



How can the ultimate reality be turned into the way to it : a special mode of thinking in early China

Gang, Xu

(Citation)

神戸大学文学部紀要, 38:183-199

(Issue Date)

2011-03

(Resource Type)

departmental bulletin paper

(Version)

Version of Record

(JaLCD0I)

<https://doi.org/10.24546/81008292>

(URL)

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/81008292>



How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

—A Special Mode of Thinking in Early China

XU Gang

Abstract:

This article focuses on Confucius' Jen and Lao Tzu's Tao, the ultimate reality in their respective philosophies, and argues that the philosophers in Early China invented a special mode of thinking. That is, by emphasizing a person's will to seek after it, they turned the seemingly untouchable ultimate reality into the way to it wisely. It is also interesting for us to notice that this mode of thinking turns out to be very similar to that of modern natural science.

Keywords:

Tao, Jen, ultimate reality, Confucius, Lao Tzu

As is known to all, Tao is the most important philosophical concept discussed by almost every philosopher in Early China. It is also the ultimate reality to most of them, especially Lao Tzu and Confucius. Compared with Lao Tzu's natural Tao, the Tao of Confucius is rather an ethic concept. Since the ultimate value of Confucius' ethics is called "Jen", usually translated in English as "perfect virtue", Confucius' Tao

is Jen in fact.

1. Two paradoxical meanings of Jen

However, what is Jen? When the researchers were studying *The Analects of Confucius*, an interesting phenomenon was noticed. On the one hand, Jen is the ultimate virtue of a human being. It is so strict of Confucius to praise somebody to be Jen that there are only several persons worthy of the title in the *Analects*. For example:

The viscount of Wei withdrew from the court. The viscount of Chi became a slave to Chau. Pi-Kan remonstrated with him and died. Confucius said, "The Yin dynasty possessed these three men of Jen." (18.1)¹

Tsze-kung asked, "What sort of men were Po-I and Shu-chi?" "They were ancient worthies," said the Master. "Did they have any repinings because of their course?" The Master again replied, "They sought to act according to Jen, and they did so; what was there for them to repine about?" (7.15)

Tsze-lu said, "The duke Hwan caused his brother Chiu to be killed, when Shao Hu died with his master, but Kwan Chung did not die. May not I say that he was wanting in Jen?" The Master said, "The duke Hwan assembled all the princes together, and that not with weapons of war and chariots: — it was all through the influence of Kwan Chung. Whose beneficence was like his? Whose

¹ The English translation of *The Four Books* is from James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, London: Oxford University Press, second edition, 1893. In order to be in accordance with the narration of this article, I have made some small revisions when necessary. The figure between brackets stands for the chapter and section number in *The Four Books*.

Jen was like his? (14.17)

Even Yen Hui, the favorite pupil who is nearly perfect in Confucius' eyes, can only be designated as "three months' Jen":

The Master said, "Such was Hui that for three months there would be nothing in his mind contrary to perfect virtue Jen. The others may attain to this on some days or nearly a month, but nothing more." (6.5)

As for Confucius himself, he never considered himself to be Jen:

The Master said, "The sage and the man of perfect virtue (Jen); — how dare I rank myself with them? It may simply be said of me, that I strive to become such without satiety, and teach others without weariness." (7.33)

So we can know he had set what a high standard for Jen. James Legge often translated Jen as perfect virtue directly, as in 6.5 and 7.33 cited above. This may be influenced by Zhu Xi, who said, "Jen stands for the perfect virtue in heart."² That is, Jen is the ultimate virtue of a human being.³

² Zhu Xi, *Variorum on the Four Books*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983, p.131.

³ There is an interesting dialogue between Confucius and Tsze-kung in *The Analects of Confucius*, which says, "Tsze-kung asked, 'Suppose the case of a man extensively conferring benefits on the people, and able to assist all, what would you say of him? Might he be called perfectly virtuous (Jen)?' The master said, 'Why speak only of virtue in connection with him? Must he not have the qualities of a sage? Even Yao and Shun were still not worthy of this.'" (6.28) Many scholars consider "sage" a higher level than Jen in Confucius' philosophy system according to this dialogue. But this is not true. I have dealt this question in my work of *The Way of Confucius and the Book of the Analects*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009, pp.162-164. Here I would not repeat that, but I only want to point out one thing. We all know clearly that Yao and Shun are the supreme models of saints in Confucius' eyes. If Yao and Shun are not worthy of "sage", then what is "sage"? I think the unique one who is worthy of it is God. But such concept as God runs counter to ↗

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

However, on the other hand, it seems that almost any good virtues of a human being can be called Jen. Such as filial piety and fraternal submission:

The superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up. Filial piety and fraternal submission! — are they not the root of all benevolent (Jen) actions? (1.2)

And the principle of reciprocity:

The man of perfect virtue Jen, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. (6.28)

And love:

Fan Chih asked about Jen. The Master said, "It is to love all men." (12.22)

And so on:

To subdue one's self and return to propriety, is Jen. (12.1)

Fan Chih asked about Jen. The Master said, "It is, in retirement, to be sedately grave; in management of business, to be reverently attentive; in intercourse with others, to be strictly sincere. Though a man goes among rude, uncultivated tribes, these qualities may not be neglected." (13.19)

Men of Jen are sure to be bold, but those who are bold may not always be men of Jen. (14.5)

Tsze-chang asked Confucius about Jen. Confucius said, "To be

^ Confucius' thought. Therefore, I would rather consider Confucius' answer in this dialogue as an impromptu exaggeration on "sage". The meaning of "sage" here is not accordance with the others in *The Analects*. It is not qualified as an evidence to prove that "sage" is higher than Jen.

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

able to practice five things everywhere under heaven constitutes perfect virtue Jen." He begged to ask what they were, and was told, "Gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness. If you are grave, you will not be treated with disrespect. If you are generous, you will win all. If you are sincere, people will repose trust in you. If you are earnest, you will accomplish much. If you are kind, this will enable you to employ the service of others." (17.6)

If I say, a man who is slow in his speech can also be called Jen, you maybe consider it ridiculous. However, it is really astonishing that the *Analects* read,

Sze-ma Niu asked about Jen. The Master said, "The man of Jen is cautious and slow in his speech." (12.3)

Interestingly, Sze-ma Niu, just like us, was confused at Confucius' answer, and continued,

"Cautious and slow in his speech!" said Niu; — "Is this what is meant by Jen?" The Master said, "When a man feels the difficulty of doing, can he be other than cautious and slow in speaking?" (12.3)

Now we can express the paradoxical proposition like this: Confucius' Tao, or Jen, can be defined as not only the ultimate virtue of a human being, but also all kinds of tiny virtues of a human being. This is just a special mode of thinking in Early China. That is, Tao, is both the terminus point and the way to it.

2. The unification of the paradoxical meanings

In Chinese, the word "Jen" is derived from "jen" (human being). It

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

means that Jen is the ultimate moral quality of a human being. It defines why a human being is a person. To Confucius, there are two aspects referring to Jen.

On the one hand, Confucius set up an ultimate standard for a human being to be a person, to inspire a person try to achieve the perfect virtue. However, this is only an ideal. Could he give us an explicit definition of "perfect virtue" in reality? I don't think he could. In fact, a man of Jen is only an ideal personality, which is designated to those imaginary ancient saints, like Yao, Shun, Yu, etcetera. But why these ancient saints could possess perfect virtues? The answer is just because they were ancient persons. Confucius knew them only through some fragmentary accounts, which only deals with their greatness, filtering off any impurity. It is only by this way that perfect personality can be formed. Our neighbours will never be our saints. Distance is the necessary condition for perfect personality. We can remember what Jesus had said, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." When Jesus came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" And they took offense at him. So that Jesus did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.⁴ Then we can understand why the men of Jen in *The Analects of Confucius* were all ancient persons died long before Confucius himself, since there would

⁴ *The New Testament*, "The Gospel According to Matthew", 13.54.

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

never be any perfect personality in reality.

On the other hand, we know that that a person will be what kind of a person depends on none other than his own efforts. The Master said,

The practice of perfect virtue Jen is from a man himself, not from others. (12.1)

A person's personality and achievement depends on his own deeds. What a person is he? This question can only be answered after his death, as Sartre's famous saying, "Man's existence precedes his essence."

While the ideal Jen is not existent in reality, we can never ignore or give a cold shoulder to the conception. It is through the ideal perfect personality that the meaning of a man's self-cultivation can be attained. Anything of a man's efforts aiming to this perfect virtue is a part of the perfect virtue; and any step towards the ultimate point is a part of the perfect virtue. A person is devoting himself to the society when he keeps communicating with others, which means "loving others" (12.22). It is in this progress that he can overcome his own shortcomings and become perfect step by step, as the Master said, "To subdue one's self and return to propriety, is Jen." (12.1) Any of the daily work of a person is a kind of training to be a gentleman, so that the Master said, Jen is "in retirement, to be sedately grave; in management of business, to be reverently attentive; in intercourse with others, to be strictly sincere." (13.19) If a man is able to practice five things — gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness — everywhere under heaven, (17.6) his benevolence will spread over to all the people, what is certainly worthy of the word "Jen". Then, why a man slow in his speech can also be called Jen? (12.3) If a man hasn't realized the

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

difficulty of doing, he will make promises rashly, and can not be trusted any more. As for him, to be prudent in utterance or slow in speaking is the key step toward the perfect virtue.

Now we can answer the question — what makes the terminus point, or the ultimate reality, turn into the way to it? The answer is the person's will, or the determination to go on the way to the ultimate virtue. Although the perfect virtue seems to be a remote ideal for us, it is not really faraway in Confucius' eyes. When a person is making up his mind to go on the way to Jen, he is with Jen immediately. When he determines to instruct his own conduct by Jen, he is a man of Jen immediately. So the Master said,

Is Jen, the perfect virtue, a thing remote? I wish to be Jen, and lo! Jen is at hand. (7.29)

There is also a metaphor somewhere else expressing the same meaning:

In the *Book of Poetry*, it is said, "How the flowers of the aspen-plum flutter and turn! Do I not think of you? But your house is distant." The Master said, "It is the want of thought about it. How is it distant?" (7.30)

"The want of thought about it" is a metaphor for the lack for will. In "The Doctrine of the Mean", a similar text can be found:

The Master said, "Tao is not far from man. When men try to pursue a course, which is far from the common indications of consciousness, this course cannot be considered Tao."

We can understand that what is really important here is the man's will. The Master said,

If the will be set on virtue Jen, there will be no practice of wickedness. (4.4)

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

A similar meaning was expressed by Tsze-hsia, one of Confucius' famous pupils:

There are learning extensively, and having a firm and sincere will; inquiring with earnestness, and reflecting with self-application: — virtue Jen is in such a course. (19.6)

Whether a man has the will to be with Jen depends totally on himself, having nothing to do with others. The Master said,

The commander of the forces of a large State may be carried off, but the will of even a common man cannot be taken from him. (9.25)

In this way, Confucius' ultimate Tao, or Jen, has been turned into the way to Jen; meanwhile, the perfect virtue, the seemingly untouchable terminus, has been turned into every part of virtue that everyone can possess. If a man has made up his mind to be with Jen, he is with Jen immediately.⁵ We can summarize the following magical equation for the discussion above:

Way + will = the Ultimate

It is on this meaning that we can say that the way IS the terminus.

3. Lao Tzu's Tao

In fact, the most famous philosopher dealing with Tao is not Confucius, but Lao Tzu. In *Tao Te Ching*, Tao is the terminus of the cosmos, that is, the origin of the cosmos. Lao Tszu said,

There is a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and

⁵ And now we can understand these words said by Confucius: "If a man in the morning hears about Tao, he may die in the evening without regret." (4.8)

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

earth. Silent and void, it stands alone and does not change, goes round and does not weary. It is capable of being the mother of the world. I do not know its name, and so I style it "Tao". I give it the makeshift name of "the great". (25)⁶

Tao begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures. The myriad creatures carry on their backs the Yin and embrace in their arms the Yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two. (42)

Tao is the terminus point of the cosmos, somewhat like Stephen Hawking's theory of "black hole". Through the Big Bang, the unique black hole bombed into our cosmos, and so the sun, the heaven, the earth, and the myriad creatures.⁷ And Tao not only begets everything, but also nourishes them:

Tao is overflowing, reaching left as well as right. The myriad creatures depend on it for life yet it claims no authority. It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit. It clothes and feeds the myriad creatures yet lays no claim to being their master. (34)

So Lao Tzu's Tao seems to be another untouchable point, nearly exceeding our imagination. But what is more interesting is that Tao has one more meaning in *Tao Te Ching*, that is, the way to it. For example:

Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles

⁶ The English translation of *Tao Te Ching* is from D. C. Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, Penguin Classics, 1963. I have made some small revisions when necessary. The figure between brackets stands for the chapter number in *Tao Te Ching*.

⁷ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, New York: Bantam Dell Publishing Group, updated and expanded tenth anniversary edition, 1998.

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

where none would like to be, this way of water is very similar with Tao. (8)

To retire when the task is accomplished is just Tao. (9)

Who can be muddy and yet, settling, slowly become limpid? Who can be at rest and yet, stirring, slowly come to life? He who holds fast to this Tao desires not to be full. (15)

This is called the Tao of deep roots and firm stems by which one can long live. (59)

Correspondingly, if something is going deviate from Tao, it is called "un-Tao" or "man-made Tao". Lao Tzu said,

A creature in its prime will soon degenerate, which is known as going against the Tao. This is called "un-Tao". That which is "un-Tao" will come to an early end. (55)

It is the Tao of heaven to take from what has in excess in order to make good what is deficient. The man-made Tao is otherwise. It takes from those who are in want in order to offer this to those who already have more than enough. (77)

Here the two meanings of Tao can be seen as one thing. This can be easily understood if we see in the same way as we see Confucius' Jen. Of course, the early Chinese could differentiate the terminus from the way to it. But when the terminus is some ultimate reality beyond our control, it would turn into a seemingly meaningless point in reality, since we would never reach it in fact. Such kind of terminus will be meaningful only in our mind. It points out the orientation of our behaviors, and so the meaning of our lives. Thus, when a man has made up his mind to be with Tao, the seemingly untouchable terminus, he is on the way to it. It is true that he will never reach the terminus

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

through the whole life, but it is meaningless to ask such a question as "Can he arrive at the terminus". How can we catch the final truth? The only way is to go on the way to it, not deviating from it. Thus what is really important here is that when he is trying to hold the way to the truth, the man is holding the truth itself. He will be with Tao as long as he is keeping his steps on the way to Tao. Lao Tzu said,

A man pursuing Tao is with Tao; a man pursuing Te is with Te; a man pursuing loss is with loss. He who is with Tao will also be gladly accepted by Tao; he who is with Te will also be gladly accepted by Te; he who is with loss will be also gladly accepted by loss. (23)

Compare with Confucius' declaration:

Is Jen, the perfect virtue, a thing remote? I wish to be Jen, and lo! Jen is at hand. (7.29)

How similar they are! Lao Tzu seldom emphasized a man's will to be with Tao directly, but we can infer from his words from time to time:

I do my utmost to attain emptiness. I hold firmly to stillness. The myriad creatures all rise together, and I watch their return. (16)

When the best students hear about Tao, he practices it assiduously. When the average students hear about Tao, it seems to him one moment there and gone the next. When the worst students hear about Tao, he laughs out loud. If he did not laugh, it would be unworthy of being Tao. (41)

My words are very easy to understand and very easy to put into practice, yet no one in the world can understand them or put them into practice. Words have an ancestor and affairs have a sovereign. It is because people are ignorant that they fail to

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

understand me. Those who understand me are few. Those who imitate me are honoured. (70)

Lao Tzu was always emphasizing on "free from desire", however, the desire for Tao is another cup of tea:

Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe Tao's secrets. But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe Tao's manifestations. (1)

Needless to say, the desire for Tao means nothing but a person's will to seek after Tao.

4. The ultimate reality and the way to it

The original meaning of the word "Tao" in Chinese is "road", "way". Lao Tzu often gave such hint in his expression. For example,

Were I possessed of the least knowledge, I would, when walking on the great way (Tao), fear only paths that lead astray. The great way (Tao) is easy, yet people prefer by-paths. The court is corrupt, the fields are overgrown with weeds, the granaries are empty; yet there are those dressed in fineries, with swords at their sides, filled with food and drink, and possessed of too much wealth. This is known as taking the lead in robbery. Far indeed is this from the way (Tao). (53)

To use Tao as the ultimate orientation for the human being is the thing at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period. And Lao Tzu is the first person who used Tao to refer to the origin of the cosmos. Why did Confucius and Lao Tzu, or the philosophers in early China equate the terminus with the way to it? Is it established by people through long usage, or by some philosophers intentionally? In my point of view,

it is conventional for Confucius, and intentional for Lao Tzu. Anyway, the early Chinese did own such special mode of thinking.

During the middle ages, the Zenists had made a famous metaphor for seeking after the truth of Buddhism. When I use my finger to point to the moon, my goal is the moon, not my finger. Here the moon is a metaphor for the ultimate reality of Buddhism, and the finger is a metaphor for the way to it. The ultimate reality is surely not the way, but he who wants to practice Buddhism can grasp nothing but the way. He has to be on the way through the whole life. He is with the ultimate reality so long as he is on the way to it. From my point of view, the secret of all religious instruction is just the way itself, not the so-called ultimate reality, like God. This secret might have not been realized by the ancient Hebrew prophets until Jesus Christ. When Thomas asked Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus replied, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." When Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me."⁸ It is in this way that Jesus claimed that he is the only way to the Father, and he IS the Father. And later, based

⁸ *The New Testament*, "The Gospel According to John", 14.1 — 14.11.

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

on this, the Theory of Trinitarianism was invented by the early Christians. However, how can a human being keep his feet on the way to the Father? This depends on his mind or faith. When one of the Pharisees asked Jesus the question to test him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment."⁹ What Jesus emphasized on is none other than the man's will to pursue the ultimate reality.

Pursuing the ultimate reality is an endless way. Since the terminus is an untouchable goal, what can we do to pursue after it? The early Chinese pointed out a very realistic way for those willing minds. That is, the principle of "from the near to the far". So practice starts from doing the things around us. "The Doctrine of the Mean" said,

The Tao of the superior man may be compared to what takes place in traveling, when to go to a distance we must first traverse the space that is near, and in ascending a height, when we must begin from the lower ground.

Thus an untouchable terminus seems to become a very easy and practicable way. Lao Tzu expressed the same meaning in *Tao Te Ching*:

A tree that can fill the span of a man's arm grows from a downy tip. A terrace nine stories high rises from baskets of earth.

A journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath one's feet. (64)
Based on the principle of "from the near to the far", a particular procedure was designed by Confucians. The following is the famous passage written in "The Great Learning":

⁹ *The New Testament*, "The Gospel According to Matthew", 22.34.

How Can the Ultimate Reality Be Turned into the Way to It

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.

Correspondingly, Lao Tzu also designed a similar procedure:

Cultivate Tao in your person, and its virtue will be genuine. Cultivate Tao in the family, and its virtue will be more than sufficient. Cultivate Tao in the hamlet, and its virtue will endure. Cultivate Tao in the state, and its virtue will abound. Cultivate Tao in the empire, and its virtue will be pervasive. Hence look at the person through the person; look at the family through the family; look at the hamlet through the hamlet; look at the state through the state; look at the empire through the empire. How do I know what Tao is? By means of this. (54)

Perhaps someone would say that such practical procedure may be the

reason that the Chinese people are so pragmatic. I would not discuss if the Chinese is pragmatic here, but I want to call my readers' attention to the cited "The Great Learning" above once more. The Confucians emphasized that a man seeking after Tao must extend his knowledge to the utmost, and such extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things. The Confucians believed that things being investigated, knowledge will become complete. Is this not the most important spirit of modern natural science? Any abstract knowledge is based on the investigation of things; this is positivistic, rather than pragmatic.

5. Coda

According to Thomas Kuhn, the history of scientific revolution is nothing but the change of research paradigm.¹⁰ In other words, the ultimate truth is nothing but the way we are seeking after. Every step to truth means a new paradigm of research, which is only partly "right", far from the absolute truth. In spite of that, every paradigm is still scientific. Seen from Kuhn's view on the scientific truth, the special mode of thinking in Early China is so "modern", isn't it?

¹⁰ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.