

Say Nothing, Do Nothing, Get Things Done: A Short Exposition of Taoist Epistemology in the Light of Abrahamic Teleology and Ontology

Joel West

University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

The Western idea of religion is of something that one does, aside from what one believes. We separate belief from action. This paper examines the Abrahamic idea of belief and the need for historicity and compares this to the Taoist belief in Lao Tzu and the lack of a need for a historical founder in terms of practice and belief.

Keywords: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Lao Tzu, comparative religion

Introduction

Many years ago, comedian Woody Allen wrote a mock college catalogue which included the following satirical course: “Epistemology: Is knowledge knowable? If not, how do we know this?” (Allen, 1971). Allen’s joke, while causing us, perhaps, to chuckle, also illustrates a problem with Western philosophy. This problem is highlighted when we compare Western epistemologies with the epistemologies of other cultures: the axioms used in Western culture to construct understanding and to

construct the methodology by which things may become knowable, may not be true across all human cultures. One thing that this difference can potentially mean is that the Western understanding of how things are understood and known may only be relative and relevant to Western culture.

When we talk about Western epistemology, which is the study of the methods by which Western culture constructs how it is that things may be known what it is thought to be knowable, we may then understand that when Westerners want to know or to understand a subject, they “study” that subject. By the word “study,” Westerners understand the requirement to separate individual “facts” from their natural environments and to move these facts into a completely separate, yet artificial, cognitive space. Facts are separated from their natural environment and then are learned as discrete items¹. Moreover, the methodology via which this denaturalization of information is fulfilled is by encoding these facts and ideas into cognitive concepts which are called “words.” These words may then be stored by encoding them into books via language and writing and then these books may be stored in libraries². Westerners, through years of trial and error, have developed methodologies, after the fact, to retrieve these ideas from these books, and, while none of these methods is perfect³ and while knowledge does indeed get lost⁴, methods do exist to both search for and to retrieve these facts. While methods other than writing do exist to encode facts, in general even those methods also use words. When facts need to be retrieved, they may be searched for using various technologies, and this search for encoded facts is called “research.” Also, after one has learned these denaturalized facts from books, one can attempt to recontextualize them⁵, or “understand” them. In the West, the whole of these facts and these contexts is called “knowledge.” The idea of learning and transmitting knowledge encoded into words is what Westerners call “discourse,” and so we can call the knowledge that is knowable by this method “discursive knowledge.” This Western idea of learning things is called “scholarship” and Western epistemology believes that scholarship together with knowledge can disclose the ultimate nature of reality. Importantly, Western cultures believe that the absolute nature of reality may be transmitted via linguistic discourse and that the world can be

understood via words.

In this Western idea of discursive knowledge, words and knowledge have sources and these sources are called “writers” or “authors” and that depending on different biases that have changed over time, some writers, some words, some ideas and some knowledge are valued more than other writers, ideas, words, and knowledge. Historically then, those in the West have created a hierarchy of knowledge based on this idea of value. One example of this idea of hierarchy is that for many hundreds of years, the discourses of men were valued over the discourses of women to the point that in some cases the voices of women did not exist⁶. To summarize, Western cultures have constructed a methodology by which ideas are encoded into words that are then stored in books, and in which these cultures have also placed a cultural value based on the idea that some of these words and ideas have a greater intrinsic value than others. These values mean that some of these words are of a lesser value, culturally, with the implication that only some of these ideas should be public, that some should be private, that some should be common knowledge and that some should be secret, and that ideas may be owned and that we can create a provenance of ownership. In fact, throughout the West, much of the value of ideas is based on their provenance, which is to say that the value of ideas and discourses is based on the fact that they can be “documented,” that they may be demonstrated to have happened at a certain place and time. As an example of this provenance, when academics cite a publication, they are attributing ideas not their own to specific others and the citation demonstrates that this idea came from a specific source that was written at a specific time and a specific place and that it was published in a specific year. As a culture, then, Westerners place extra value on discourses that have some sort of demonstrable historical authenticity or provenance and the converse is also true, so that discourses without any provenance can be of dubious value or of no “intrinsic” value whatsoever⁷.

The problem is demonstrated when Westerners encounter people from other cultures⁸, specifically those cultures where the bases of understanding have a different philosophical foundation, so that the lack of shared cultural bases, or of cultural axioms, may lead to misunderstandings and to confusion. This is not because of the

fact that cultures are different and that cross-cultural discourse is hard, which, while true, is rather trite. Instead, more specifically, there are cultures that exist where Western ideas of verbal discourse and provenance, as described above, are considered to be needless and thus the philosophical or religious artifacts⁹, specifically, in this case, scriptures, of these cultures confound any attempt to be understood, especially in the sense that Westerners would try to understand things. There are what Westerners call “religions” which exist where, despite a lack of historical provenance of religious artifacts and scripture, and, despite the Western requirement for a certain kind of “knowledge” as we have described above, that more importantly, using a Western epistemological perspective to try and understand these religions results in what Westerners call logical paradox, or a lack of meaning. Despite these “paradoxes” which, from a Western point of view, is a lack of meaning, it is a safe presumption that some sort of “knowledge” which may not be “discursive” in the Western sense is still being transmitted within these cultures.

In fact, the Western idea of knowledge and of learning via discourse is in direct opposition to the Taoist idea that ultimate reality is “non-discursive,” that such ideas may not be put into words, and thus that “knowledge,” as we think of it in the West, is not knowable. Moreover, even the formation of ideas, in terms of Western syllogistic logic, is completely confounded from this viewpoint. This Taoist idea of non-discursivity of knowledge and of apparent illogic means that while those raised with a Western point of view may try to create meaning with what they believe to be “facts,” as above, and, while Western epistemology considers the nature of being and of knowledge to be absolute and also, crucially, that this knowledge may be encoded in words, the difference is that the conception of knowledge in Taoism is that facts are always relative and relational to each other, never absolute. To Western eyes, Taoist ideas appear to be paradoxical, in the Aristotelian sense¹⁰. Taoist texts propose what at first view may seemingly look like logical statements but which, when treated with Western logic, make no sense; these statements seemingly say opposite things at the same time, and this opposition is anathema to the ideals of Western discourse and knowledge. These Taoist statements reach conclusions which from a Western point

of view are absurd and are either void of meaning or contain too many meanings to be “logical.” By reading Taoist scripture from the lens of Taoist learning one may see specifically how the *Tao Te Ching*, the central Taoist text, itself defies the possibility of the Western ideal of positive, discursive knowledge. If one then attempts to analyze the Taoist notion of “*Wu Wei*” from a Western point of view or if one retells and then attempts to derive meaning from the famous “Zhuangzi’s Butterfly Dream,” other Western-style paradoxical impasses are encountered. Moreover, from the Abrahamic point of view, the absolute provenance of our Western scriptures is essential. To be authentic in a religious sense, Abrahamic religions believe that scripture must have emanated from a specific source at a specific time from a specific person. While lack of such provenance may remove any sort of value from a Western religious text, Taoist scripture lacks this absolute requirement and, in fact, lack of provenance does not change the meaning or meanings associated with the Taoist religion.

Instead, the lack of Taoist philosophical epistemology also defies the Western conception of “knowledge.” Compared to Western ideas of epistemology, ontology, rationalism, and dualism, the Taoist notions of meaning creates what are, from our Western view point, cognitive and discursive paradoxes. In Taoist logic, the fact that a thing has empirical existence and the discourse surrounding that thing, which in Western discourse would be indexical and point to that thing as an object itself existentially, can be shown, ontologically, instead to defeat positive knowledge of the thing by creating verbal and cognitive paradoxes such as “Sometimes gain comes from losing, and sometimes loss comes from gaining” (Feng & English, 1972). This kind of idea, where one idea negates the next, is completely opposed to the Western idea that the discourse surrounding the thing actually is indexical to, and represent the thing, by pointing to it in an ontological sense.

Taoist Ontology in a Historical Context

A Western philosophical look at Taoism can be daunting because, by definition, Taoist stories, definitions, and allusions are, as mentioned above, self-defeating

and paradoxical. In a historical context, Western philosophy's reaction to identified paradoxes is to label them and to add each new paradox to the taxonomy of paradoxes¹¹ and, once having identified and labelled them, to quarantine this observed lapse from the rest of Western discourse. The reason for this aversion to paradox or to quasi-paradoxes is that historically Western religions have based themselves on Aristotle's three rules of logic¹². These "laws" define the rules by which argument may be considered valid or invalid. Aristotle influenced Western religion via the "final and most influential scholar" of Islam, Ibn Rushd, also known as Averroes, who wrote major commentaries of Aristotle's works and brought Aristotle's logical rules to Islamic thought (Hillier, 2000). We also know that Averroes' commentaries influenced both of the pre-eminent Jewish philosophers of the time, Moses Maimonides (Seeskin, 2019) and Ibn Ezra (Hillier, 2000). Thomas Aquinas, the Christian theologian and philosopher also read Averroes (McInerny & Callahan, 2016). Although, one may argue that Aquinas was not, in terms of his philosophy, an Averroesist, we do know that he was taught Aristotelian principles of logic by Albert Magnus and as a philosopher "Aquinas is emphatically Aristotelian" (McInerny & Callahan, 2016). These three great thinkers went on to shape the form of their respective religions' philosophical axioms and because of the influence of Aristotle's rules, all three religions went on to take on the forms of Aristotelian logic, including the philosophical bracketing of paradoxes¹³. The point is that since Aristotle's approach to paradox was to call it error, this approach was also embraced in Western ideology. Contrary to this approach, Taoism treats paradoxes as, somehow and in some way, meaningful and didactic.

Also, in general, most scholarly literature prior to the late 19th century either do not concern themselves with Taoism, or, they lump Taoism into "non-Christian" religion. When Marco Polo encountered Eastern religions, he mentions that "you are constantly passing towns and castles of which the inhabitants are idolaters" (Polo, 1908). Of course, Marco Polo was no theologian, but the point may be taken from his comment that the Western lay view, and therefore the clerical view, of all Eastern religions, including Taoism, was negative. Russell Kirkland later identified the rise of

Taoism as a self-recognized religion at approximately the fifth century CE (Kirkland, 2002), which is well before Marco Polo's voyages in the late thirteenth century so that certainly Taoism, itself, was a thing at that time. The point here is not that Westerners viewed Taoism as "idolaters" (which might well have been the case) but rather that typical Westerners who were not priests or actively involved in religion as occupation were not interested in the details of Chinese religions and lumped them all into a portmanteau of non-Christians, or "idolaters." These "idolaters" were a lumped single entity consisting of Taoists, Buddhists, and Confucianists and as such they become a more generalized problem, the solution of which to the Western world at the time was to convert these "idolaters" to Christianity. Because of these reasons, Western scholarship did not delve into the beliefs of Taoism.

While it would be impossible to cite exactly when Western scholarship first encountered Taoism, a fair guess may be established by the first sentence of Damian J. Bebel and Shannon M. Fera's article "Comparison and Analysis of Selected English Interpretations of the *Tao Te Ching*" where the abstract states that "In the last 150 years, the ambiguous and enigmatic 81 chapters of the *Tao Te Ching* have been translated, interpreted, and adapted into the English language more than 100 times" (Bebel, 2000). It may then be a working assumption that, while the *Tao Te Ching* has obviously existed as a text for much longer than a hundred and seventy years¹⁴, the lack of literature then and the plethora after this time might indicate that it was only seen as a thing to be studied at that point in time, one hundred and seventy years ago. The fact that translations only exist after this perhaps is a sign that was seen to be worthy of translation then and not before then, which means that Western scholars of religion or philosophy may only have been aware of the *Tao Te Ching* as a thing to be translated after that time. Prior to that time, Taoism as a subject worthy to be studied was, as the scanty evidence that exists seems to indicate, lumped into the Orientalist and ethnocentric Western concept of Chinese culture existing as a monolith which was equal to "idolatry." To put the matter into a historical context, recognition of the *Tao Te Ching* as a text worthy to be translated would appear to start at approximately the same time that Max Muller¹⁵ was translating the *RG Veda* from Sanskrit.

Another issue that we face is that Taoism is often seen as philosophy rather than religion. Categorization of knowledge into discrete disciplines is a particularly Western idea. Prior to the advent of the Dewey decimal classification system, each library had its own methodology and system for classifying information. As Sears Jayne notes in *Library Catalogues of the English Renaissance*, most libraries were privately held so that each catalogue and each classification system was unique, and they were built and maintained in whatever order made sense to the holder of that library (Jayne, 1956). When libraries became used by scholars, as more books became available, a formal method of taxonomy of knowledge was created by Melvil Dewey in the late 19th century¹⁶. As well, it must also be understood that the word “religion” as a thing to be studied, was understood, within the Western context, to refer only to the three Abrahamic worship systems, even as late as the year 1912 (Hoyt, 1912). The exact date of when the modern conception of the study of religion became inclusive of Eastern philosophies and religions and also the exact taxonomy of various types of knowledge, including religions, is still being debated, but these questions are, of course, beyond the scope of this work.

The question that now arises is, why, then, have there been so many different translations of the *Tao Te Ching*? Is the need for many translations intrinsic to the text, itself?¹⁷ This question is perhaps moot as we know that all translations are, today, acknowledged as close interpretations of the text. Instead, we propose that the issue we face is that Taoism, as a thing to understand, defies *prima facie* understanding. Granted, some studies have focused on specific problems of ontology in specific areas of Taoism itself, rather than looking at Taoism through a more general perspective. One example, Moller’s “Zhuangzi’s ‘Dream of the Butterfly’: A Daoist Interpretation” (Moller, 1999) looks at interpretations of the Butterfly Dream Fable from the point of view of Taoism’s own view. It is extremely notable that other Western scholars have concentrated on this specific story or other very specific areas of Taoism and how they may impact the problem of dualism in Western terms.¹⁸ However, this view is limited only because the fable can also illustrate and illuminate more the more generalized problem of Taoist ontology. Instead, it behooves us to take a much more general

approach to the topic and to make some more generalized assertions about the topic of the Taoist philosophical lens in juxtaposition to the Western lens.

The Paradox of the Thing

The understanding of a thing or of a document in the West is informed by the idea that absolute knowledge about a thing or an idea is possible. We presume that if we learn a thing, then what we learn about that thing can stand as a metaphor for that thing (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). For example, we say, “He was so angry that he saw red,” which is a good denotative description of the visual effect of the emotion rage on the human visual system. Over time the words “seeing red” comes to stand for and to connote rage and then over more time just the word “red,” depending on the context of the word, may connote anger. To reduce the idea further, the Western epistemological belief is that when we can name an object, real, abstract, or metaphorical, as some “thing” unto itself, then it is possible for us to understand that object as a thing. This conception of “thing” is in stark contrast to the Taoist notion which both complicates and defies these Western epistemological ideas out of hand. The *Tao Te Ching* begins with the words:

The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way,

The name that can be named is not the constant name. (Feng & English, 1972)¹⁹

Western epistemology is used to dealing with verbal objects and treating those verbal objects as real or as having some real referent, even though those objects may be false to fact.²⁰ Contrary to this idea, and from its very outset, Taoism complicates our understanding of knowledge by creating verbal and cognitive paradoxes which state that what we can name is not really what we are naming, that the relationship between what we know and what we can say about some “thing” is therefore not a one-to-one relationship. Western religions presume understanding via words and ideas. God, in the Western religious view, created the world using words (Genesis

1) and later this idea was further refined into the verses “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God” (John 1:1). The Christian scripture asserts that there is a “Word” and that word is “God.” Taoism annihilates this very idea of Logos, of words having meaning that represent things and that have power, by preventing any possible verbal discourse and it does so by using Logos, the word as a creative force, against itself. Instead, in the view of the Tao, we do know there is a way that, having been named, is not constant, and there is a name that, having been named, is not constant, and even saying this defeats the purpose of saying it because it is a logical paradox. There may be a “Word” but it cannot be spoken of. In a sense, the concepts of “Word,” “God,” and “Beginning” are bracketed and become meaningless as they, in terms of Taoism, are not the real ones. How then are we to proceed in a Western sense, and how can these paradoxes and denial of logical knowing, the manner in which we know what we know, be useful in a practical sense?

Taoism, it may then be argued, is not about learned knowledge acquired from books in the Western sense of learning, but is about positive action and learning through doing, an epistemology not of Logos but of life as performance and performativity in the sense that knowledge comes from life experience and from doing. It may be argued, however, that while this notion appears to be good on the surface, we must remain cognizant that Taoist ideology also denies the possibility of any positive performance with the notion of “*Wu Wei*.” *Wu Wei* is awkwardly defined as “‘non-activity,’ or ‘governing by doing nothing’” (Xing, 2011). While these terms have conventional meaning in the Western sense of meaning, the problem with both of these definitions is that they describe *Wu Wei* as simple passivity. To explain, if one was to “do” *Wu Wei* as an activity, one would simply do nothing. Instead, *Wu Wei* describes an action, to do nothing, as an activity which, in Western terms, creates a paradox of action by inaction.

Meanwhile, and in the light of this first, paradoxical definition of *Wu Wei*, consider the *Tao Te Ching* which seems to concur with this notion of non-activity when it says that:

Less and less is done

Until non-action is achieved.

When nothing is done, nothing is left undone. (Feng & English, 1972)

Therefore, according to the text, and just as paradoxically, “non-action” or “non-activity” is a goal to be achieved over time and “doing less and less” is the method by which it is achieved. The goal, it would seem, is that both “nothing is done” and “nothing is left undone” which, in terms of Western understanding, is a contradiction. A Westerner might well ask “How is it exactly that we are to achieve, or to ‘do’ these ideas of ‘non-action,’ ‘not-doing,’ and ‘non-activity?’” How can we “govern by not doing?” If we understand this formulation of “actively doing non-action” from the point of view of standard Western epistemological discursivity, what remains is a logical paradox. What the text has done is define something as its exact opposite, not in a literary sense, as an oxymoronic figure of speech, but rather it is possible to presume that while the text may not view itself as having internal logic, that it at the very least is trying to impart some sort of knowledge so that having achieved a logical paradox in the Aristotelian²¹ sense, the text, instead of resolving such or even admitting such, continues to proceed from what looks to us, from our Western lens, like smaller paradoxes to greater paradoxes, ad infinitum. From a Western point of view, we are then at an impasse created by a verbal paradox and may not proceed. If, on the other hand, we render “*Wu Wei*” as the idea of “active inaction” or perhaps “creative non-creation,” then we render the idea of *Wu Wei* as a positive action that is in itself inaction, not just “doing nothing.” The idea of *Wu Wei*, at the very least within the text, makes more sense, while still remaining a paradox within a Western ideological framework. There is still a paradox which might tempt us to reify or simplify *Wu Wei* into Western ideas but which must be resisted.

Consider the passage below:

Therefore, the sage says:

I take no action and people are reformed.

I enjoy peace and people become honest.

I do nothing and people become rich.

I have no desires and people return to the good and simple life. (Feng & English, 1972)

It would be simplistic to interpret this passage and the idea of *Wu Wei* as merely a caution to shun the micromanagement of others.²² In the West, it is tempting to reduce Taoist ideals to palatable points of discursivity or to reify them to something that is easily digested by Western minds, so it must also be remembered that there is always a paradoxical non-discursiveness to any of the ideas one may find in the pages of the *Tao Te Ching*. To paraphrase the quotation, the sage, or teacher, takes no action, enjoys peace, says nothing, and has no desires, and yet the world around the sage changes to the positive. Is the fact that the “People return to the good and simple life” somehow connected to the inaction of the sage? It is crucial to note that it is the “not-doing” to effect change that is the key, and that any changes are secondary. While one may understand that while the goal may be change via inaction, this effect is the effect of *Wu Wei* and is not *Wu Wei* itself. The goal of *Wu Wei* is *Wu Wei*. The notion of being creative and the notion of inaction lead to the understanding that mere doing and mere not doing are also not the goals of *Wu Wei*. It is the inaction in a creative manner, the creative and active inaction, which is the Tao. In this, while we try hard to understand *Wu Wei*, *Wu Wei* itself defeats understanding, most simply because we are attempting to understand positive inaction as a positive action and not as merely inaction. Any attempt to understand the non-discursivity of *Wu Wei* as a thing completely defeats any attempt to be understood by classical Western epistemology because its definition alone is a paradox by Western standards.

Add to this mixture of non-discursiveness and paradoxical inaction the famous Taoist fable “Zhuangzi’s Butterfly Dream” from the eponymous scripture, the *Zhuangzi*.²³ The story is this: Zhuangzi falls asleep and dreams that he is a butterfly. The butterfly then falls asleep and dreams that it is Zhuangzi (Moller, 1999). It is important to note that Zhuangzi does not transform into a butterfly with the knowledge of having been Zhuangzi but instead, via dreaming, the butterfly has

always been the butterfly which in turn, when it falls asleep, has always been Zhuangzi. Once we unpack this story further, we can see that it acts as refutation via paradox of, not just Western Cartesian dualism but also of rationalism, positivism, empiricism, and ontology. The famous French philosopher Rene Descartes best codified the idea of Western ontology, epistemology, rationalism, and positivism into a single statement: “*Je pense donc, je suis*” (Descartes, 2004) or in English, “I think therefore I am.” Descartes states that the ontological “I” exists and that “I” observes itself in an empirical manner which logically and rationally causes a positive statement of ontology or being. On the other hand, Zhuangzi believes that he/it is the butterfly. The butterfly believes that it/he is Zhuangzi. We can continue the process to state that Zhuangzi believes that he/it is the butterfly, and the process can continue, *ad infinitum*.

This process results in several paradoxes. One paradox which defies resolution is in trying to determine where the process starts; it is the “what came first, the chicken or the egg?” dilemma. Which came first, and which one is now? And importantly, the story has defeated being, thought, rationality, and the senses. Another paradox is that the narrative is a dream. This idea of dreaming, as a dream, logically defeats the first part of Descartes’ *dictum*, the “*Je pense*.” The idea of dreaming destroys any possibility of positive knowing or thinking via the senses and via the mind because, according to the Butterfly fable, what I think of me may be a dream and completely false to fact. Another paradox is that the nature of reality is observed to be mutable. Descartes’ “*je suis*” is untrue, because as the fable shows, I may not even be me but instead I may be a butterfly, or the butterfly may be me. This idea where reality may be illusion acts as a refutation of empiricism and of Cartesian ontology. Even the “*donc*,” the “therefore,” is defeated because there is no rational “therefore” to this process because nothing has been proven. So, to reframe Descartes in terms of Zhuangzi, we may state that the dream shows that “*Je reve toujours, donc il y a la possibilite d’etre ou bien, de ne pas etre, mais je ne peux pas savoir*,”²⁴ thus eliminating any chance of positivism, rationalism, empiricism, epistemology, or ontology. To restate, and to further challenge Western epistemology, “I cannot know, even logically

know, if or what I am at all, nor does it positively matter.” Moreover, because of the constant transformations, we can arguably state that, “I am unsure if I even am a body or a mind or even if I, as I, am at all.” The paradox is clear. It means that each person is a “self,” who recognizes themselves as unique, but that, paradoxically, this self is unknowable to the individual. It also means that this self cannot place itself into any relatable or recognizable context. In Western terms, this “self” as it exists is a non-discursive and discontinuous form.

This idea of self only exists in a context and context is hugely important within the realm of Western ideas. In the West there is the attempt to place artifacts and ideas into historical contexts and these historical constructs are considered to be a form of provenance. These “objects” may be religious texts, physical materials, or historical personages, but it is also important that this provenance is understood internally, in terms of the religion itself, rather than from an etic viewpoint. The historicity of Rome is important only if Western culture is also important, otherwise it becomes a minor detail. The provenance of any artifact, personage or even of knowledge and kinds of knowledge is crucial within the context of Western discourse and is therefore crucial to the matter of Western or Abrahamic religions. In Abrahamic religions one needs to know who said what to whom, when they did so and in what context it was said. Moreover, the authenticity of this discourse needs to be documented, as do the personages doing the documentation. Everything requires a pedigree. One example of this necessity is the direct provenance of the Law of Moses received at Sinai through proto-Rabbinic Judaism to Judaism today. According to Jewish belief, rabbinical authorities inherited both the wisdom of the Torah and the authority to interpret it through direct succession:

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. (Avot 1:1)²⁵

Thus, Moses received authority and wisdom through direct revelation at Mount Sinai.

This authority and wisdom were transmitted in a direct line of concatenation from Moses to the “Men of the Great Assembly,”²⁶ who were also the predecessors of the Pharisees and who were therefore, it is believed, also the predecessors of those people we now call Rabbis, so that Rabbinic authority is derived via historical precedent from direct revelation at Sinai through to Modernity. Judaism tells itself that because, without this historically derived authority, Modern Judaism and all of its literature, laws, and statutes require a historical provenance because without such a framework, Judaism collapses into a fiction, without any historical basis or context. The key to the matter is the historical provenance of knowledge and authority.

The other Abrahamic religions, Christianity and Islam also require similar historical provenances to justify their existences. Without a historical Jesus, there is no revelation of the Gospel to share, the New Testament becomes complete fiction, and because of this lack of provenance, the religion Christianity, as such, collapses into meaninglessness. Without Muhammad, Muslims have no *Shahada* (declaration of faith)²⁷ on which to base their praxis and belief. Therefore, all three Abrahamic religions require a direct provenance of some sort and without this direct provenance, all of these religions cease to be meaningful in their most orthodox senses. Also, because less orthodox versions of these religions base themselves on their stricter counterparts, these less rigorous versions of faith would also cease to exist. Like Islam, the other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity require a direct positive faith in their historical provenances for these religions to make an internal sense.^{28 29}

As a further proof of the above, we know that mainstream Jewish orthodox belief,³⁰ as opposed to Orthodox Jewish practice, presupposes belief in the Torah as an authentic historical document. A similar doctrinal requirement holds true for conventional mainstream Christian orthodoxy (as opposed to Orthodoxy) as in, for example, the case of catechism³¹ where the tenets of faith are literally spelled out, as previously mentioned, in the Islamic *Shahada*. Even less rigorously orthodox versions of these religions conform to acceptance of the form, if not the substance, of their respective belief systems. One must believe in the religion to be a practitioner of these

religions.

Taoism differs because, surprisingly, it does not really matter if there was a historical Lao Tzu.³² In *On the Historicity of the 'Tao Te Ching'*, Hsiu-Chen Chang notes that, while the issue of historicity is contentious within existing scholarship, the number of good arguments that have been proposed to argue both for and against the existence of a real, living, and historical Lao Tzu are about equal (Chang, 1998). While both sides in the argument believe that they have definitive proof, neither argument actually affects the validity of Taoism. The existence or lack of existence of a historically real Lao Tzu or Zhuangzi does not affect the teachings of Taoism at all. There is no need to prove the works are “authentic” because, as the Butterfly Dream parable shows, the type of authenticity that we treasure in Western scholarship is, in Taoist terms, at best, suspect.

Conclusion

While there is still much to explore on this topic, it has been demonstrated that at the very least, within our understanding of Taoism and of Western thought, the Western notions of dualism, epistemology, rationalism, positivism, and ontology are all refuted and ultimately rendered moot by the ideas contained in the Taoist scriptures and that Taoist ideas are incomprehensible from the perspective of a Western lens. In Taoism, any specific references to any one thing indicate a defiance of understanding that thing which then leaves us with a conundrum to be untangled. We cannot understand Taoist scripture as a kind of Western discourse and any attempt to understand these texts as Western discursive knowledge ends in paradox, and these paradoxes defeat attempts at positive understanding, positive learning, or even positive knowledge even of one's own existence. Of course, the examples supplied are not the only examples of how Taoism defeats positive knowledge, and a longer exploration of this topic would warrant many other examples.

Other Western ideas, the notions of provenance as a method of creating value, and the specific evidential lack of provenance of the *Tao Te Ching* versus the absolute

requirement of provenance of texts in the Abrahamic religions is also worthy of further study. The idea of Tao is not a simple one and ironically enough, as the Tao itself says, the idea of studying Tao, in the Western sense of study, as we have seen, is not the way to learn Tao.

There are many English translations of the *Tao Te Ching*. As stated above, every translation is an interpretation and every interpretation is an attempt to convey the meaning of text. That being stated, since the text itself resists meaning, there are many failed attempts, some better and some worse, to convey the meaning, or meanings, of the *Tao Te Ching*. The text resists not just interpretation, but even simple understanding. The text refutes the conventional Western notions of existence and of understanding. Finally, we are just left with just the Tao.

Notes

- 1 One example of this type of learning is memorization, where ideas are learned by rote.
- 2 For our purposes, a bookstore is a kind of library. While the ideas in this particular library are for sale, this is not so much a criticism of capitalism but rather a statement that humans have put value in storing ideas. Otherwise we have no need to create texts.
- 3 The problem of knowledge retrieval is ongoing and well beyond the scope of this paper.
- 4 An example of this is Zeno's volume called "Paradoxes," which, while mentioned by Aristotle, no longer exists or has not yet been retrieved and so is thought to be lost to posterity.
- 5 To place again in a context.
- 6 While the incidences of this rampant cultural sexism and genderism in the West are countless, it is worthwhile to note the work of Mary Anne Evans, who could not be published as a woman and instead, famously, used the pen name George Eliot.
- 7 One example of this requirement of provenance is the assertion that the text in Genesis 6-9, which details the great flood, is a historical and geographical fact, and the human attempts to reconcile the narrative with the lack of geographical evidence and even contrary scientific evidence. A real life example is "The Ark Encounter" which is a theme park in Kentucky where attendees attend a "Life Size" [sic] Ark built "according to the

dimensions given in the Bible” (<https://arkencounter.com>).

- 8 Or vice versa.
- 9 Artifact means any writings, oral traditions, or objects that may not be naturally occurring and includes the narratives which have been confabulated to describe those objects.
- 10 Aristotle’s ideas inform Western epistemology and theology to such a great extent that after the Middle Ages there really are no religious or philosophical texts that do not incorporate neo-Aristotelian ideas (Cameron, 2010).
- 11 One example of this taxonomy is Zeno’s document “Paradoxes,” which, as mentioned above, no longer exists but was made famous by Aristotle in the *Parminides*. In the West, paradox serves as a cognitive delineation and arguments do not pass beyond that point. There is no such delineation in the East as is noted below.
- 12 These rules are the Rule of Identity, that a thing equals itself, $A=A$, the Rule of Non-Contradiction, that a thing may not be anything but itself (A must be A and not B), and the Rule of Excluded Middle, in which a thing is true or another thing is true and there is no in between, i.e. A is only A and may not be B. In other words, in Aristotelian logic no binary dualities are allowed (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).
- 13 We use the term “Bracketing” as is used in the same terms as Husserl’s sense of *epoché* where an idea is placed aside (Beyer, 2016). However this usage also differs from Husserl in the sense that, in Husserl’s usage, he makes no distinction between the relative truth or falsehood of a phenomenon and instead places it in brackets. Instead, our usage of “Bracketing” concerns paradox, which, when they are determined, are then placed aside, cognitively, in brackets, so that these ideas are no longer considered; we have in a sense quarantined the idea and have placed it into a category. In Western discourse, these paradoxes are then “bracketed” safely into taxonomies. This “bracketing” resolves any requirement to try and “solve” the paradox. It is enough to place the paradox aside and then move on.
- 14 It has been 20 years since Fera’s work was published in the year 2000 and this is now 2019.
- 15 It must be stated categorically that while some may be interested in questions of ethnocentrism or of cultural bias in Muller’s actual works of translation, our interest lies

in the single fact that Muller was interested in the study of religion as a *sine qua non*, a thing unto itself, and that Muller founded what he called “The science of Religion” (Segal, 2016) which was and is a historical precursor to our modern field of the study of religion. While Muller’s works were about Hinduism and the Hindu scriptural texts, his work opened the field of the study of religions to others. It then makes sense, in a historical context, that once a “Science of Religion” had been founded, all religions, including Taoism, became plausible targets of objective study, or at least study that was as objective as could be obtained in that sociological and historical context. By this reasoning, it then makes sense that Taoist scriptures were first seen as worthy to be translated into English about a hundred and seventy years ago and it was only at this time that Taoist texts were translated by scholars.

- 16 See the Online Computer Library Center for more history: <https://www.oclc.org/en/dewey/resources/biography.html>
- 17 Anecdotally, a number of native-speaking, bilingual Chinese people were showed the *Tao Te Ching* text in Chinese. Although they all conceded that the text was “wise” they were baffled by it and unable to translate the sense of the text into English. Perhaps this resistance to translation is inherent in the non-discursivity of the text but this question is beyond the scope of this work.
- 18 See Hansen, 2017 for more on this.
- 19 The first line may also be translated as “The eternal Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao” (in Craig, 2007).
- 20 Examples of false to fact or imaginary objects include the square root of -1, the result of dividing by zero. False to fact objects include such speculative characters as The Joker or Spiderman, who have an existence in the imagination, but not in reality.
- 21 The paradox here is based on a violation of Aristotle’s rule of contradiction where A is stated to be equal to not A.
- 22 See Xing, 2001 for a more detailed recounting of this view.
- 23 Also Rendered the *Chung Tse* or *Chung Tzu*.
- 24 “I am always dreaming, therefore there is the possibility to be or, as well, to not be, but I may not know.” Translated by myself.

- 25 It should be noted that the term Torah can refer to any one of: The Five Books of Moses, the entire Hebrew Bible, including Prophets and Writings, or as a portmanteau that refers to all of Jewish learning, both oral and written, or as any part or parts thereof. In this case, the term Torah is understood to mean the entire encyclopedia of Jewish learning and tradition.
- 26 The Great Assembly existed from between c. 400 BCE to about 310 BCE and was a pre-Talmudic group who became important during the Interregnum between the first and second temples. This group included Ezra the Scribe and several other major Jewish personages. According to Jewish tradition, this group made several major contributions to modern Judaism which included the decision to canonize the Hebrew Bible as it exists today. They derived their authority to do so from the above statement. They also began formalizing prayer and started to compile the oral traditions of Torah which were much later codified into a text by Rabbi Judah Hanasi.
- 27 A Muslim is required to declare five times a day that “There is no God but God and that Muhammad is His greatest prophet.”
- 28 It is important, in this case, to separate Judaism as religion from Judaism as an ethnicity or nation. While both constructions are valid and both may be interdependent on one another, within the context of this paragraph the meaning is specifically Judaism as constructed solely as a system of faith.
- 29 See Moses Maimonides’ 13 principles of Jewish faith which are found in his commentary on the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin (Chabad Lubavitch Media Center, n.d.).
- 30 The name “Orthodox Judaism” describes certain movements within the rubric of Jewish practices. These groups believe in the absolute authenticity of scripture, or Torah, and both the fact that it was revealed directly on Mount Sinai to Moses as depicted in Exodus 19, and also that the entire Talmud, also known as the Oral Torah, was also revealed at the same time. While this belief is essential to Orthodox Judaism, this myth of revelation is also a huge part of all Jewish practice so that knowledge of this myth is a linchpin in the structural understanding of the cycle of Jewish holy days.
- 31 It is important to note that Roman Catholics are not the only Christian sect to have Catechism.

32 The author of the *Tao Te Ching*.

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(Copy editing: Curtis Harrison)

About the author

Joel West (joel.west@mail.utoronto.ca) is currently studying Semiotics and Religion at the University of Toronto. His current publications include “The Ontology of Yentl: Umberto Eco, Semiosis, Mimesis, Closets and Existence, and How to Read ‘Yentl the Yeshiva Boy’” in *Semiotica*, “The Dialogues of Bernie Madoff’s Ponzi Fraud” and “The Joker on the Couch: A Case Study” in *The International Journal of Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric* and a book chapter in the book *Empirical Studies in Semiotics and Visual Rhetoric* entitled “Neologisms: Semiotic Deconstruction of the New Words ‘Lizardy,’ ‘Stacycation,’ and ‘Wannarexia’ as Peircean Indexes of Culture”. His upcoming publications include “The Selfish Meme” in *Semiotica* and a Monograph, “The Sign of The Joker: The Clown Prince of Crime as a Sign”, which will be printed by Brill Press late 2019. Current academic interests include Popular Culture, the Philosophy of Science and Critical Theory of Religion.