

Seeking the Meaning of Life: A Comparison of Lao Tzu's "Tao" and Emerson's "Oversoul"

He Jing, Beijing Foreign Studies University

This paper aims to compare the similarities and differences between Lao Tzu's "Tao" and Emerson's "Oversoul" in terms of their respective connotations, implications for the relationship between man and nature, and the specific means of conformity. It is argued by the current author that although both concepts serve as the highest ontological rule, laying an epistemological foundation for human existence, Lao Tzu's "Tao" and Emerson's "Oversoul" differ from each other in the sense that the "Tao" is illusive in nature while the "Oversoul" is perceptible through the experiential nature. In addition, Lao Tzu's materialistic view of the "Tao" implies a holistic relationship between man and nature, while Emerson's "Oversoul" is characterized by religious monism, identifying man with God. Lastly, in comparison to Lao Tzu's advocacy of "actionless activity" as a means to follow the "Tao," Emerson urged people to become active reformers for self-perfection and spiritual independence with the power of the "Oversoul" realized from within. Although from different perspectives, when put into the framework of specific historical and cultural backgrounds, both approaches constitute a similar attempt by the two great thinkers to seek a way out of the social reality for a more meaningful life.

Lao Tzu, traditionally regarded as the founder of Taoism, and Emerson, one of the leading exponents of transcendentalism, both exerted a profound influence on their respective Chinese and American cultures. Although separated by almost 2500 years and the vast ocean, both thinkers, in their philosophical quest for the meaning of life, focused their attention on the relationship between man and the supernatural power as the origin of the universe, and both highlighted the importance of innate freedom of one's self-existence. While contemplating the essence of existence, Lao Tzu expounded on the concept of the "Tao," which generated the entire universe and guided the harmonious operation of the world. Emerson, on the other hand, believed that by returning to nature, people could intuitively experience the omnipotent "Oversoul," an all-pervading spiritual essence or vital force in the universe as manifestation of God's overwhelming presence.

Lao Tzu's "Tao" and Emerson's "Oversoul"

Lao Tzu and the Taoist "Tao"

Lao Tzu, literally meaning the "Old Master," is an important philosopher in ancient China. As for Lao Tzu's specific date of birth, scholars still do not reach any consensus. Some historians believe Lao Tzu to be an older contemporary of Confucius, living in the 6th century B.C. during the Spring and Autumn Period. Some argue that Lao Tzu lived in the 4th century B.C., concurrent with the Hundred Schools of Thought and the Warring States Period. Others

simply regard Lao Tzu as a legendary figure and questioned whether he ever existed as an individual. No matter what, Lao Tzu's Taoist ideas, along with Confucianism, have a far-reaching influence upon the Chinese culture. "During the last millennium most Chinese, including many of the literati, were Confucians in their social life and Buddhists or Taoists in self-cultivation and religious observances" and it is a groundless understanding that "Confucianism was the doctrine of the ruling class, whereas Buddhism and Taoism appealed solely to the ignorant masses" (Welch & Seidel, 1979, p. 1). As two pillar religions, both Taoism and Confucianism have taken root in the Chinese civilization. Confucianism is greatly concerned with morality and people's way of conduct in maintaining interpersonal and social relations, while Taoism has a much more individualistic and mystical feature, appealing to instinct and conscience to govern one's conduct.

Legend has it that Lao Tzu was the Keeper of the Archives at the imperial court of Zhou. Weary of the city's moral decay and disillusioned about men's unwillingness to follow the natural path to goodness, Lao Tzu ventured west to live in reclusion at the age of eighty. At the border of Hank Pass, he was recognized by a sentry, who asked him to record his philosophy for posterity. This led to the eighty-one sayings of the *Tao Te Ching*, the world's most translated classic next to the Bible.

Lao Tzu believed that human life, like everything else in the universe, was constantly influenced by external forces. For better illustration, he developed the concept of the "Tao" or "the organic order underlying and structuring and pervading all existence" (Kohn, 1993, p. 11). In the 25th Chapter of *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu (1997) gave such a description of the "Tao" as a formless, unfathomable source of the natural world:

There was something formless yet complete,
That existed before heaven and earth;
Without sound, without substance,
Dependent on nothing, unchanging,
All pervading, unailing.

One may think of it as the mother of all things under heaven. (p. 53)

As an essential notion of Taoism, the "Tao" not only created the world, but also sustained it "as the seed of primordial harmony, original purity, selfless tranquility" (p. 53). Contemplating the remarkable natural world, Lao Tzu felt that it was men and their pragmatic activities that interrupted the perfect order of things. Therefore, he counseled people to intuitively experience the laws of nature and lead a simple and desire-free life in order to follow the "Tao" and return to one's natural wellspring.

Although the interpretation and study of Lao Tzu's ideas could be traced back to works during the Pre-Qin period and remained an important branch of philosophical research in the Chinese culture, on the international arena, "Taoism was, until recently, the one on which the least research had been done" in comparison to Confucianism and Buddhism (Welch & Seidel, 1979, p. 1). It was not until 1968 that the first international Taoism conference was held to discuss Taoist studies. Taoist ideas were later applied to a wide range of research fields,

including not only philosophy, but also “political science, instructions on self-cultivation, descriptions of trance and traces of shamanism” (p. 4). With growing enthusiasm for Taoism in Western academia, more than one hundred English translations of *Tao Te Ching* could be found, unearthing Lao Tzu’s Taoist ideas to the modern world. Among frequently used versions, there were “Wayley 1934, Bynner 1944, Lin 1948, Legge 1962, Chan 1964, Lafargue 1992” (Kohn, 1993, p. 13).

Emerson and the Transcendentalist “Oversoul”

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is one of the greatest thinkers and naturalist writers in American history. He is a leading exemplar of transcendentalism¹, a movement originated in New England combining Romantic pantheism², German idealism³ and the holistic Asian philosophies. Emerson was born in a clergy family. Upon graduation from Harvard University, he served as a Unitarian⁴ minister, during which time he applied himself to extensive reading and profound thinking⁵. Unbearable with the Unitarian prioritization on reason and pure logic, Emerson quitted his post and traveled to Europe, where he was greatly influenced by the romantic passion for nature and the German idealism that highlighted the power of individual spirit.

In 1836, Emerson published “Nature,” which laid the foundation for “New England Transcendentalism,” exerting a powerful impact on the consciousness of American people. Transcendentalism was, in essence, romantic idealism on Puritan soil, giving full play to man’s capability of comprehending truth intuitively. According to Emerson, nature is alive, filled with God’s omnipresent divine spirit. All men are part and parcel of the divine “through their share in the universal spirit” or the “Oversoul,” and nature serves as a “physical manifestation” of the “Oversoul” “to which man can turn for truth, inspiration, discipline, or guidance” (Jin, 2007, p. 58). Nature not only is deemed as a source of merriment and inspiration, but also has cleansing power to correct the degenerated morality and restore the

¹ Transcendentalism, proposed by a group of New England intellectuals, was defined as recognition of man’s capacity to acquire knowledge transcending the reach of five senses, or knowing truth intuitively.

² Pantheism refers to a doctrine that identifies the Deity with the universe and its phenomena. Pantheism differs from other religious philosophies in the sense that it worships nature as the physical existence of God. Pantheist ideas could be traced back to Enlightenment philosophers like Spinoza, who advocated that God and the mathematical universe of physics were one and the same thing.

³ Idealism is a philosophical theory, proposing that any object of external perception, in itself or as perceived, consists of ideas. The most influential German idealistic thinkers from whose ideas we may find trace in Emerson’s transcendentalism include Leibniz who asserted the absolute power of the individual spirit against the monistic pantheism of Spinoza. Emerson’s indebtedness to Immanuel Kant should also be mentioned. Kant was a firm believer in the freedom and creative imaginations of human nature in the realm of morality.

⁴ Unitarianism rejected the doctrine of trinity, believing in the single unity of God. It emphasized religious toleration and laid the foundation for the forthcoming transcendentalism.

⁵ During his untiring exploration of knowledge through reading, Emerson also cultivated an interest in oriental philosophies like Hinduism, Buddhism and the Chinese Daoism, which also influenced his philosophic view of nature as a purifying force.

purity of human mind. In his masterpiece “Nature,” Emerson wrote:

[T]he simple perception of natural forms is a delight. [...] To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. (Ziff, 1982, p. 42-3)

Apart from urging people to discover their inner potential empowered by the “Oversoul” to lead a natural and self-reliant life, Emerson also stressed the universal brotherhood of humanity. Since all people derived their beings from the single essence of the “Oversoul,” they were simply following different paths for the same ends, and the clash of human interests could be avoided.

From the above analysis, it is clearly shown that both Lao Tzu and Emerson attempted to probe the meaning of life. Against the bustle of the society, both of them called for intuitive conformity with nature to restore one’s original simplicity. But among the existing research, few adopted a cross-cultural approach by comparing Lao Tzu’s philosophical quest of the “Tao” with Emerson’s religious understanding of the “Oversoul.” With the sweeping wave of globalization, there is a growing awareness for intercultural influence and communications. Each culture, while maintaining its uniqueness, is reaching towards others for greater tolerance and mutual prosperity. Against this background, the comparison between Lao Tzu’s “Tao” and Emerson’s “Oversoul” as embodiment of oriental and occidental wisdoms might provide some useful insights into man’s unremitting quest for the meaning of existence.

A Comparison of Lao Tzu’s “Tao” and Emerson’s “Oversoul”

As mentioned above, both Lao Tzu’s “Tao” and Emerson’s “Oversoul” constitute the philosophers’ endeavor to understand the ontological origins of the universe in order to restore the original purity of one’s mind, which is corrupted by the hustle and bustle of the society. But the two concepts also differ from each other in their specific connotations, the relationship between man and nature, as well as their implications on people’s way of living.

Elusive “Tao” vs. Experiential “Oversoul”

In terms of the connotations of the two concepts, Lao Tzu’s “Tao” is elusive in nature while Emerson’s “Oversoul” could be experienced by people’s interaction with nature. In the first chapter of *Tao Te Ching*, the “Tao” was defined as something indefinable through language: “The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way” (p. 3). According to Lao Tzu, the “Tao” is “a thing impalpable, incommensurable” (p. 45). It is “hidden and nameless”; however, it “supports all things and brings them to fulfillment” (p. 89). Lao Tzu regarded the “Tao” as the original force in shaping the natural order of the universe. It is formless, yet it gives shape to all under heaven. It is nihility, yet it contains everything on earth. Such dialectical and mythical nature of the “Tao” determines that it is beyond human

comprehension and can only be followed by conforming to the natural way.

In comparison, the notion of the “Oversoul,” the essence of Emerson’s transcendentalist philosophy, could be experienced intuitively by each individual or through one’s interaction with nature. It was believed by Emerson that each human soul contained the sparkle of the “Oversoul,” or the divine spirit of God, which permeated all living creatures in nature: “[T]he world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool...” (Emerson, 1900, p. 101). Therefore, God can be reflected in both human nature and the physical nature, and human beings were able to “discover their higher spiritual selves through sympathy with nature” (Fiero, 2006, p. 16). Unlike the elusive nature of Lao Tzu’s “Tao,” the “Oversoul” could be comprehended either through an inward search for one’s spiritual nature, or with the help of the symbolic nature, which was infiltrated with God’s overwhelming presence.

Materialistic Holism vs. Religious Monism

Another major difference between Lao Tzu’s “Tao” and Emerson’s “Oversoul” is their respective implications on the relationship between man and nature. In comparison to Taoist emphasis on a harmonious coexistence between man and nature, the transcendentalist ideas prioritize human capability to utilize nature, empowering and deifying man to the status of God.

The belief that man is an integral part of nature remained the core of Chinese ancient philosophies. Lao Tzu’s “Tao” is also characterized by such a holistic view: “Tao gave birth to the One: the One gave birth successively to two things, three things, up to ten thousand,” which compromised *yin* and *yang* in a harmonious balance (Tzu, 1997, p. 91). Since everything originated from the “Tao,” human beings, with no exception, must be a part of the Tao-generated world. The “Tao” not only serves as the ontological origin of man and nature, but also guides the operation of the universe, which, in Lao Tzu’s view, is composed of heaven, earth and human beings.

The ways of men are conditioned by those of earth. The ways of earth, by those of heaven. The ways of heaven by those of Tao, and the ways of Tao by the Self-so. (p. 53)

According to Lao Tzu’s Taoist ideas, no man should interrupt the inherent balance of nature. Man was born of nature out of “ten thousand” things and would return to nature, generating new components of nature. Only by adapting and conforming to nature can one find the essence of the “Tao.” Lao Tzu warned people against any intention to rule over nature or wield their power to exploit nature driven by their self-centered arrogance. Since both man and nature are harmonious manifestations of the “Tao,” any human attempt to subvert the natural order would run counter to the “Tao” and eventually be eliminated from the universe.

In contrast to Lao Tzu’s materialistic view of the “Tao,” which urges people to be modest about their mundane origin and content with their holistic relationship with nature, Emerson’s application of the “Oversoul” is characterized by religious monism, or the unity between God

and man, singing high praise of the human potential to master and utilize nature. According to Emerson, the “Oversoul,” or the spirit of God, serves as a medium for human beings to redefine their relationship with God and nature. The “Oversoul” “does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old” (Ziff, 1982, p. 73). Since human beings are immersed in the divine spirit of the “Oversoul,” they enjoy the same faculty with God and could ascend to a God’s view of the world: “I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of parcel of God” (p. 39). Emerson gave full play to individual power that acted in harmonious interaction with nature. Unlike Lao Tzu’s advocacy for modesty and conformity with nature, Emerson highlighted the superiority of man in relation to nature. Different from the requirement to follow the natural “ways” in Lao Tzu’s worldview, in Emerson’s writings, human beings are guided by their intuition and individual spirit as a reflection of the divine “Oversoul”: “The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks, alone can teach” (Emerson, 1900, p. 109). Instead of being bound by the external force, man appears as a conqueror of nature, acting free will. As Emerson stated in “Self-Reliance”: “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature” (qtd. in Jin, 2007, p. 61). The religious monism embodied in Emerson’s “Oversoul” is best illustrated in his address to the senior class in the Divinity College of Cambridge University: “I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think” (Emerson, 1900, p. 105).

“Actionless Activity” vs. Active Reformation

The third difference between Lao Tzu’s “Tao” and Emerson’s “Oversoul” is the means of practicing the two concepts in everyday life. In the eyes of Lao Tzu, the best way to follow the “Tao” is through “actionless activity,” which means “to guard emptiness and nonbeing and the spontaneous flow of life,” attaching to nothing but a concentrated mind (Kohn, 1993, p. 218). While Emerson called for human being’s active reformation of nature and the existing world order so that man could “deserve that guidance and clearer communication with the spiritual nature” (Emerson, 1900, p. 186).

Based on the illusive nature of the “Tao” and its requirement for harmonious coexistence between man and nature, Lao Tzu proposed the dialectic notion of “actionless activity” to explain his philosophical worldview. According to Lao Tzu, “Tao never does; / Yet through it all things are done” (p. 77). Similarly, “through his actionless activity all things are duly regulated” (p. 7). The term “actionless activity” embodies the holist harmony of seeming contradictions, which was illustrated by Lao Tzu through a comparison to water:

Nothing under heaven is softer or more yielding than water; but when it attacks things hard and resistant there is not one of them that can prevail. For they can find no way of altering it. (p. 165)

Lao Tzu taught people to retreat into the background and stay as low as water, to be

content with what they already have and refrain from striving for personal end. It should be noted that what Lao Tzu argued for was not to wait idly for everything to be done, but to remain modest and withdraw when the work was done. A sage, according to Lao Tzu's understanding, would not be driven astray by endless desires, nor has he any intention to be superior to others, but it is just because of such a non-competitive attitude that he could live harmoniously with the surrounding nature and remain closest to the "Tao," just as what was written in *Tao Te Ching*:

He does not show himself; therefore he is seen everywhere.
 He does not boast of what he will do, therefore he succeeds.
 He is not proud of his work, and therefore it endures.
 He does not contend,
 And for that very reason no one under heaven can contend with him. (p. 47)

Contrary to Lao Tzu's advocacy of "actionless activity" to follow the "Tao," Emerson was a firm believer in the strength of action. In his famous oration of "The American Scholar," Emerson called upon all scholars to cultivate a "heroic mind" and stated with clarity: "Inaction is cowardice" (Emerson, 1900, p. 77). Compared to Lao Tzu's "Tao," which requires man to follow the natural rule through "actionless activity," Emerson derived the divine power from the "Oversoul" and confirmed human potential to be active reformers of the world. Unlike Lao Tzu who emphasized self-preservation by living in desire-free solitude, Emerson urged his countrymen to keep inner balance while actively engaging in worldly affairs: "it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (quoted in Jin, 2007, p. 62). In another lecture entitled "Man the Reformer," Emerson encouraged everyone to be "a brave and upright man, who must find or cut a straight road to everything excellent in the earth, and not only go honourable himself, but make it easier for all who follow him to go in honour and with benefit" (p. 186). The sharing part of the "Oversoul" with God not only gave human beings full confidence in their capabilities to conquer formidable fields of the unknown, but also enhanced their sense of obligation to take the lead in correcting the grim legacies from the past.

Similarities in Differences – Towards a Tentative Interpretation

Although Lao Tzu's "Tao" and Emerson's "Oversoul" differ from each other in many ways, when put into specific historical and cultural frameworks, both concepts embody the philosophers' endeavor to explore a way out of the social reality in order to lead a more meaningful life.

Lao Tzu's Ideas in a Small Peasant Economy of Feudalist China

The illusive nature of the "Tao" and the need to conform to the natural "way" could be better understood when we take into consideration the agricultural society Lao Tzu lived in.

Agricultural farming had remained the chief means of survival for people in ancient China. Unlike nomadic tribes moving from place to place in search of grazing land, farmers of an agricultural society lived on fixed land for generations and as a result were highly dependent on natural endowment and seasonal change. During the Spring and Autumn Period of Lao Tzu's time, people still didn't have advanced technologies to resist the natural force. Therefore Lao Tzu's suggestion of following the natural "way" conformed to the dominant mentality of self-preservation and would be readily accepted by people of his time.

The small-peasant society Lao Tzu lived in also confined his perception of the ideal state as "a small country with few inhabitants" (p. 169). To sustain a political system composed of many small states, it was of paramount importance for all subjects to be contented about the self-sufficient way of life without any intention to rule over their neighbors. From this perspective, it is not difficult to understand the tenet of Lao Tzu's "actionless activity," which served to maintain peace and dissolve tension when conflict arose.

Lao Tzu's "actionless activity" is also a recursive response to the corruption of the feudalist rulers. Although the Spring and Autumn Period witnessed a blossoming of diversified schools of thought, it was also a period with frequent wars and declining morality. Lao Tzu's worry about the social injustice was described in *Tao Te Ching*:

The people starve because those above them eat too much tax-grain. [...] The people are difficult to keep in order because those above them interfere. [...] The people attach no importance to death, because those above them are too grossly absorbed in the pursuit of life. (p. 159)

The feudalist rulers levied heavy tax on the starving subjects and there were too many laws to be followed that no one would heed the announcement of new bills. Therefore, Lao Tzu's idea of "actionless activity" was also a message sent to the ruling authority: a wise ruler would "love quietude" and "act by inactivity," which would bring about better results than constant interference in the state affairs. Lao Tzu compared running a state to cooking a small meal; only when the subjects were given freedom and choice to live their lives can they prosper and stay obedient to the state.

Emerson's Ideas in the Newly Independent America

Just like Lao Tzu's response to the social reality through his elaboration on the "Tao," Emerson's "Oversoul" is also a rational reaction to the historical background of his time. It was not long since Americans gained their hard-won political independence in 1789, and democratization had been set as a national policy. With accelerated industrialization and capitalization, the United States was growing to be a nation with spiritual confidence and material prosperity. In the mean time, the Americans were eager to free themselves from the dominant ideologies of the European continent. Although having made remarkable achievement in all fields, the United States still couldn't get away from the continental influence in terms of culture, ideologies, religion and literary tradition. In their effort to seek real independence, a group of New England intellectuals initiated the transcendental

movement for American spiritual independence from the dominant Puritanical influence.

The era Emerson lived in also witnessed an enthusiastic movement to explore the vast western frontiers, which promised freedom, potential profitability, and a chance to start a new life. The Westward Movement was an important political and economic movement that promoted the localization of American culture away from European influence and the shaping of American spirit of honoring freedom, democracy, individuality, and entrepreneurship.

It was against this background that Emerson called for a discovery of human potential through the mediation of the "Oversoul." In an industrialized society with severe competitions and the harsh world of the western frontiers where self-reliance and hard work were crucial to personal well-being, individual power was upgraded to a status never dreamed of by spiritually enslaved Europeans in their cozy chairs. Instead of kneeling in front of nature for merciful benefactions, Americans were aroused and stimulated by Emerson's spiritual declaration of independence to explore and conquer nature as a tough-minded winner.

Unlike the need of modesty and reverence to the unchallengeable natural laws as implied by Lao Tzu's "Tao," Emerson redefined the relationship among man, nature and God, the foundation for his exaltation of individualism. Since the Supreme Spirit infiltrates into everything, man and nature alike, there is no need for human beings to follow the external rules with the exception of their own. Feeling within their veins the flow of the divine spirit, Americans took pride in their intrepid exploration and reformation of nature to serve their needs. Therefore, the "Oversoul" proposed by Emerson captured the tune of the time, paving the way for a more meaningful life to the awakening Americans in a brave new world. It not only empowered the awakening Americans, but also served as a prerequisite for self-reliance and individuality, the very core of American values since its founding day.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both Lao Tzu's "Tao" and Emerson's "Oversoul" are described as supernatural forces combining human beings to the universe and aim to restore man's original simplicity in a changing society. But the two differ in their connotations, the implications for the relationship between man and nature as well as respective means of practice.

After a detailed analysis of the three differences, the paper probed the historical and cultural reasons behind the two notions. It is tentatively suggested that the elusive nature, the implied holism, and the proposed "actionless activity" of Lao Tzu's way are the philosopher's natural response to a small-peasant economy and the corruption of the feudalist rulers during the Spring and Autumn Period. The experiential nature, religious monism, and the advocacy of active reformation embodied in Emerson's "Oversoul" are closely related to the historical requirement for a newly-established America to seek spiritual independence away from European influence, the value of individualism, and self-reliance cherished in the process of accelerated industrialization and the political demand to conquer the western frontier for an expansion of the national territory and promise of freedom. All of these ensured the wide spread of Emerson's transcendentalist ideas, which laid the foundation for the individualist spirit to take root in the American soil. Therefore, both Lao Tzu and Emerson based their philosophical ideas on the historical and social reality in their unremitting quest for a more

meaningful way of existence.

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