



Mysticism and Apophatic Discourse
in the *Laozi*

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It is impossible, therefore, to adduce any definite example,
for, as soon as anything is an example,
what I wish to show is already past.

—Schleiermacher, *On Religion*

Go up to it and you will not see its head;
Follow behind it and you will not see its rear.

—*Laozi*, chapter 14

What does it mean to describe a text like the *Laozi* as “mystical?” Mysticism, in common with other terms that derive from attempts to generalize particular historical phenomena, is used in a variety of senses that vary according to the “mystical” phenomenon that is consciously or unconsciously used as a model. The common understanding of mysticism as a variety of religious experience adds to the problems that arise from the term’s ambiguity, especially in the context of a text like the *Laozi*, which contains little internal evidence to suggest that it is a direct expression of experience. The conflation of the categories of text and experience make it difficult to know what senses of mysticism and what

practical contexts are assumed when the *Laozi* is compared to more canonical mystical texts. In this essay, I will examine some of the criteria according to which the *Laozi* has been classified as a mystical text, and focus particularly on one, its use of apophatic, or self-negating, language. I hope to show that there are justifiable readings of the text that undermine orthodox classification of the text as mystical, and that the text advocates the *theoretical* possibility of the existence of mystical experience but is not an *experiential* description of mystical union.

Current Debates on Mysticism(s)

It is a deceptively simple observation that the *Laozi* does not closely resemble accounts of mystic visions common in some Christian accounts. This is because the theoretical discussion of mysticism has evolved in complexity to the point where quite a bit is at stake in defining the degree and character of the resemblance between such phenomena. Not only does any such definition bear on the debate over the unity of mystical experience, it also has implications for the dichotomy between "Eastern" and "Western" mysticism, and the degree to which mystical experience is mediated by specific beliefs and attitudes. In turn, these contemporary debates define the parameters for the application of the term *mysticism* to specific phenomena, and locating the *Laozi* in the framework of these discussions must precede any attempt to examine its mystical qualities.

By examining the stages in the evolution of the theory of mysticism, the various definitions according to which the *Laozi* has been classed a mystical text may be examined against the theoretical background according to which they were formulated. The earliest attempts to define mysticism were based on a set of criteria that were little more than generalizations of aspects of particular archetypal experiences such as those of Teresa of Avila. In the influential account of William James (1842–1910), these criteria were (primarily) ineffability, noesis, (and secondarily) transiency, and passivity. The *Dao*, it has been argued, is both ineffable, which is to say that it cannot be expressed or communicated in words, and knowledge of it is noetic, that is, not theoretical but a form of insight, and so it satisfies the two most important canonical criteria for mysticism

outlined by James.¹ Scholars soon found, however, that these criteria were too closely tied to particular religious traditions and increasing emphasis was placed on the more holistic picture of the "experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality" that Webster's and other general sources now use to define mysticism.

A good avenue to embark on to explore the relevance of these early definitions to the *Laozi* is the concept of the *Dao*, since many scholars have seen union with the *Dao* to be the text's definitive mystical aspect. On what basis have modern interpreters of the *Laozi* read passages such as "Therefore the sage embraces the One and is a model for the empire"² as evidence of an appeal to mystical union? For some of these interpreters, it is the One, usually read as a reference to the *Dao*, which plays a role similar to that of God in more archetypal forms of mysticism. John Koller identifies this goal of union with the *Dao* as the characteristic that defines the text as a mystical one:

By giving up desires and letting the *Dao* enter and pervade oneself, life will rise above the distinctions of good and evil. All activity will proceed from *Dao*, the very source of existence, and man will be one with the world. This is the solution Laozi brought to the problem of evil and unhappiness in man's life. It is a solution that depends ultimately upon achieving a unity with the great inner principle of reality, and is therefore, basically mystical.³

Many characterizations made by Koller are accurate. The centrality of the *Dao* in the *Laozi* is impossible to deny, and Koller is correct that the *Dao* transcends distinctions such as that between good and bad, for it is only "When the great way falls into disuse/ There are benevolence and rectitude."⁴ Indeed, the *Dao* appears to be beyond all distinctions, "Only when it is cut are there names."⁵ As such, it fits the classical description of a mystical unity that is at the same time the basis of all multiplicities. This type of mysticism was given influential formulation by Rudolf Otto in his 1932 *Mysticism East and West*:

In relation to the many it becomes the subject in so far as it unifies, comprehends and bears the many. It is in fact its

essence, being, existence. Already at this point the One concentrates attention upon itself, draws the value of the many to itself, silently becoming that which is and remains the real value behind the many.⁶

Using such a definition, it is possible to portray the *Laozi's* sage as seeking a unity with the *Dao*—the One that encompasses the Many—the quest that is the basis of mystical experience. In a similar way, scholars have been able to interpret the resemblances between the *Laozi* and archetypal examples of mysticism as indicative of an underlying identity, a unity of mystical experience.

On closer examination, however, it becomes evident that there are certain aspects of the *Dao* that serve to differentiate it from other “unities.” In keeping with its meaning as “path” or “way,” the *Dao* is followed (*cong* 從, chapter 21), held to (*zhi* 執, chapter 14), or possessed (*you* 有, chapter 24) but is not merged with. Although some have seen the *Dao* as “providential,”⁷ it is certainly not an anthropomorphic “intelligence.” The *Dao's* relationship with the “One” (*yi* 一) is not necessarily one of identity, rather the *Dao* is anterior to it: “The *Dao* begets the One/ The One begets the Two . . .”⁸ Do these points mean that the *Laozi* does not fit Otto's description? It was the consideration of characteristics peculiar to individual traditions such as these that led first to a concern with the varieties of mystical experience, and, more recently, to a questioning of the utility of comparisons of mysticism across different traditions.

While the assumption that there existed a mystical “perennial philosophy” that showed up in different guises in the religions of the world had been widely accepted until the last few decades, the recognition of differences such as those described above led in the 1960s to interest in the varieties of mystical experience. This produced the influential typologies of R. C. Zaehner in his *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (penenhenic, monistic, and theistic), and of W. T. Stace in his *Mysticism and Philosophy* (extrovertive and introvertive). Following the lead of Otto's comparison of Meister Eckhart and Shankaracharya, less theistic appeals to a reality outside the ordinary realms of experience were seen as a distinctively “Oriental” or “Eastern.” Specifically, penenhenic and extrovertive mysticism were seen to lead to a sense of the oneness of all things through the transcendence of space or time in the case of the former

category, and in the case of the latter an experience of unity wherein the subject does not look inward, but instead engages their senses.

Recent work has sought to locate the *Laozi* in a comparative mystical context using categories like these. Julia Ching, in “The Mirror Symbol Revisited: Confucian and Taoist Mysticism,”⁹ classifies the text along with aspects of early Confucianism as instances of a more general mode of “Eastern mysticism.” Ching sees early Daoism as a type of Nature mysticism, one that is characteristic of “Eastern” mysticisms in that it does not preserve the hierarchy between the subject and object inherent in Western forms.¹⁰ The absence of a distinction between subject and object fits in with the taxonomies of Zaehner and Stace in the sense that these are characteristics of nontheistic and extrovertive types of mysticism.

Another author who groups the *Laozi* among uniquely “Eastern” styles of mysticism is Arthur C. Danto. He distinguishes between the two styles of mystical experience:

The Western mystical literature is a literature of ecstasy and embrace. Santa Teresa is alone on her cloud, individuated at the moment of unity, when she is pierced by a golden arrow. Mrs. Moore's experience [in *A Passage to India*] is, instead, an Oriental blur and a profound spiritual dislocation rather than a fulfillment.¹¹

Danto's explanation of the origins of the Oriental “spiritual dislocation” has to do with the underlying difference between the way distinctions are eliminated in the East and West.¹² The Eastern approach, according to Danto, is to seek to go beyond distinctions like good and evil and “become one with one's role.” He uses the examples of Wheelwright Pian and Cook Ding from the *Zhuangzi* to illustrate this emphasis on practical knowledge at the expense of propositional knowledge. Danto sees the *Dao* of the *Laozi* as an illustration of this emphasis on practical knowledge, and characterizes the entire text as anti-intellectual in its “celebration of infants, children, and artisans.”¹³ Thus, for Danto, the *Laozi* is characteristic of an amoral strand of mysticism that stretches across Hinduism, Buddhism, and early Daoism.

Both Ching and Danto, then, attempt to locate the text within a subcategory of Eastern mysticism, although they do so in different ways. Their approaches may be seen to grow out of the work of Otto,

Zaehner, and Stace and reflect the essentialist assumptions inherent in their theoretical models. Problems arise from the fact that the *Laozi* fails to conform to the requirements of "Eastern" mysticism in several important ways. First of all, a very good case could be made that the text is *not* extrovertive in its orientation. The senses are not to be relied on (chapter 12), and instead one is to "Block the openings/ Shut the doors" (chapter 52 and 56). This state of turning inward is most often seen in the motif of regression to infancy: the sage values suckling the mother (chapter 20), and must emulate the infant's suppleness (chapter 10) and harmony (chapter 55). Further, if the *Dao* is the mother of this infant, then it is not the case that the subject/object distinction completely disappears, as Ching would have it. In a recent article on "Chinese Mysticism,"¹⁴ Wu Kuang-ming rejects the notion that what he sees to be a uniquely Chinese style of mysticism eliminates the distinction between subject and object.¹⁵

Danto's picture of "Eastern" mysticism is different from other models already examined, but on closer inspection he also fails to adequately separate the *Laozi* from other "Eastern" texts. The critique of Daoism is almost entirely based on the *Zhuangzi*, and it is difficult to see *any* examples of Danto's "practical knowledge" in the *Laozi*.¹⁶ The difference between the aims of these two texts is very great, a difference Livia Kohn has summed up in these terms:

While the *Daode jing* wishes to remedy an unsatisfactory situation socially and through simplicity, the *Zhuangzi*, much more radically, encourages a thorough revolution of people's very minds.¹⁷

Throughout the *Laozi* the ruler and sage is the exemplary figure, as opposed to the skillful exemplars of the *Zhuangzi*. Although the intuitions the ruler is supposed to rely on may be characterized as "anti-intellectual," it is difficult to see how such a characterization could apply to "Eastern" thought in general. These observations suggest that there are significant problems with grouping the *Laozi* in a category of generic "Eastern mysticism" and point out some problems with the broad typologies that dominated the study of mysticism in the 1960s and 1970s.

That period's phenomenological approach assumed that, at least sometimes, local beliefs and attitudes mediated the core mystical

experience, and this assumption set the stage for the current debate between the constructivists and their critics. Recent work on mysticism may be situated along a continuum between the position that each mystical experience is different since it is mediated by the tradition in which it occurs, and the position that a universal element of the experience of "pure consciousness" exists in mystical experience across traditions. The former position assumes that religious experience must pass through a series of cultural, doctrinal, and personal filters and is therefore constructed within a tradition. As championed in a pair of volumes edited by Stephen T. Katz beginning with *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* in 1978, the constructivist position assumes that "there are no pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences."¹⁸ The latter position, developed to counter the constructivist position, is represented in a 1990 volume edited by Robert K. Forman called *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*. Forman argues that since mystical union is by definition a state that transcends ordinary consciousness to reach an undifferentiated unity, it is the single experience that might be considered unmediated by the filters emphasized by the constructivists.¹⁹ In one sense, the debate between those such as Forman who argue that mystical experience is unmediated because it occurs on a level of pure consciousness and those such as Katz who see it is as socially constructed is a reflection of a broader debate about the nature of religious experience. In the latter context, Friedrich Schleiermacher's attempts to portray religious experience as intuitive may be seen as a move to avert a Kantian reading of it as constructed through practical reason.

The constructivist position is not one that sheds light on necessary conditions for applying the term mysticism to the *Laozi*, but instead calls into question the possibility of upholding a cross-cultural ideal of "mystical experience." On the other hand, the response to that position has served to illuminate the long implicit understanding of mysticism as experience that cannot be mediated. As such, the term mysticism has been increasingly applied to a level of experience that transcends the basic terms of a tradition, whatever that tradition may be.

We have seen how the text of the *Laozi* has provided problems for those who have tried to classify it using a criterion of mystical union, and those who would label it simply a form of characteristi-

cally Eastern mysticism. When one looks to the text for evidence of a level of experience so basic that it exists prior to any cultural mediation, it is no longer possible to bracket the fundamental distinction between text and practice. The issue of how exactly one infers experience from a text must be examined critically.²⁰

Mystical Experience and Mystical Text

The gap between text and experience may not be as difficult to bridge for a text that purports to directly record experience, such as the *Castillo Interior* of Teresa of Avila, but the scope, ambiguity, and abstract nature of the *Laozi* makes any attempt to read it as a record or diary of mystical experience extremely problematical. There are records of unions with divinities in the early Chinese tradition, although these stylized poems, the *Chuci* 楚辭, have not been treated in discussions of mysticism.²¹ By contrast, the *Laozi* is constituted of aphorisms and instructions that are often didactic rather than descriptive. A few isolated fragments (e.g., chapter 20) use first person pronouns, and the few dialogical passages (e.g., chapter 77) evidence little more than the addition of a rhetorical interlocutor. In other words, there are few explicit signs that mystical experience was connected to the text.

Nevertheless, two different approaches have been taken to infer that such experience guided the composition of the *Laozi*. One approach has been to isolate a technical vocabulary that demonstrates that the text is in some way the product of mystical experience. Marcel Granet was an early exponent of the view that early Daoist texts derived from religious practices. Writing in 1922, Granet proposed that the *Laozi*, along with two other early texts, "can be understood only by relating their ideas to the concrete religious practices to which they correspond."²² More recently, Harold Roth has argued for the hypothesis that the *Laozi* contains "philosophies directly derived from the experience of practicing mystics."²³ References to the "bellows" (chapter 5), to "concentrating your breath" (chapter 10), and the previously mentioned imperative to "Block the openings/ Shut the doors" (chapters 52 and 56) have all been read as references to meditation techniques.²⁴ Recent archaeological evidence has been used to support the characterization of the *Laozi* as a record of experience or as a manual for specialized techniques.

Indeed, there is growing evidence that many medical and meditative strategies known to have been practiced in the late Han dynasty (c. 180 C.E.) onward existed in some form during the time that the *Laozi* was composed, raising the possibility that the text itself was based on early medical or meditative practice. A recent volume of essays in Chinese includes several attempts to link such practice to the *Laozi*. In it, Zhou Shirong 周世榮 has noted the similarity between the terminology of chapter 4 of the text and that used in traditional *qigong*. Zhou reads the chapter as a description of the location, method, and result of a type of breathing linked to longevity practice.²⁵ Wei Qipeng 魏啟鵬 has noted that the term *pu* 樸 "simplicity," used frequently in the *Laozi*, is also used in conjunction with certain medical regimens.²⁶ Whether or not statements as strong as Granet's and Roth's are true, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the *Laozi* incorporates the language of and perhaps even references to concrete medical or meditative practices of the period.

The similarity between the vocabulary of the *Laozi* and early medical or meditation texts, however, does not make the *Laozi* one of these texts. After all, the presence of the vocabulary of childrearing, farming, schooling, or moneylending does not make it a primer on any one of these subjects. The poetic form of the text is unsuited to be read as a manual for a specific practice. The presence of specialized vocabulary does provide proof that the accretion of text that became the *Laozi* took place against a background that included meditation practices. Yet there is nothing to show that the use of meditational vocabulary is anything but metaphorical. Even if it was not metaphorical, the analysis of Zhou and Wei suggests that the goal of meditation may have been more medical than experiential.

Another approach to linking the *Laozi* with mystical experience has been to link its use of paradox to the experience of the reader of the text. Benjamin Schwartz has singled out the use of paradox in the *Laozi* as a means of communicating the ineffability of the *Dao*, and identified this as a universal criterion for mystical literature:

The *Dao* in its aspect of the ineffable eternal is nondeterminate and nameless. It cannot be identified with anything nameable. . . . Here, as elsewhere, in all mystical literature, we find the constant paradoxical effort to speak the unspeakable.²⁷

Schwartz makes a general claim about mystical texts, that they tend to use paradox to create a discourse capable of pointing to a type of truth that ordinary language cannot. When paradox is used in this way, it is an attempt to "point to" something that cannot be expressed using language. Michael A. Sells has compared the use of such apophatic language, speech that negates, in several mystical traditions, and argued that it functions within these traditions to eliminate distinctions between immanent and transcendent.²⁸ It has already been shown that various arguments that purport to demonstrate that the text arose as a record or commentary on mystical experience on the part of the author do not account for the form or much of the content of the *Laozi*. Schwartz's approach, however, focuses on the effect of the text on the *reader* of the text, so that the text becomes a member of Stanley Fish's category of "self-consuming artifacts."

This approach provides a criterion according to which the text might be connected to mystical practice without being a record of such practice. As a means of speaking about mystical literature separately from a specific basis in mystical experience, the existence of an apophatic discourse generated by the use of paradox is a useful criterion for determining whether or not the *Laozi* is a mystical text. Fortunately, the Chinese commentarial tradition allows us to examine the way the paradox in the *Laozi* has been read. Livia Kohn puts it this way:

[The *Laozi*] conspicuously lacks concrete descriptions of mystical methods, physical or otherwise. Nor does it show the emphasis on the mind and on the development of the individual known from later mystical literature. In other words, the *Daode jing*, as it stands, is not obviously a mystical document. It could equally likely be read as a work on ideal government or on the moral and cultural decline of humanity. . . . On the other hand, by claims of the later tradition, the *Daode jing* is a mystical text of the first importance.²⁹

If the *Laozi* fails to fit the definition of a mystical text based on direct testimony of mystical experience, the issue then becomes: has paradox been read so as to make the *Laozi* a "mystical text of the first importance"?

Apophatic Discourse in the *Laozi*

The language of the *Laozi* is rich in contradiction, a fact that has been pointed out by D. C. Lau.³⁰ Direct contradictions such as the linked imperatives of chapter 63: "Do that which is doing-less, attend to that which is attending-less, taste that which is tasting-less,"³¹ are also common. Traditional strategies for interpreting the self-contradictory language of the *Laozi* have varied from seeing it as only an apparent contradiction to seeing it as apophasis that preserves its internal tension to destroy the assumptions that underlie ordinary discourse. Interestingly, it is the earlier commentaries that generally follow the first course, and it is in the Chan-influenced or post-Buddhist Confucian commentaries that the second course is used.

To explain these two strategies, that of "embracing" the contradiction in a text and that of "explaining" it, one might consider for a moment some possible responses a visitor to an art gallery might have when faced with the famous Magritte painting of a pipe that contradicts itself in its title "Ce n'est pas une pipe." One response would be to nod and accept the tension between the visual and linguistic cues as a means to liberate one's mind from limitations imposed by the hobgoblin of consistency. Magritte used the contradiction, perhaps as some try to use *kōans*, as a form of therapy that allows one to discard categories that block one's natural ability to engage the transcendent. A related response to the painting would be to focus instead on the assumption underlying any standard of consistency, whether it is a full-fledged concept of rationality, or simply a taste for titles that tell one what a painting is about. Once one has called into question such a standard, one must examine the grounds concerning the asking of questions, thereby translating the contradiction encountered in the gallery into a conundrum concerning how one knows what one thinks one knows. These two courses are similar in that the contradiction is accepted as an argument that leads to the reexamination of the viewer's assumptions, in the former case leading the viewer away from these assumptions, in the latter encouraging the viewer to pay more attention to them.

Alternately, the viewer might seek to resolve the contradiction so that such fundamental assumptions are not called into question.

Perhaps the painter sought to point to the difference between relying on what one sees with one's own eyes and what one reads. Alternately, a claim might be being made about the difference between the general class represented by the word *pipe* and the very specific pipe portrayed on the canvas. Finally, and perhaps most literally, Magritte might simply be saying that a two-dimensional representation of a pipe is different from a three-dimensional wooden pipe. Among the visitors to the gallery who stop and look at this work of art, most of these interpretations are probably represented each day.

These strategies of interpretation, as well as the general disjunction between approaches that "embrace" the contradiction and those that "explain" the contradiction, have analogies in the history of interpretation of the *Laozi*, and indeed represent only some of the ways that its contradictory language has been read. While it would be difficult to come up with criteria for arguing that one of these strategies of interpretation is more "correct" than others, this does not mean that there are no frames within which they may be compared.

In examining the use of contradiction in the *Laozi*, a primary goal will be to distinguish between the resolvable instances of contradiction and the ones that generate an irresolvable tension. Three general categories of contradiction will be outlined: contradictions arising out of incorrect perception, contradictions of action where one thing leads to its opposite, and finally contradictions involving things that are not themselves.

Contradictions of Perception and Reality

One of the most ubiquitous themes in the *Laozi* is that of incorrect perceptions involving false semblances, as in phrases of the form "(something) seems to be (the opposite of something)." The sage can avoid this pitfall because he does not attempt to perceive the *Dao* in an ordinary way:

This is the reason that the sage does not move but
nevertheless knows,
Does not look but nevertheless sees clearly,
Does not act but nevertheless accomplishes.³²

The mode of "seeing" in which the sage engages is not well-defined, but it appears that his stillness, sightlessness, and passivity guarantee a more reliable picture of the world than ordinary perception. This exceptional ability allows the sage to use intuition and inference to understand the *Dao*. There are many instances of false semblances in the text, such as "The clear *Dao* seems hidden."³³ However, the claim of semblance excludes the possibility of genuine contradiction between the two opposing elements. These dichotomies may be resolved rather effortlessly into those between "conventional" versus "true" sight, action, or knowledge.

Traditionally, such passages have usually not been read as any more than a claim about the difficulty of accurately perceiving the *Dao*. While the *Dao* exists in a prelinguistic realm that only the sage can intuitively observe, there are also distinct physical traces of it that the sage *can* directly observe. This is the dichotomy in chapter 1 between the "secrets" (*miao* 妙) of the *Dao* and the "manifestations" (*jiao* 微) of the *Dao*. The earliest partial commentary on the *Laozi*, chapter 20 of the *Han Feizi*, comments on the description of the *Dao* as "a form without form, an image (*xiang* 象) without substance":

People rarely see a living elephant (*xiang*) but when they come upon the bones of a dead elephant they imagine it alive on the basis of their structure. Therefore all instances of what people imagine by means of their traces are called images (*xiang*). Now, the *Dao* cannot be seen or heard, but the sage investigates its manifestations and uses them to determine its form.³⁴

While the entire *Dao* is not directly perceptible, its form can be known through a kind of imaginative inference based on a skeleton provided by its trace image. This interpretation that it is possible to know of the *Dao*, but impossible to accurately represent it in the realm of the senses is shared by the later *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary's explanation of the same passage:

The most revered *Dao* is subtle and hidden without shape or structure. Although one may follow its admonitions, one cannot see or know it. Those who today through false arts point to the "name and form" of the *Dao*, imposing fancy clothes, a complete name, shape and size on it are all wrong. They are entirely pernicious and deceptive.³⁵

This explanation of the phrase in chapter 14 of the *Laozi* sees the *Dao* as being impossible to perceive in its entirety, as some charlatans might claim, but its admonitions are something that may be followed. Again, the ineffability of the *Dao* is not a sign that any knowledge of the *Dao* is impossible to express, but instead that it may never be *entirely* expressed.

Another type of explanation of the statements in the *Laozi* that call into question the validity of the perceptions is one which stresses direct transmission of the *Dao*. This explanation posits the possibility of the transmission of the *Dao* from one person to another, but argues that, in the manner of Bodhidharma's robe, it must be passed directly from master to disciple. Closely tied to arguments centered on language skepticism of the sort that populate the *Zhuangzi*, such an explanation does not so much indict the senses, but instead conventional ways of using the senses. In the illustration of the opening lines of the first chapter of the *Laozi* in the Han Dynasty *Huainanzi*, the story of Wheelwright Pian from the *Zhuangzi* is invoked. In this story, Pian calls into question whether knowledge can be passed on through books.³⁶ The second chapter's admonition to wordless teaching is interpreted in the *Heshanggong* commentary to mean that the sage "teaches and leads them with his body."³⁷ In common with the above strategy of using "trace manifestations" this explanation resolves any apparent contradictions inherent in the paradox of false semblances, and explains them away.

Contradictions of Action and Effect

This sort of resolution is more difficult to reach with the second type of contradictory passage of the form "doing (something) leads to (the opposite of something)." This type of contradiction is usually a characteristic of the sage:

Therefore the sage puts his person last and it comes first
Treats his person as external and it is preserved
Is it not because he has no self-interest
That he is able to realize his self-interest?³⁸

While it is quite possible that the sage only appears to be putting his person last, these passages carry with them no explicit indication

that there is any difference between, for example, the "self-interest" the sage is without and the "self-interest" that he realizes. The question is whether these contradictions ought to be explained in the manner of "apparent" contradictions as with those above, or whether the contradiction expresses instead a deeper skepticism or criticism of the idea of self-interest, or perhaps even the idea of the sage.

Traditional commentators generally favor a resolution of such phrases, although the type of resolution varies. One strategy is to distinguish between long and short temporal horizons. Some of the earliest commentaries to the text favor this reading. The Western Han *Huainanzi* illustrates the phrase "the sage puts his person last and it comes first" with the following fish story:

Gongyi Xiu 公儀休 was Chancellor of the state of Lu who had quite a taste for fish. A [delegation from another] country presented him with some fish, but Gongyi Xiu did not accept them.

His disciples remonstrated with him: "Our master has a taste for fish but did not accept any. Why was this?"

He answered: "Now, it was exactly because I have a taste for fish that I did not accept any. If I had accepted the fish but was dismissed from my post as Chancellor, then although I have a taste for fish I could not provide myself any. By not accepting any fish I will also not be dismissed from my post as Chancellor, and will be able to provide myself fish into perpetuity."

This is an individual who understands how to act toward others and how to act toward himself.³⁹

In this story, the correct self-interested action changes depending on the time frame being considered, and so the sage appears to have no short-term self-interest precisely because he has long-term self-interest. In two other early commentaries, the long-term benefits of longevity are seen to outweigh other short-term benefits. The *Heshanggong* commentary explains that "the sage puts his person last and it comes first" (chapter 7) means that "the people of the world revere him; 'comes first' means long life," while he "treats his person as external and it is preserved" means that

the common people love him as if he were their father and mother, while the spirits and specters assist him as if he were their baby. Because of this his person will exist eternally.⁴⁰

A similar understanding of the passage may be found in the *Xiang'er* commentary, where several “conventional” modes of putting oneself first are revealed to actually be ineffectual means to that end:

He who seeks long life does not belabor his essential thoughts with the pursuit of wealth to nourish himself. He does not, without achievements, coerce the ruler and receive a salary to glorify himself. He does not eat the five flavors to indulge himself. His clothes are inferior and his shoes have holes in them so as not to clash with those of regular people. All these are ways in which he “puts his person last.” However, looking at it from the perspective of his gaining the long life of the immortals, reaping good fortune ahead of the regular people, these are how he “comes first.”⁴¹

Putting oneself last and having oneself come first are not embraced as opposites in these readings, but rather as referring to fundamentally different types of action.

While such explanations of action and effect contradictions are the rule, the reading of Song commentator Ge Changgeng 葛長庚 provides a contrast. The Ge commentary provides the following perspective on “the sage puts his person last and it comes first”: “I am Heaven and Earth, and Heaven and Earth are me.”⁴² This interpretation of the passage signals a style of interpretation that is fundamentally different from the earlier commentators, one in which the tension of the contradiction is used to eliminate distinctions between the individual and the natural. This is an interpretation that might well be categorized as evidence of an extroverted mystical experience by Stace.

Self-Contradictions

The third and final form of self-contradiction is the general formula “(something) which is not (something).” In the *Laozi*, there are both indirect and direct instances of such formulas. The sage is the one who “dwells in doing-less affairs and practices not-saying teachings.”⁴³ Earlier we saw that the way the sage goes about this is to *wei wuwei* 為無為 “do that which is doing-less” (chapter 63), a mode certainly related to the imperative *xue buxue* 學不學 “learn not to learn.”⁴⁴ This approach is certainly appropriate to the object of

these (non-) actions, since the *Dao* is *wuzhuang zhi zhuang* 無狀之狀 “the shape without a shape.”⁴⁵ The direct symmetry of these phrases would seem to indicate that there is more to these passages than simply a condemnation of a “conventional” notion of action or learning.

Traditionally, however, this class of self-contradiction has also often been resolved using the interpretive strategy of explaining away the contradiction. For example, the *Heshanggong* commentary reads the character *xue* 學 in “learn not to learn” as “true learning” in the first case and as “conventional learning” in the second case. It reads:

The sage studies what others cannot study.
Others study wisdom and falsehood, the sage studies spontaneity.
Others study governing the world, the sage studies governing himself.
[So he] preserves the *Dao*'s trueness.⁴⁶

Governing oneself is simply another type of studying, and the apparent contradiction is explained away. In the same way, Wang Bi reads “taste that is tasting-less” as referring to actual substances that have no discernible taste.⁴⁷ These interpretations suggest that it is possible to explain away any of the contradictions in the text, even the most elemental ones, in terms of categories like those of “conventional” versus “exceptional.”

Nevertheless, some traditional commentators have taken the contradictions in these passages as indicative of an irresolvable tension. This is the case for three such commentaries, the Tang or pre-Tang commentary attributed to Gu Huan 顧歡 (420–483 C.E.), and the eleventh-century Song commentaries of Ge Changgeng and Su Che 蘇徹 (c. 1100 C.E.). For Gu Huan, the apophatic discourse in the *Laozi* was intended to dissolve the distinctions between doing and not doing certain things. For example, he understands the statement “do that which is doing-less” to deny the difference between doing and not doing:

Struggle to grasp the source of the mind, do not lose its true radiance. Once its radiance is emitted, doing is the same as the doing-less. This is what it means. So doing is doing-less and doing-less is doing.⁴⁸

Gu affirms the destruction of the opposition in a similar way when the text speaks of learning "not to learn":

Learning is not learning and not learning is learning. Not to engage in learning is different from not learning and is [also] different from learning. So the *Xishengjing* 西昇經 [*Scripture of Western Ascension*] says: "I learn without anything to learn and so can understand the natural."⁴⁹

Here the commentary is explicitly challenging the identification of not learning with not engaging in learning, implying that there is a "not learning" that transcends the simple opposition of taking part in learning versus not engaging in learning. In this manner, the Gu Huan commentary attempts to point to something that surpasses learning and not learning, thereby embracing rather than explaining the contradiction in the original text.

The Song commentators are also interested in eliminating the distinction between a thing or action and its opposite, and in this way pointing to something that transcends such oppositions. Ge Changgeng uses the Buddhist metaphor of the "bright mirror hanging on the platform" from the *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經 (*Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*) to explain how the sage "knows without moving" (chapter 47).⁵⁰ Su Che does not see the mind as what exists behind the distinctions, but rather the Neo-Confucian idea of principle (*li*). Su Che uses the same concept of transcendent principle to explain the chain of sentences in chapter 22 of the *Laozi* that begins "bowed then preserved":

In moving, the sage must follow principle, where principle exists it may be straight or bowed. He simply must penetrate it. If he penetrates it then he will not be bogged down. If he is not bogged down then he will be preserved.⁵¹

The effort that the sage makes to penetrate principle is on a level different from physical attributes that are manifestations of substance (*qi* 氣). It is through this dichotomy that Su addresses the stark contradiction "learn not to learn":

The sage . . . is not without learning. He learns and does not learn. So although he learns he nevertheless avoids doing harm to principle. Only then can inner and outer be vacuous

and clear. Solitarily acting-less, he can complement the spontaneity of the myriad things and rely on his own self-realization.⁵²

In this interpretation, the sage is not "without learning," but instead combines the polar opposites of learning and not learning. By specifically affirming that the sage both learns and does not learn, Su embraces the tension that allows him to define a mode of action that resembles learning but is at the same time fundamentally different. As with the Ge commentary, the tension of the self-contradiction is preserved and the text is read apophatically.

While it is the case that commentators disagree over whether contradiction in the *Laozi* should be read as apophasis or not, there is an important conclusion here concerning traditional readings of the text. It is not the case that the history of the text's interpretation clearly supports a reading of the *Laozi* as a mystical text according to the criterion established by Schwartz. Even with the most stark contradictions, it is chiefly in the post-Chan Buddhist commentaries that the contradiction is embraced as apophatic language rather than explained away. Traditional commentators on the *Laozi* have not necessarily interpreted the text as containing apophatic language that preserves a tension pointing to ineffability.

Mystical Theory and Mystical Practice

It may seem surprising to try to deny the *Laozi* the therapeutic effect of apophasis, the one type of mystical experience that might be definitely connected with the text because it arises from the very act of reading it. Yet many traditional commentators sought to explain away the text's contradictions, calling into question even this link to experience. Thus, not only are explicit references to mystical experience lacking in the text, but it does not seem that the earliest commentators even read the text as an attempt to express knowledge implicitly gained through such experience. To the degree that mysticism has been fundamentally understood as a form of religious experience, then, it is not possible to state authoritatively that the *Laozi* is a "mystical" text.

This gap between text and experience is perhaps why it was possible to find flaws with the attempts to categorize the *Laozi* as

mystical according to the use of the term by the successive generations of scholars during this century. Indeed, it might be argued that the compilation is pointedly abstract, with its systematic omission of proper names or dates and simple language. Herbert Giles's 1905 *Religions of Ancient China* makes a somewhat derisive reference to Laozi's doctrines along these lines: "Such a system was naturally far better fitted for the study, where in fact it has always remained, than for use in ordinary life."⁵¹ Yet how can one speak of the possibility of having knowledge of a prelinguistic *Dao* without an attempt to tie it to experience? Returning for a moment to the mode of Magritte-style self-reference, this sort of theoretical discussion is not as foreign as it first seems—this article is doing precisely that.

Most scholarship in the history of religions, and in mysticism theory in particular, assumes that some commonality underlies the diverse traditions being examined, whether that commonality is supernatural or psychological. By placing the *Dao* prior to the formation of categories, the *Laozi* is performing much the same theoretical move we have already seen made by Forman in the discussion of mystical experience and Schleiermacher in the discussion of religious experience. Like these later theorists, the *Laozi* is trying to evoke an unmediated moment that is not reducible to ordinary modes of knowing. This is close to the way that Wayne Proudfoot understands the use of *Dao* in the *Laozi*:

The term [*Dao*] acts as a formal operator, or placeholder, systematically excluding any differentiating description or predicates that might be proposed. The term functions in this way regardless of its meaning or connotations.⁵⁴

Proudfoot goes on to draw the parallel between the use of placeholders like "*Dao*" in mystical texts and those like "numinous" in the literature of the history of religions.⁵⁵ In this sense, the *Laozi* has more in common with Rudolf Otto's discussion of Meister Eckhart than with Eckhart's writing itself. In this analysis, the text is less an expression of an experience of an ineffable *Dao* than a compilation of attempts to describe it.

Taking a step back, the question arises: what could the compiler of the *Laozi* have in common with a scholar such as Otto, so temporally and culturally distant? One answer might be that both are attempting to find a hidden thread that runs through a multiplicity

of data. Early writers like Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 B.C.E.) state that the numinous thread of the *Dao* is what runs through the phenomenal world, and is the sum of the "techniques" (*shu* 術) that are used to act in that world.⁵⁶ The *Laozi* itself may best be understood as a composite text organized along thematic principles, centered on the various methods that people have evolved to speak about the *Dao*. The earliest classification of the *Laozi* in China, attributed to the late second-century B.C.E. historian and astrologer Sima Tan 司馬談, associates the text with a group intent on developing methods that drew on the expertise of each of the existing traditions.⁵⁷ The *Dao* was what united the approaches of these traditions, the common denominator that was behind "the great order of the yin-yang lineages," the "good points of the Confucian and Mohist lineages," the "essentials of the Nominalist and Legalist lineages," that the group selected out. The *Dao*, then, was also a way of speaking about a unitary phenomenon that appeared in different guises once it was constructed in different traditions.

To be sure, this does not rule out the possibility that one of the mediated manifestations of the *Dao* might be knowledge acquired via mystical union with ultimate reality. It is possible that the compiler of the *Laozi* was using the possibility of personal knowledge of such a mystical *Dao* to show the possibility of having similar knowledge in other spheres. Such a theory would provide a connection between philosophical aspects and the political and moral aspects of the *Laozi*. That there exists a transcendent *Dao* that undergirds reality provides a precedent for the sage ruler's ability to access political and moral knowledge directly—thereby undermining the ultimate authority of alternate traditions and texts devoted to rulership and ethics (e.g., Confucianism). The *Laozi* is then not an account of mystical experience, but an attempt to describe a "phenomenon" in the same way that scholars of mysticism do.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Philip J. Ivanhoe and Karl Plank for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1. James's requirements are that mystical experience "defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words" and that such

experiences "are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect..." *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Collins, 1961), 300.

2. Chapter 22. D. C. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 79. For the use of this passage as evidence of mysticism, see Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 69.

3. John M. Koller, *Oriental Philosophies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 239. Koller is using a definition of mysticism similar to that of W. T. Stace, which assumes a unity "which the mystic believes to be in some sense ultimate and basic to the world..." Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), 132.

4. Chapter 20. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 74.

5. Chapter 32. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 91. Note, however, the female/male and weak/strong distinctions appear to persist even in unity (see chapter 61, and also chapters 66 and 78).

6. Here, Otto is describing the second of three steps in "unifying vision" mysticism, that is, the mysticism of the "East." See Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West* (New York: MacMillan, 1932), 68.

7. See, for example, Edward H. Parker's (1849–1926) translation of the first line of the *Laozi*: "The Providence which could be indicated by words would not be an all-embracing Providence," *China and Religion* (London: John Murray, 1905), 271.

8. Chapter 42. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 103.

9. In *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983): 226–246.

10. Ching's goal is to examine uses of the reflecting mirror as a metaphor for mystical union with the divine to confirm the distinction made by the German religious writer Friedrich Heiler (1892–1967) in his 1921 *Das Gebet* (*Prayer*) between "prophetic" religions grounded in divine revelation and "mysticisms" which do not rely on prophecy and instead are defined by their mystical traditions. The former religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, maintain a distance between the subject and object of mystical meditation, while the latter traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism, promote the elimination of the differences between the self and the divine. Ching contrasts the "Western" *attachment* of the subject and the mirror image with the "Eastern" *detachment* from the object reflected (242). For the purposes of understanding the *Laozi*, this analysis is generally inapplicable, since Ching's examples of mysticism are pre-Qin Confucianism and post-Han Daoism. Ching can replicate Heiler's results only through

this judicious choice of data. The application of the contrast between prophetic religions and mysticisms to Daoism and Christianity ignore the central nature of revelation in later Daoism and the influential nonprophetic traditions of early Christianity such as Gnosticism.

11. Arthur C. Danto, *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 56. Note that Danto's evidence for the nature of the "Eastern" mystical experience comes from the pen of E. M. Forster.

12. Danto, *Mysticism and Morality*, 55. According to Danto, in India the rejection of illusory distinctions was final and no attempt was made to account for their origins, as opposed to a situation where they are rejected but still have to be explained. This leads to the idea of "discipline of action" wherein one's actions "are, by the criterion of the *Gita* itself, beyond good and evil and, so, beyond moral appraisal, which is concerned with whether an act may be said to be good or evil" (95).

13. Danto, *Mysticism and Morality*, 111.

14. In Donald H. Bishop, ed., *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience: East and West* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 230–259.

15. Wu writes: "Nor does Chinese mysticism bring down the supreme deity, the exalted ancestor, the vital pervasive moral force, the Heaven. Instead, Chinese mysticism lets us realize that the world is up there without nullifying the distinction between the ultimate and the concrete; the distinction is reverently *accepted*" (Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience*, 234).

16. For a good discussion of "skillfulness" in the *Zhuangzi* which could be used to engage Danto's critique on a number of points see Mark Berkson, "Language: The Guest of Reality: Zhuangzi and Derrida on Language, Reality, and Skillfulness," in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 97–126.

17. Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism*, 58.

18. Stephen T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 26.

19. Robert K. Forman, "Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

20. Philip C. Almond notes that the gap between text and experience is sometimes finessed in Zaehner's discussion of Indian mysticism. See his

Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine: An Investigation of the Study of Mysticism in World Religions (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982), especially pp. 29–30.

21. Several parts of the *Chuci* have usually been classified as examples of shamanism, despite the fact that the “shamanistic” journey is rarely associated with the *wu* 巫, the term usually translated as “shaman.” See David Hawkes, trans., *The Songs of the South* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 42.

22. Marcel Granet, *The Religion of the Chinese People*, trans. Maurice Freedman (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 121.

23. Harold D. Roth, “Some Issues in the Study of Chinese Mysticism: A Review Essay,” *China Review International* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 154–73.

24. See Donald Harper, “The Bellows Analogy in Laozi V and Warring States Macrobiotic Hygiene” *Early China* 20 (1995): 381–192, and Harold Roth’s article “The Laozi in the Context of Early Daoist Mystical Practice,” in this volume.

25. Zhou Shirong, “Cong Mawangdui chutu wenwu kan woguo daoia wenhua 從馬王堆出土文物看我國道家文化,” in *Daoia wenhua yanjiu* 道家文化研究, v. 3, ed. Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (Shanghai: Guji, 1993), 395–407.

26. Wei Qipeng, “Mawangdui guyishude daoia yu yijia 馬王堆古逸書的道家與醫家,” in *Daoia wenhua yanjiu*, v. 3, ed. Chen Guying, 360–377.

27. Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 197–198.

28. Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

29. Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 40.

30. Lau, “The Treatment of Opposites in Lao Tzu 老子,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 21 (1958): 344–360, 355. Lau examines previous theories about the superiority of the “female,” paying particular attention to those of Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 and Yang Kuan 楊寬. Lau ultimately rejects both positions and argues that “The process of change is not necessarily circular. Decline, when a thing reaches the highest point, is inevitable, but development is not . . . [And] can be arrested. It is, therefore, both possible and useful to ‘abide by the soft’” (354–355).

31. Compare Lau’s translation: “Do that which consists in taking no action, pursue that which is not meddling; savour that which has no flavour” (Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 125).

32. Chapter 47, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 108. The Dao in particular should not be approached using the senses: “Go to meet it and you will not see its head . . .” (chapter 14, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 70).

33. Chapter 41, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 102. See other instances of such language in chapter 6 and chapter 45. Note that the certain dualisms created by human beings also tend to interfere with accurate perceptions (chapter 2).

34. *Han Feizi* 20, commenting on chapter 14. Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Han Feizi jishi* 韓非子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 6:368.

35. Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian* 老子想爾注校箋 (Hong Kong: Tong Nam, 1956), 18.

36. *Huainanzi* 12, *Zhuzi jicheng* edition, 196. See also *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 13, *Zhuzi jicheng* edition, 217–218 (cf. Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1968], 152–153). For a fuller treatment of language skepticism see Eric Schwitzgabel, “Zhuangzi’s Attitude Toward Language and His Skepticism,” in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, 68–96, and for the various types of skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* see Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Skepticism, Skill and the Ineffable Dao,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* 61, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 101–116.

37. *Laozi Daodejing sijuan* 老子道德經四卷, *Sibu congkan* edition, 2a. As Qu Wanli 屈萬里 has pointed out, this explanation is elaborated in the commentary to chapter 34: “The sage teaches and leads with his body, unspeaking he transforms the myriad things and repairs the government” (*Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 51, no. 4 (Dec. 1980): 749–796, 759).

38. Chapter 7, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 63. Some form of a contradiction of action is present in chapters 2, 4, 15, 22, 26, 27, 47, and 73.

39. *Huainanzi* 7, *Zhuzi jicheng* edition, 201. Note that Gongyi Xiu’s taste for fish is paramount, and does not admit of competing goods. This is in contrast to Mencius’s taste for fish, a metaphor for his desire for life, which must be balanced with his taste for bear paws, a metaphor for his desire to be righteous (*Mengzi* 孟子 6A10 in the traditional numbering, see D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970], 166). Gongyi Xiu pointedly does not consider whether a Chancellor *should* accept fish, but only how to best satisfy his taste for fish.

40. *Laozi Daodejing sijuan*, 7:4a.

41. *Laozi Xiang'er zhu xiaojian*, 10.

42. *Daode baozhang* 道德寶章, *Wuqiu beizhai* edition, 4b.
43. Chapter 2, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 58. See chapter 43 for a similar phrase.
44. Chapter 64, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 126.
45. Chapter 14, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 70.
46. *Laozi Daodejing sijuan*, 14a. Cf. Chen Guying's 陳鼓應 modern rendering "those who possess the Dao study what others do not," *Laozi zhuyi ji pingjie* 老子註譯及評介 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 310, n. 5.
47. *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi* 王弼集校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980), 164.
48. *Daode zhenjing zhushu* 道德真經注疏, *Wuqiu beizhai* edition, 6.19a. "Radiance" here may be thought of as reflected light, and the mind's "doing" as consisting of passive reflection.
49. *Daode zhenjing zhushu*, 6.24b. For the *Scripture of Western Ascension*, see Livia Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
50. *Daode baozhang*, 12b. Gu Huan uses a similar metaphor, but reads *buxing* 不行 to refer to the mind, making it an "unmoved mind" which reflects like a mindless mirror. See *Daode zhenjing zhushu*, 5.5b–6a. Ge, a Song Daoist writer and hermit, is quoting the late seventh-century monk Shenxiu 神秀. See Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 130.
51. *Su Che Laozi Daodejing pingzhu* 蘇轍老子道德經評註, *Wuqiu beizhai* edition, 1:20b.
52. *Su Che Laozi Daodejing pingzhu*, 2:28b.
53. Herbert Giles, *Religions of Ancient China* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1989), 41.
54. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 127. Proudfoot is often grouped with Katz among the constructivists, but Proudfoot's position differs from Katz in ways that are important to this analysis (e.g., 244, n. 4).
55. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 131.
56. The relationship of *Dao* to *shu* is explored in Mark Csikszentmihalyi, "Jia Yi's 'Techniques of the Dao' and the Han Confucian Appropriation of Technical Discourse," forthcoming in *Asia Major* 10 (1997).
57. Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 130:3289.



The Laozi in the Context of
Early Daoist Mystical Praxis

Harold D. Roth

To know others is to be clever
To know oneself is to be clear . . . (*Laozi* 33)

Introduction

One of the few areas of agreement between sinologists and scholars of Comparative Religion is in regarding the *Laozi* as an important work of mysticism. Scholars from Wing-Tsit Chan to Benjamin Schwartz in the former group and from Walter Stace to Wayne Proudfoot in the latter group share this common understanding of the text as they make use of it in a wide variety of intellectual endeavors.¹ While this is by no means a unanimous view (see the contrary opinions of D. C. Lau and Chad Hansen), it is certainly held by a great many scholars.² Despite this surprising unanimity, when one examines the views of these scholars more closely, there is an equally surprising lack of a comprehensive discussion of why they regard the *Laozi* as a mystical text in the first place.

Some scholars simply use the term "mysticism" uncritically, as in Chan's accurate but overly general observation that the *Laozi* is a "combination of poetry, philosophical speculation, and mystical