change over time. Morality occurs as a result of human weakness, the weakness that arises when people seek to declare one way of acting over another (Ch. XVIII). In doing so, evils are created and goods are

praised. Only in pointing out that an act is evil does one establish the conception of good.

Remaining apprised of morality does not make a person of greater character than others; instead it merely represents a state of fluidity of the person's beliefs. Such a person adapts to subtle and extreme changes well. The person who does not necessarily fight against such change can be seen as understanding that the wave of morality will change. Because the state of nature would lead to evolutions in morality, it becomes less important to be constantly steeped in morality's finer points. Over time it becomes even less meaningful to attempt to define consistent principles for guiding human action. As such the applied ethicists of today become increasingly irrelevant to moral and ethical issues, and guiding principles collapse into the next stage of the human condition.

The Tao even discusses the contingent nature of other human pursuits. It actually praises those who do not seek to acquire knowledge and in a sense those that remain ignorant of issues (Ch. XIX). It directly criticizes the accumulation of information as an empty pursuit similar to the pursuit of great wealth. One can see the value in such advice when viewing the development of disciplines such as the sciences or even in philology. Common knowledge changes over time depending on what information is readily available. Events in history that once seemed to be established can become questioned after new evidence arises or any academic produces a provocative new theory. If a person were to consider the body of human knowledge as a static thing, he or she would only discover over time how much knowledge can and will change. Because of this, possessing a wealth of knowledge can only be as significant if it provides one with the means of discerning useful information from probably contingent information.

After the Tao establishes knowledge as something to avoid as an ultimate goal, it even goes so far as to suggest natural limitations to human beings. It clearly denotes different levels of



capability among people in terms of their ability to grasp the Tao. There are three kinds of people with regard to ability: “those who know the Tao, those who can come to know the Tao, and those who cannot” (Ch. XLI). This follows a conception that not everyone possesses the same talent. For instance, the Tao points out that those who cannot conceive of the Uncarved Block will merely laugh at the notion of it. However, this demonstrates the value of the Tao, for it would not possess a higher meaning if it were so easily understood by the most common of laymen. Just as philosophy does not have the same value for everyone, wisdom can be of no import to those who are incapable of seeing it.

The Tao also presents a very pragmatic way of viewing activity. There are natural benefits to avoiding the pursuit of wealth. The acquisition of great treasures and material wealth will invite jealousy and theft from others. A vault filled with treasure tantalizes far more than no vault at all (Ch. IX). Flaunting wealth and establishing individual identities based upon social class welcomes conflict into one’s life. The struggle between the upper and lower classes has been a common aspect to human history.

This viewpoint also applies to more abstract pursuits such as the pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge can corrupt a man. The supposed gap between a knowledgeable man and one lacking education can produce results that are not good for one’s well being. Intellectuals in history have a tendency to be misunderstood or disliked as often as they are praised and idolized. The current state of television promotes a culture that does not glorify intellect but instead presents normality as the highest values adheres to this notion. Popular and financially successful literature generally does not adhere to the same quality of writing as the canon of academic literature. As a result, intellectualism can be seen as a negative characteristic when the populace distrusts it and quite possibly chooses to ignore it.

Morality can also be seen as something that we should not necessarily pride ourselves in possessing. By claiming higher individual morality, one places oneself above others and can be seen as having an obsession with maintaining superiority in the moral realm. The Tao suggests treating the good and the bad equally (Ch. XLIX). The difficulties that arise in challenging conceptions of morality, or keeping a level of moral plasticity can be seen as pernicious to society due to the inconsistent behavior that follows. However, the ideal of keeping an open mind in moral situations drives the development of new morality and as such prevents the undesirable state of dogmatic morality. Progressive thought tends to anger people more frequently than gradual change, and as such it constantly pushes new morality upon society which results in alienation from society. The solution would be to act in a manner that does not disrupt the flow of this natural development.

By looking at each of these categories of human experience as unnecessary distractions, people could learn to act in a manner that would promote individual and social well being. The Tao presents a different conception of action that avoids the conflicts that arise as a result of seeking any extremes. Images that represent the key to action for the Tao involve flexibility and mutability (Ch. XXII). The ability to change, to move with the general flow of Nature, is emphasized as the key to obtaining any sense of real power over oneself in the world. Understanding one's position in the world is far more important than simply moving towards an immediate goal that arises in everyday life.

As mentioned above, one of the more concrete examples of what the Tao seeks to instill as a guide for human action is the way that water acts in nature. Water flows in a direction in a river and a stream. It is a generally malleable substance and changes into whatever shape contains it. At the same time, it can erode the most solid of rocks and will eventually tear through

the hardest of substances. Water can alter the shape of things perceived as vastly stronger, and it can do so very gently over thousands of years. The water that carves a bowl into a giant boulder will eventually sunder that boulder in two, but it only does so by tiny amounts over long periods of time. It achieves a great change but only in imperceptible movements because of its subtle nature.

Images of flexibility include other naturally occurring incidences. “What is of all things most yielding can overwhelm that which is of all things most hard” (Ch. XLIII). Blades of grass bend in heavy wind and storms, while trees can be broken and shattered because they adhere so strongly to the ground. Likewise the human organs follow a similar sense of decay as the teeth disappear before the tongue does over time. These types of occurrences exist all the way through nature, as that which avoids conflict and struggle seems to survive longer. What the Tao emphasizes as stated before is a sense of endurance. The goal of ultimate importance is that people endure and focus on longevity instead of short gains that could easily be lost.

The *Tao Te Ching* can be seen as a book that guides one towards prudence, or prudential action. It advocates a new way of viewing the world that would allow one to make decisions based upon careful and thoughtful advances. By treating every situation as one to be viewed with fresh eyes but as something that has a definite nature, the Tao reveals the means necessary to be free in an otherwise restrictive world. This ultimately entails a submission to what can be seen as a greater force of nature and understanding one’s place in the world.

As mentioned before, the Tao does not support the notion of equality. Each person does not possess the same aptitudes as his or her peers. Instead, all persons have strengths and abilities that define them. If one does not have the ability to grasp abstract mathematics or particle physics, he should definitely not spend his time studying them. Not every human being is

capable of gaining benefit from studying the sciences or the humanities. What should be important then, is that each person learns more about himself or herself. The goal would be a self-knowledge, of understanding one's limitations. Some people can grasp abstract material better than others. Olympic athletes just happen to have the genes that promote their excellence at the events in which they compete. Therefore, one should not follow societal institutions merely because of social pressures.

Gaining an understanding of the self allows a person to lead a more effective life. The Tao states, "To understand others is knowledge; to understand oneself is to be illumined" (Ch. XXXIII). Finding one's interests and strengths becomes a benefit that allows the avoidance of frustration. Someone who does not grasp scientific principles should not attempt to become a scientist just because society deems science to be a driving economic force. Likewise, athletic expectations of people who may not be the proper ability unnecessarily cause damage to their self-images because they would be attempting to do something which they do not possess the means of accomplishing. Such action is wasted, and goes against the state of nature like swimming against a rip tide in the ocean. Any person that does so would find himself exhausted, most likely resulting in an early demise.

After learning one's limitations, a person can move through life by following the Tao itself. The Tao as an absolute presents an insurmountable challenge, something that is not to be overcome by mere force of will. Instead, a person would walk around obstacles and move through life by discovering what he or she needs to do to live freely. The conditions of the Tao are not to be conquered; one must understand that there are restrictions to one's actions. This provides the means of finding freedom within those restrictions. Those who learn to exploit the

rules and mechanics of sports to their advantage find themselves in a more favorable situation than those who simply try to break the rules consistently.

The development of law and precedence can be seen as something that follows this paradigm. Working within a set of boundaries and developing new rules without directly challenging them is the key to successful legal action. Fighting against the flow of rules can be seen as a futile struggle and must be avoided entirely if possible. Instead action should be focused entirely on leaving the smallest impact on the ambient world. Leaving a small footprint indicates the least violence taken in action and is a general goal of the actionless action promoted by the Tao. This allows one to avoid the issues that arise in morality and opposition in general.

The Tao itself as a rule for prudence guides human action towards a freedom through subservience. This seems contradictory to the Tao's power to compel one to act most freely. It eliminates any sense of servitude to endeavors that would lead to undesirable ends by driving one towards action that is efficient, that leads to a purpose that is most desired by the person seeking it. Instead of advocating elements of life that distract and produce endless cycles of prosperity and ruin, the Tao focuses on endurance over time. What endures is that which moves the least, that acts but leaves no trace of that action. Such action does not produce a strong reaction, which produces conflicts against one's wishes.

The philosophy of the Tao as an abstract concept stands as something that is difficult to grasp definitively. However, it might be easier to understand it through the embodiment of its ideals in a human being. This manifestation of the ideals of the Tao in a human being is referred to as the Sage, a human being who stands above the key oppositions and rules of society by taking the Tao as his guide (Ch. II). If he does so, he taps into the limitless resources of the Tao as it provides the key to prudence and prudence itself provides the key to unrestricted movement.

By fully grasping the Tao in its entirety as an absolute, the Sage knows no limitations in human experience and escapes any sense of the common trappings of human existence.

The Sage stands as a paragon of Taoist philosophy. By utilizing all of the wisdom offered by the Tao, the Sage is able to act freely in a manner that does not violently alter the world. Instead his actions can barely be recognized; as it is his goal to avoid being noticed. The Sage does not concern himself with the aforementioned opposites that drive most people to ruin. In a sense the Sage becomes an embodiment of the Tao in human form. He moves according to the Tao's ultimate law, understanding that the absolute is not something to be challenged. Ultimately, his submission to the Tao as a guide to prudential action alters how effective he can be in the course of experience.

People in contemporary society demand recognition for their actions. Successes should be praised and failures should be reprimanded. The Sage avoids any association with his actions (Ch. XXXVIII). His goal is to accomplish his intent without ever taking credit. Striving to complete a task without any desire for reward makes the process easier. It also prevents the negative side effects from gaining recognition which follows from creating lofty expectations and jealousy as well. Ideally the Sage would not act at all but instead would direct others to action removing him from the completion of a task. Thus his actions remain minimal, merely causing others to move about and act while he sits still, viewing the way to act in every situation.

The Sage does not adhere to any form of ethics. His ethics are derived from the Tao, the absolute that inheres in nature. Nature has no ethics of its own, as it brutally and mercilessly will destroy those who are not prepared to adapt to its trials. The Sage views his fellow men as "straw dogs" in the same way that nature does (Ch. V). Human beings become the means by which

some greater goal is achieved, whether it is the prosperity of the kingdom or an attempt at creating a lasting peace.

The Sage might seem to be tyrannical due to the view of treating humans as straw dogs. However, if the other aspects to philosophical Taoism are taken into account, this could not be the case. Although the Sage lies beyond standard ethics, it would be outside of the laws of nature to attempt to control all those who serve the Sage. The reason why the Sage would be a dominant ruler would be through skillful and careful treatment of subjects so that tasks are accomplished as they arise. If he attempted to repress his subjects, the draconian rule would eventually result in a desire for revolution. No ruler can endure if he constantly stresses his people to the point of war.

As an ideal ruler the Sage would guide the kingdom toward what would lead to its prosperity. However, this prosperity cannot be seen as one of extreme opulence and political power. The important aspect of prosperity as noted earlier is that the political state endures, that it survives as long as possible. Such longevity cannot be achieved if one is constantly stockpiling armaments and expanding one's sphere of influence. Actions such as these have led to the collapse of empires in history. No empire has been able to sustain itself for long, usually due to continued aggression or as a result of established enemies due to earlier conquests. Thus, an ideal ruler would move the state towards less aggressive actions and a more tranquil coexistence within the world. At the very least, the Sage would recommend that most prosperous nations take less action so as to avoid unnecessary conflict.

The Sage can be seen as a person entirely lacking in an ego. The sense of self has to be eliminated to grasp the Tao. He cannot be worried about self gain and act in a manner that creates enduring successes (Ch. XLVI). His goals have to lie far outside the realm of what could

be seen as beneficial to him. Conflicts arise over mere trivialities all the time, and the Sage would end up seeing his efforts wasted if actions could be attributed to him. The only notion that guides the Sage is the Tao, and the Tao does not reveal any sense of one individual being more significant than another. Nature only recognizes those that endure, while everything else can be seen as something that decays.

The Sage does not have any possessions. His work and the people who he works with do not belong to him at all. Realizing this, the Sage escapes from the conceit of ownership, from the sense that he has a right to property in a literal and metaphorical sense. The added benefit to this viewpoint is that the Sage does not have anything valuable to lose. He cannot lose something that he never possessed. This concept extends to material objects as well because the Sage is aware of the futility of hoarding physical objects for artificial gain. The Sage represents a return to the state of man before the introduction of many social conditions. For him the state of nature is absolute, void of any misconceptions about reality.

The Sage applies the conditions advocated by the Tao in action. One of the more interesting notions offered by the Tao concerns the treatment of the common people. The Tao states that the people should intentionally be kept from knowledge (Ch. LXV). The Sage therefore only allows the people to gain as much knowledge as necessary to accomplish a purpose. This seems to go against any notion of the freedoms that modern society advocates. People criticize censorship and the limitation of information as a diabolical and deplorable action. However, when viewed as a position that does not imply extremes, a valuable guide for prudential action appears. Perhaps the limitation of information should be applied only in so far as the people do not learn information that is dangerous to society as a whole. Some information causes irreparable damage between citizens and government. Transparency has never resulted in



entirely beneficial results. In fact, some knowledge and information distract people from what they need to do, causing them to opt out of their duties and become trapped in pointless abstractions.

The Sage must act in such a manner that he prevents extremes from occurring. This applies to morality as well. While the Tao presents morality as an alteration of the natural state, the Sage must work within the boundaries of the society in which he lives. The Sage cannot support any particular ideologies because doing so would raise one sort of activity above another. The act of judging one sort of action to be more valuable than another creates the possibility of conflict. If humanity does not praise one sort of person over another, then the difference between a virtuous person and a depraved one becomes non-existent. The emphasis on becoming someone of value or someone respected as opposed to someone who is reviled has placed society in a state where the populous decides what sorts of actions are moral and others are not.

The Sage must abandon social conceptions of morality and obligation because they are the result of an artifice that stemmed from the violation of nature. When people stopped eating to the point of surfeit, the conceptions of greed and gluttony had arisen. During the process of forming the ideas of the family and the connections between family members, the likening of respectful behavior towards elders became preferable. As a result, the unquestioned morality of being respectful to people of older age was artificially constructed. The dominance of the elder over the younger begins early on, when the development of the mind begins. In a state of nature, the elder will pass away and the younger will prevail because the elder are less apt to surviving on their own. However, this is most definitely not the case for societies because of the alterations to life that human interaction has brought about. Instead people have created all of these artificial

constructions to maintain the illusions of society, to instill concepts that enforce rule while causing constant opposition between individual members of society.

An important aspect of the Sage is the concept of wordless teaching (Ch. XLIII). The Sage does not necessarily speak to people to offer advice. Instead the Sage might act in a manner that presents a valuable perspective. In other cases he might find that acting would be inappropriate and instead waits for the appropriate time to act. He sits still and considers the flow of nature and the conflicts between opposites to avoid the mistakes of delving into one extreme or another. His actions aim at rising above opposition in order to produce the effect that endures.

Most speech in contemporary society wastes energy because it lacks purpose. The concept of wordless teaching may be considered a return to placing value in every word spoken, for speech does not have a place in nature. Speech arises because of mankind's inability to survive individually. However, the Sage does not depend on his fellow man at all. His longevity and existence stand apart from society. He only needs to enter into action when he desires to fulfill a purpose, but there is no urgency or obligation for him to act.

The Sage contents himself with knowing the Tao as a unity. He does not seek to spread its value as a doctrine of wisdom. People either possess the ability to grasp the Tao or not. The Sage knows the Tao, knows of those who can come to know the Tao, and knows those who cannot. In a sense, the Sage understands the capabilities of individuals to the extent that he can find their limitations. The people who scoff at any notion of prudence can be ignored, for they do not have the ability to learn. The Sage does not advocate training the ignorant to become wise, instead he would state that leaving them to their ignorance would ultimately keep them satisfied. The illusion of satisfaction for the people who cannot grasp the Tao does not concern the Sage at

all. He merely will continue with his thinking because the people who can act for the sake of prosperity will be receptive to knowledge and wisdom.

The *Tao Te Ching* can be seen ultimately as a book of self-knowledge. Within all of its strange abstractions and metaphors lies the foundation for reality. The Tao reveals the Sage as an image to be viewed as an embodiment of its philosophy. Moving through experience with the intent of enduring and prospering has its limitations. While it may seem that the Tao presents the Sage as a person of limitless power, or as someone who ideally stands above humanity, the Sage ultimately resides below the Tao. He accomplishes action because he understands his place in the world. The Sage's knowledge does not need to be highly refined. He must know himself and his relation to his world as well as to other people.

Working through the metaphors in the Tao should reveal some aspect to knowing the self better. One's reaction to the many contradictions and simplicities shows one's inner nature. A person can easily throw away a source of knowledge merely because he does not appreciate its value. People can grasp the Tao, or they can choose to ignore it. Such is the case for any philosophy, but people can always learn from what they judge to be valuable and what they judge to be worthless. What separates philosophers from students of philosophy is that philosophers learn more about themselves and the world through how they react to the wealth of knowledge presented to them. This opposition is a necessary thing, for wise people could not exist without those who are foolish. Figuring out where one stands is a hallmark of self-knowledge. Unfortunately for the foolish, the process of reflection lies outside of their experience. This view in its own way is a sort of foolishness.

A lack of receptiveness to the Tao does not indicate its worthlessness. Like the Tao suggests, in order for something to be of value, there must be those who see no value in it. The

idea of great or worthless philosophy only exists as long as people continue to differentiate between the two. Finding value in one thing over another is nothing new in social interactions. The interplay between opposites continues perpetually. The point of the Tao would be to look at it from a new perspective, one withdrawn from the viewpoint of one opposite attempting to crush another.

The notion of a pluralistic world is a relatively modern one. The viewpoint offered by the Tao places the absolute as something unchangeable. Everything else in experience is artificial, something that does not hold permanence as its substance. Morality, ethics, knowledge, and materialism shift over time and become something else. Religion over time has undergone many metamorphoses and modifications. What might be the only absolute is the Tao.

The Tao suggests that over time what seems to be of incredible importance will ultimately change into something else. Nature functions in a way that cannot be manipulated by human hands. Nothing can be permanent in human experience as everything decays over time. Since this is an unchanging fact, people could learn to avoid becoming obsessed with the pursuit of things that ultimately do not matter. However, the actions people choose to pursue will vary substantially from person to person. What should be important is the determination of where to go based upon the self-knowledge gained.

What important role does this viewpoint play for philosophy? The many philosophic traditions contradict and argue against each other endlessly. It can be said that the goal of any new philosophy is to erase another. For the process of reasoning requires one to indicate the weaknesses in some argument against another. A philosophy in vogue requires its opponent that has been vanquished and overcome by originality and creativity. The constantly changing form

of philosophy reveals that it does not escape the battle between opposites. One philosophy conditions another and this process continues endlessly.

The body of philosophical knowledge in terms of the Tao can be seen as a necessary interaction between opposing ideas. Philosophers judge aspects of experience to be more important than others, and they debate with others to prove that point. What some of the more insistent philosophers should realize is that the differences between the philosophies they advocate are a necessary part of developing human knowledge. The alterations continually made over time continue to be a part of the whole, part of the true.

The Tao itself can be seen as the true, the one aspect to life that never changes. The Uncarved Block stands unconditioned and unmoving. All aspects of experience lie within it as opposites as things that are continually changing each other. No argument exists that does not have a counterargument, and no idea stands that it cannot be refuted. By viewing all opposites as a necessary part of the whole, that truth only has value because things can be false, then a shift in self-knowledge and prudence occurs. One can finally view the world as something to be moved through with the least disturbance. This actionless action prevents the wasteful expenditure of energy and time during the limits of human existence. Ultimately, the Tao serves its purpose well as a suggestion for how to act in the world, as it offers a new perspective that adds to human experience and the possibility of achieving freedom in a world that has lost focus on what to hold as ultimate.

### Chapter 3: Hegel and the Tao

The Tao and Hegel's absolute present a new case for universality between the different branches of philosophy. As concepts, they both create postulates for prudential action. Both lie beyond the realm of language, instead they can be approximated only through images and historical forms. Absolutes for human experience seldom carry the same significance. They tend to differ over standards of value. Most philosophers determine for themselves what aspects of experience carry the most weight. However, with these two viewpoints, opposition itself becomes a structure of experience that collapses into absolute knowing and the Tao. Examining both of these concepts at the same time produces a new possibility for understanding the first principles that guide human thought and action.

Absolute knowing arises from looking at opposition in the course of human history. Only by understanding the differing perspectives from every stage of human consciousness can one understand opposition. Moving from the perspective of the subject to the object being observed and back again yields new information that otherwise would not have been discovered. Without a firm foundation for the understanding to give either opposite a greater weight, the importance of each collapses into a newer and higher form. This process continues, and no resolution between knower and known can be found. This key to absolute knowing grants anyone who grasps it the ability to act without upsetting the balance between opposites.

As a concept, absolute knowing can be seen as something that lies beyond opposition. The only way to describe absolute knowing is through attempting to resolve the incongruity between opposites. As noted earlier, this process yields no concrete justification for either perspective. Instead, the contingent nature of opposition becomes subject to the viewer. In a sense, Hegel's absolute serves the same purpose as the Tao because it unifies opposites as

concepts that presuppose each other. Understanding opposites can only be done when one grasps them without becoming wholly absorbed in placing importance in one over the other.

Avoiding extremes as a guide for human action has long been a part of doctrines of prudence in philosophy. Practical wisdom dictates that one should avoid becoming too involved in the fulfillment of desires. These desires can be anything from seeking intellectual superiority and moral flawlessness to acquiring material wealth and great renown. This guidance can be clearly seen in the text of the Tao itself, as it mentions such extremes as a way of producing ephemeral effects. No action can endure when it causes jealousy, and no work can be eternal should one value it as dearly as one's life.

Hegel suggests such a practical wisdom through the many forms of consciousness. When consciousness apprehends another, it attempts to subvert the other in the relationship of master and servant. However, Hegel notes that this process ultimately becomes a destructive one and does nothing to prove the mastery of one over another. The servant ends up becoming the person with real power in the relationship but only by means of developing skills and effective power. The master becomes useless because of a dependence on others for his sustenance. If human interaction was reduced to this basic form, then the annihilation of the different and the uncanny would result, leading to less understanding of consciousness itself.

Viewing all aspects of human life through the lens of absolute knowing and the Tao provides some insight into the distinctly pointless endeavor of pursuing opposites. Beginning in the realm of material wealth, one sees that richness holds weight only in the sense that it stands against poverty. The conception of poverty over time changes based upon what standards of society and living develop as a result of human interaction. One civilization's peasant could be another civilization's noble, if material wealth is the chief value. If a different culture chose not

to value money or consumer goods, then material wealth would hold no meaning at all. To the person living in a state of subsistence culture, the idea of making money and becoming successful seems ludicrous and irrelevant to his or her current situation.

Cultural and social context limit the freedom of any form of action. Without understanding the limitations that social constructions place on the individual, one is bound to act in a way that offends others and counteracts one's intent. Doctrines of self-knowledge advocate knowing oneself completely, and that also implies that one should know where one stands in society. Attempting to stretch beyond one's ability to act simply causes frustration and ineffectively uses one's time. Unfortunately, people have difficulty grasping their limitations especially when society promotes making up for one's weaknesses and becoming well rounded. The fallacy that all individuals are capable of the same actions actually prevents the acquisition of self-knowledge because as an ideology it refuses to acknowledge that some endeavors are unnecessarily difficult to achieve.

The Tao and Hegel's Absolute raise the question of a unity within philosophy through the similarity of philosophical ideals. While the overall developmental path of each concept differs greatly, the end goal remains the same. These two branching philosophies can be seen as concepts in opposition to each other, yet are very much a part of the true. As Hegel says, "The True is the Whole." Viewing these two ideas that share so much in common as a necessary aspect to philosophical endeavors brings forth a new perspective for philosophy as a whole.

Hegel's development of consciousness for the Tao would be a process of attempting to reconcile the self with the world. The self only exists in so far that it must be a part of a larger whole. A person alone has no meaning except when he accepts his part in the greater world. While the Tao tends to focus on natural images and more abstract social conceptions, this view



very much applies to human societies which Hegel addresses. The conflicts of Spirit occur as a result of the tension that develops from the differentiation between opposites. Opposition occurs at the individual level, the social level, and continues into the realm of religion and metaphysics. Only in seeing the different forms of opposition collapse into each other does absolute knowing arise.

Hegel's dialectical movement presents a different form of grasping the absolute. While the Tao repeats similar ideas throughout the text that allow one to see into the absolute, Hegel's dialectic follows a very specific line of thought. It moves from less complex to more complex forms of consciousness. Hegel specifically uses this order to create his system. Without it, one does not possess the means of attaining absolute knowing. A person cannot reach the stage of absolute knowing without overcoming the inherent challenges that exist between all forms of opposition. This process continues endlessly, in the sense that no resolution occurs between opposites. Ultimately, absolute knowing and Hegel's absolute arrives as a result of apprehending that this change is continuous, and that the conflicts collapse into each other and become something else entirely.

Hegel's system and the Tao introduce the possibility that all aspects of experience stand as artificial constructions. From the simplest interaction between the self, to the intricately nuanced movements of global politics, the philosophical necessity of either opposite never becomes absolute for either party. No side can claim an absolute virtue, a viewpoint that defeats all others. People can argue endlessly so long as they have opinions and beliefs concerning ideologies. Every position has a counterargument so long as there is someone clever enough to discover it. Because of this, any belief that seems to be of utmost importance cannot be overcome merely through argumentation. The result of continued conflict parallels Hegel's

discussion of mastery and servitude. Eventually one side claims dominance over another, perhaps even going so far as to eliminate the opposition entirely. Such destruction eliminates the conflict with no side able to claim absolute right or wrong.

Human and social constructions produce artificial limitations on action and on perception. A focus on any form of opposition leads to pointless actions. If the fate of opposites is to clash to the point of mutual destruction, then the path of conflict itself is an unmoving movement. The end result will be the same regardless of action. Such circular motion would only be beneficial if it creates something new as a result. Hegel's concept of sublation, of the creation of new concepts as a result of a movement between opposites, does not eliminate the opposites. Instead Hegel recognizes that the opposites cannot be reconciled and continues onto other possibilities for overcoming the natural unease that plagues the human condition.

The viewpoint offered by the Tao and Hegel's absolute present a challenging question for philosophy as a whole. The idea of an absolute in philosophy seems to be contradictory to the themes of wisdom. An absolute moral and ethical philosophy takes too strong a stance and does not allow for any other possibilities in experience. Such a reality seems impossible without any immediately discernable categories for determining an absolute standard. Because of the impossibility of arriving at any form of agreement, the absolute of Hegel and the Tao could at initial glance be seen as something that does not allow wisdom to arise. Looking deeper into the characteristics that compose the ideas behind each however, reveal that Hegel's absolute and the Tao are flexible absolutes, in that they are vague in their doctrines and guide action through prudence, not through dogmatic absolutism.

It would be best to clarify many positions on the Tao and Hegel that could confuse what the philosophies consider to be absolute. The absolute suggested in both do not possess any form

of opposition as previously noted. They do not adhere to normal rules of logic, and they exist outside of the ability of human language to convey. In this sense, the absolutes possess a primacy that precedes human interaction, an importance that goes beyond the trappings of society. The rules of the absolutes guide prudential action in the sense that to go against them would be to deny that the necessity of opposites. What is most important can only be noted in what is less important. Without judgments and observations, no concept stands on its own. Named objects stand in opposition to the named.

The Tao and Hegel's Absolute have concepts that transcend human action and also help to guide readers to develop a sense of knowing that goes beyond conventional wisdom. For the *Tao Te Ching*, the concept exists in the sense that the opposition between the individual and nature stands as an undefeatable concept. Nature holds absolute dominance over the individual. If a person becomes hungry, the only way to survive would be to consume food. When natural disasters occur, no person can surmount the sheer power of the calamity. Earthquakes determine the fate of the individual. Only a limited sense of control can exist in man while the power of nature stands uncontrolled. It moves in a direction that is unstoppable. Like time, it continues forward without any particular pattern recognizable by human beings.

Geist or Spirit transcends the sense of the individual to the extent that it begins to move regardless of the intent of any single being caught in its wake. For Hegel, Geist becomes something that continually develops into more complex forms. As a concept that might border as an under explained, Geist is the collection of consciousnesses that form the human race. It develops when people gather in social connections. As a whole, the populace decides differently from the individual. The individual becomes subservient to the rules of the whole in so far as necessity dictates. Geist however does not serve as a functional analogy for the Tao because it

still dwells in the realm of human interaction. Instead one might see Geist's development as an image that helps one grasp absolute knowing, similar to the natural images that lead to gaining knowledge of the Un-carved Block.

Hegel's process of developing absolute knowing differs greatly from what the Tao presents. His history of consciousness can be seen as an incredible journey of gaining knowledge of consciousness's many forms. Absolute knowing requires that knowledge be acquired before it can be achieved. Without taking the necessary steps to recognize the trivialities of the opposition in society, absolute knowing cannot be attained. The *Phenomenology* must be read thoroughly and understood conceptually before any attempts at grasping the absolute can be made. The key to Hegel's absolute stands as a pyramid of knowledge, one that must be overcome.

The Tao presents an interesting case for limiting knowledge. As previously noted, the Tao denotes the acquisition of knowledge as an end to be a fruitless endeavor. It states that such things can be a distraction from achieving anything that can endure. In this sense, the Tao does not think that the steps that Hegel has taken are a necessary step in developing knowledge of the absolute. Instead the knowledge of the absolute arises in observing natural occurrences and understanding space in terms of the Tao. Without any form of consistent doctrine like any Western philosophy, the Tao presents a case for depth in simplicity. It attempts to present the case that the most complex and arcane concepts can be learned through looking at what is most basic and fundamental. As a result of this line of thought, the Tao might even suggest that Hegel's phenomenology be overlooked as unnecessarily complex and creating a problem by examining what does not need to be examined. The Western canon of thought seems overly mired in logical constructions and the need to prove arguments when compared to the Tao's simpler concepts.

While Hegel follows the Western ideology of attempting to explain as much of the history of consciousness as he can, the Tao emphasizes that what is not expressed can be just as significant as what is expressed. This complements Hegel's notion that negative elements of experience add a characteristic of truth to the development of thought. Only through determining how something is wrong does one learn what is correct. The Tao does not cover the details of consciousness perhaps as a result of consciousness not being a significant concept in the development of eastern thought. At the same time, the Tao does not discuss the development of the philosophy, instead it presents an unstructured, sometimes confusing set of details concerning its absolute.

The two philosophies also have different analogues for the embodiment of their ideologies. The Tao's Sage may be compared to an ideal representation of Hegel's philosophy, the Hegelian philosopher. Hegel's philosopher would follow the development of consciousness through its many forms. By perusing the details of opposition and giving each moment of consciousness its due consideration, the philosopher achieves the state of mind of absolute knowing. Absolute knowing becomes the Hegelian philosopher's key to prudence, offering him the means to know how to act in any situation that arises in experience. This notion arises in the knowledge that develops as a result of viewing the repetition of oppositions shot through experience. At each stage of consciousness, some level of individuality conflicts with a greater whole and the necessity of each become apparent and collapse into the other. The issues remain unresolved and transforms into a higher form. The reconciliation between individuality and the world is central to Hegel's philosophy and can be seen as one of the ends of Taoist philosophy as well.

Absolute knowing arises from the attempt to resolve the disunity between perceiver and the object being perceived. The final perspective it offers to the Hegelian philosopher shows that a complete unity cannot be achieved. No synthesis between the subject and the object can ever be achieved. Knowing this, the Hegelian philosopher only moves theoretically through opposites in experience traveling through the many forms of subject and object. Morals, ethics, and other abstract concepts transform over time because of the constant drive to determine their necessity. However, without any solid metaphysical ground to provide an absolute answer, these parts of metaphysics that philosophers hold to high degrees lose their significance. Instead, the Hegelian philosopher sees that these concepts do not maintain their importance over time and that philosophy will continue to change according to what becomes important for the generation in which it occurs.

The Sage shares much in common with the Hegelian philosopher. He views the world not in terms of the details instead opting to look at the larger picture. The realization that opposition obscures one's ability to act awakens the Sage to the possibilities of wisdom in action. Unlike the Hegelian philosopher, the Sage stays almost entirely removed from philosophical and ethical traditions. He does not study the movement of human interaction and consciousness. Instead the Sage focuses on natural images and understanding the power of Nature itself. What ultimately manipulates human action goes beyond the day to day action of man. Fighting against the Tao would only result in an expression of the futility in actions that cannot endure.

While the Hegelian philosopher would be well versed in the ethics and moral traditions over time, the Sage would possess relatively less knowledge concerning the details of human interaction. The Tao suggests that the most effective way to look at things is in terms of its absolute view, not in the human conditions that people have created for themselves. This

essentially colors knowledge in a different scheme, limiting its importance for the Sage. In contrast to the philosopher, the Sage values wisdom but does not focus on knowledge as a necessary step. The only knowledge necessary for the Sage is self-knowledge. Understanding the limitations of the self eliminates the desire to overreach one's own ability. Thus, the Sage and the philosopher differ on their judgment of the value of knowledge.

The Sage and the philosopher share the ability to go beyond traditional human morals and ethics. By applying the wisdom they have acquired through understanding of the absolute, these two do not face the limitations imposed upon them by society. Instead of focusing on the intricacy of popular ethics, the philosopher can view contemporary morals as something about to change, or a process that will change. Likewise the Sage considers morality and ethics as evanescent concepts that do not endure in any form or shape beyond the scope of society's needs. However, the application of this knowledge differs for the Sage and the philosopher. The Sage follows the ultimate rule of Nature, in that the Tao determines the case for action. The Hegelian philosopher moves from the standpoint of absolute knowing to answer practical questions and overcome challenges by seeing that the movement between opposites has occurred prior in experience. In this sense, the philosopher seeks to solve the problem most effectively by looking at what has come before while the Sage sits back and quite possibly does not pursue any course of action.

Hegel's philosopher might see himself as part of society in that his consciousness maintains a stake in Geist, in the Spirit that drives humanity forward. He is a part of the whole of Geist and cannot be separated from it. At the same time, he maintains his individuality through understanding himself. The autonomy of the mind remains regardless of society's impositions of will upon the individual. Geist cannot be overcome by the philosopher and Geist's movement

continues to develop with or without the philosopher's input. However, the philosopher understands that he cannot become distinct from the whole and as such remains an integral part of its development.

The Sage distances himself from human action as much as possible. While he does participate in the activities of society, he does so as little as possible. In this sense the Sage might be viewed as a sort of hermit, remaining artificially separate from society. However, the Sage can still be considered a part of greater society as a whole in so far as human activity functions under the rules of the Tao itself. The question of whether or not the Sage considers society as something that can be avoided entirely arises when viewing it as something secondary to the Tao. Following along this line of thought, the suggestion of the Tao that the Sage should view human beings as straw dogs almost eliminates the distinction between what is and is not human. Nature does not make this consideration and perhaps neither does the Sage.

The similarities and differences between the Sage and Hegel's philosopher demonstrate the differences between Eastern and Western thought. While both have views of the whole as the guiding determination for what is true, the understanding of the whole has different connotations for the Sage and philosopher. The two both share the conception that self-knowledge has great value and that that knowledge allows one to act prudently within the context of society. However, the greatest difference occurs in how the two view society, in the sense that philosopher views himself as part of the developing whole while the Sage considers society to be subsumed underneath the Tao and not necessarily an enduring conception. The Sage does not quite make the distinction between humanity and non-humanity, instead focusing on everything underneath Nature. Ultimately the Sage and Hegel's philosopher view the whole with very



different perspectives as a result of what each considers to be most significant in context of the whole.

Viewing the two different philosophies at the same time offers the possibility for understanding more about what drives the human condition. One might find that common ground between the disparate philosophies could unite human thought under particular categories. Beyond all of the cultural and logical differences, the ultimate goal of philosophy could be a shared one. Hegel's absolute and the Tao are both absolutes for human experience. They are eternal and do not possess opposites. A suggestion of similarities between the two has not been discussed before in philosophy because of the claimed inherent differences in the thought of western and eastern doctrines.

While Hegel maintains the general logical order and structure associated with Western philosophy, the *Phenomenology* focuses on the idea of the whole. A complete picture is important and the only way to ascertain that image is to view what is true and what is false at the same time. Excluding any aspect of experience because we learn that it is false would deny some form of evidence that provides what is true with its strength. This focus on the idea of the whole is what brings Hegel's dialectic close to the ideas of the *Tao Te Ching*.

The Tao and other eastern philosophies tend to focus on holistic concepts. When viewing objects of experience, Asian philosophy concentrates on the larger picture. Seemingly unconnected things in Western doctrine hold great importance to the Eastern mind. What would be an insignificant detail to the West could be something that determines everything that occurs for the Eastern mind. As such, the Tao discusses the grand scheme, the whole picture of experience in the form of nature and subsumes everything underneath the control of the limitless force of the Tao.

The differences and similarities between Hegel's absolute and the Tao provide an interesting possibility for philosophy. While the two standards do not complement each other perfectly, they do seem to point towards a similar idea. Both offer the self-knowledge necessary to overcome the issues of experience. At the same time, they go about very different paths to acquiring self-knowledge. For Hegel knowledge of history and its details is a necessity for absolute knowing while for the Tao knowledge is something not to be acquired in excess. The process of learning the Tao can be seen as anti-intellectual in its implementation. The simple words of the *Tao Te Ching* do not match up at all to the complex metaphors and shapes expressed in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

If one views Hegel's deep intellectual approach to the Tao's simplicity, then perhaps Hegel should be given more credit for writing something less immediately perceptible yet incredibly profound. Most of the depth of the Tao comes from viewing oppositions repetitively and non-linearly. The chapter structure of the Tao is not organized like the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. At times it seems as though the Tao functions like a stream of consciousness in expression, arriving at topics as they come to mind and addressing them. Without any clear narrative structure, the Tao lacks the order and elegance of the history of consciousness.

The opposites in the Tao do not transform as a result of a movement of consciousness. Hegel's dialectic movement is completely missing from the Tao. Instead the Tao immediately presupposes the absolute as a necessary condition for opposition. The position that Hegel achieves at the end of the *Phenomenology* presents itself to the reader within the first few chapters of the Tao. If anything, for the philosophical Taoist and the Sage, the challenge exists in overcoming the traditional view of opposites and to avoid becoming absorbed in that conflict.

The Tao shows a point of view that conflicts with most forms of Western thought. The Sage essentially eliminates his conception of the self. By no longer claiming any credit for activities that he takes, the Sage becomes an element of the background of human activity. Actionless action as a guiding principle prevents the Sage from being viewed as a key entity in the survival of society. If the Sage is working as he should, he does not maintain any sense of self-importance. One could even go so far as to say that the Sage does not have the sense of a human identity as he does not attempt to achieve any sort of renown. He does not seek to become noticed because the only thing that is worth noting is the Tao, which guides absolutely in its abstract manner.

The Sage presents an alternative for identity that is uncommon in western philosophy. He seeks to attune himself to nature and become part of the Tao. This unity requires that one does not consider the self as the most immediate object of experience. The self-knowledge acquired by the Sage moves him into a position where he has to act least. Having an identity prevents the Sage from accomplishing work because of the possibility of activities that counteract the Sage's actions. If the Sage is easily noted by the people, then others will seek to overcome the work that he has accomplished. In this sense the work of the Sage can be undone. The lack of an identity is a concept that does not present itself in Hegel's absolute at all. In fact, the struggle between the self and the otherness of the world continues perpetually with Hegel while the Tao suggests that a complete harmony is possible.

The self remains an important part of Hegel's philosophy. Reality is viewed through the lens of consciousness. People cannot live otherwise, as consciousness colors every aspect in experience inescapably. Consciousness limits the viewer's perception as a precondition for interacting with objects. The question of whether or not self-consciousness can be limited by

grasping the whole. Hegel's absolute might offer a way to do so, but the very nature of the forms of self-consciousness and the interaction between Geist and individual consciousness suggests otherwise. The narrative of the development of consciousness presupposes consciousness's fundamental stages. Self-consciousness is a necessary step in the development of Geist. Thus identity remains important to the Hegelian philosopher, while it appears to be something to be discarded by the Sage.

Having viewed these key differences in the philosophies it might be fruitful to attempt to reconcile them to develop a new viewpoint. Which philosophy holds greater value in terms of what it produces? Hegel's absolute provides its wisdom through the rigorous development of the mind by constantly challenging the concepts of opposition. The Tao presents its argument in simple forms, as it attempts to remove layers from experience that impede the understanding of the absolute. The intellectual exercise of Hegel as opposed to the minimalistic expression of the Tao provides an interesting case of metaphysical contradiction. If both are to be believed simultaneously, wisdom can be achieved through the brute force of deep analysis and through the understanding of basic elements of nature.

The metaphysical question of which doctrine of philosophy provides greater self-knowledge can be seen as a great red herring. By seeking to place one philosophy over another in terms of values that cannot be answered in any grounded terms, one encounters the relationship between servant and master in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It seems that the cultures driving the philosophies of Hegel and the Tao are in opposition. In this sense, the natural result would be that one philosophy would attempt to attain mastery over the other. However, because of what the cultures of East and West have deemed as the means of determining wisdom, they have made the mistake of simply ignoring each other.

The promotion of one philosophy in place of another avoids an attempt at reconciliation that Hegel considers an integral part of his philosophy. If the Phenomenology is to be effective, then the step of viewing the philosophies of the East and that of the West as opposites will provide new insight that will transcend the original philosophies and become something new. What does philosophy gain from promoting a doctrine of close mindedness when it encounters the alien and uncanny? The trouble seen in the master and servant relationship arises in the attempts to avoid approaching the opposition by simply eliminating the possibility for its value. Each philosophy calls itself the master and claims the other to be its servant, thus disregarding the next step in the development of philosophy as a whole.

Just as the development of Geist for Hegel requires that Eastern philosophy be given its consideration, the Tao can also view the world in the terms of the Western doctrine. While East and West deny sharing common grounds for understanding, the world no longer remains in a state where both sides can simply ignore each other. The growing interdependence between the global communities would suggest that it would be unwise for any new Sages who emerge during this time to ignore the West. When understanding other cultures allows the Sage to avoid unnecessary conflict, it becomes a necessary step for him to understand the Western doctrines so heavily focused in logic and intellectual construction. As a result the Sage must become aware of the role that the West plays in the world, because he can no longer remain isolated in one cultural viewpoint.

The two branches of philosophy now present an interesting case for coexistence, one that does not merely tolerate the other but includes it as a necessary part of understanding experience. The West can learn much from the seemingly mystical elements of the East, and the East can gain just as much from the deep philosophical traditions of the West. The goal of both branches

of philosophy happens to be the same, a doctrine of understanding of the world and how to act in regards to its current state. Because the state of the world is changing in such a way that the cultures no longer remain isolated but instead face each other openly, philosophers must open themselves up to the possibilities that can be gained from interaction.

If the true really is the whole, then the Eastern and Western sides of philosophy are a part of that whole. Learning one in exclusion of the other would only weaken the value of truth. The two sides do not need to be unified in a monstrous amalgamation that attempts to make contradictory notions function together. Instead, the two must be viewed simultaneously in a manner that gives each its own weight. If new wisdom cannot be gained by doing this, at least a new doctrine for prudential action can occur. Understanding other cultures allows one to act in a manner that takes greater consideration regarding the factors that can drive human action. Cultural context provides the means to greater understanding of experience.

The similarities between the Tao and Hegel's absolute suggest the possibility of cooperation in understanding, not in the sense that the two ideas be unified in some bizarre form of synthesis. Instead the true would arise in the comprehension of both notions at the same time, acknowledging the distinctions between them while seeing the common ideologies that they share. By doing so one avoids the struggle between opposites, instead looking for a way to incorporate the two doctrines of wisdom into every day action. Comprehending the absolute through Hegel's dialectic and through the Tao's observation of opposites stands as the bridge between philosophical branches. This one common point is the seed that can produce a new viewpoint, one that escapes the limitations of searching for superior philosophies and adds to philosophy as a whole.

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