

A COMPARISON BETWEEN HERACLITUS' LOGOS AND LAO-TZU'S TAO

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Abstract: This paper explores a comparison between Heraclitus' notion of Logos and Lao-Tzu's notion of Tao(Dao). Since such comparison is not void of controversy, because of the spatial and cultural distance between the authors and the fragmentary nature of the texts of both authors, a cautious approach is needed, which makes use of multiple translations of the originals and engages in a meticulous textual analysis. Recurrent images used by both authors (the river, the opposition of contraries, the bow and others) suggest a seemingly similar structure in the metaphysical theory of the two authors. First, an analysis of Heraclitus' Logos and, secondly, one of Lao-Tzu's Tao will be provided. Four aspects will be looked at in both analyses: the notion of the Principle (common name I will use for Logos and Tao); the contrasting opposites which constitute it; the harmony which underlines it; and, finally, the depth which characterizes it. While this analysis is primarily metaphysical, connections will be drawn to the epistemological and ethical claims of both philosophers. This analysis will reveal that both authors seem to identify a dual structure of reality, comprising an inner, fundamental layer, and a superficial, manifest one. Time and space constraints will limit the scope of this inquiry to the fundamental core layer, only marginally referring to its superficial manifestations.

Introduction

In this paper I wish to draw a comparison between Heraclitus' notion of *Logos* and Lao-Tzu's notion of *Tao*. Fascinating comparisons between Early Greek and Eastern philosophy have been drawn in the literature¹. Given that these branches of philosophy arose in very different temporal and special contexts, the legitimacy of such a comparison can indeed be questioned. Several authors have,

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¹See, for example, West, M. L. (1971), *Early Greek philosophy and the Orient*, Oxford

however, attempted to support its validity. West's (1971) thesis is explicitly "diffusionist": similarities reflect ideas that Greek thinkers might have borrowed from Eastern philosophy. Kahn (1979) is instead of the opinion that parallels arise from the fact that particular authors, though far away in time and space, might be sufficiently akin to give rise to similar thoughts in similar language. Other thesis reported in Kahn are the idea of a sort of "human universality" underlying different cultures and the presence in different contexts of similar social and religious institutions as a basis for resemblance (Kahn, 1979: 300).

While these views are not mutually exclusive, and might in principle justify this comparison, caution is needed when addressing such a topic. Further difficulties are presented by the fact that in the case of both Heraclitus and Lao-Tzu, the texts that reached us are fragmentary and often (maybe willingly) obscure², reason for which interpretations across the literature diverge widely. Also, the texts are written in Ancient Greek and Chinese, thus imposing a further obstacle to a direct reading. To avoid the risk of forcing the meaning of the texts beyond the intention of their authors, I will adopt a cautious approach: I will pay as much attention to the similarities as to the differences between the authors; I will work with multiple translations³ of both Heraclitus' fragments and Lao-Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*; I will engage in a meticulous textual analysis.

At first fascinated by the recurrence of similar images (the river, the opposition of contraries, the bow and others) I have identified a seemingly similar structure in the metaphysical theory of the two authors. I will first analyse Heraclitus' *Logos*, then turn to Lao-Tzu's *Tao*, and conclude with a comparison which will emphasize similarities and differences. In both authors I will look at 1) the notion of the Principle (common name I will use for *Logos* and *Tao*); 2) the contrasting opposites which constitute it; 3) the harmony which underlines it; 4) the depth which characterizes it. While my analysis will be primarily

²As noted, for example, by Cooper (2010, p. 579) in relation to Heraclitus.

³For Heraclitus: Kahn, C. H. (1979). *The art and thought of Heraclitus*. Cambridge University Press, English translation Diels, H., and Kranz, W. (1934). *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Weidmann, 5th ed., English translation by Burnet, John (1920). *Early Greek Philosophy*. London. For Lao-Tzu: Addiss, S. & Lombardo, S. (2007), *Lao-Tzu – Tao Te Ching*, Shambhala Boston & London Lionel Giles (1904), *The Sayings of Lao-Tzu*, Kessinger Publisher LLC Loy, D. (1999). *Nonduality: a study in comparative philosophy*, pp. 113-125. New York: Humanity Books.

metaphysical, I will draw connections to the epistemological and ethical claims of both philosophers.

I. Heraclitus' Logos

I-1. The Notion of Logos

Both authors seem to identify a dual structure of reality, made of an inner, fundamental layer, and a superficial, manifest one⁴. For time and space constraints, I will limit the scope of my analysis to the fundamental core layer, only marginally referring to its superficial manifestations.

The core of Heraclitus' metaphysics⁵ is the notion of *Logos*, a sort of independent, mysterious and "divine" (Heraclitus, DK 114) natural law which "governs the Universe" (Heraclitus, DK⁶ 72) and the flow of change in reality⁷. It is difficult (if not impossible) to find an appropriate translation of this key term. Heraclitus himself states, in DK 1, that "it is what it is", suggesting that no further definition can be provided. However, several characteristics can be identified.

In early Greek language, the word *logos* meant "what is said", "word", "story". In this sense, Logos might simply indicate Heraclitus' account of reality, as it is used, for example, in DK 1: "this *Logos* is true evermore". Fragment DK

⁴The characterization of such structure as "dual" unduly simplifies the complex interactions between the two layers in both authors. For the purpose of this claim I mean: in Heraclitus, the fundamental layer is the harmony of contraries; the manifest layer is the fire/river; in Lao-Tzu, the fundamental layer is unnamed *Tao*; the manifest layer is named *Tao*. My choice to focus on the inner, less accessible layer is due to the fact that both authors indicate it as the true, ultimate level of reality: "The hidden harmony is better than the apparent." (Heraclitus, DK 54) "The Tao which can be expressed in words is not the eternal Tao" (Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 1, L.G.)

⁵As Cooper (2010, p. 579) notes, in Ancient Greek philosophy metaphysics principally dealt with the discerning of the *Archai*, ie the basic principles, of reality.

⁶The notation DK refers to the Diels-Kranz classification of Heraclitus' fragments.

⁷With "flow of change" I refer to Heraclitus' notion of *panta rhei*, the idea that "everything changes or is in a process of changing" (Cooper, 2010: 579). An illustrative fragment is DK 91: "Upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow." Also DK 49a and DK 6.

50⁸, however, suggests that, at least in some fragments, *Logos* is something different from Heraclitus' theory. In Ancient Greek the word *logos* was also used to indicate "mathematical ratio", "proportion", "calculation", "right reckoning", "reasonable proportion". Indeed, as noted by Long (1999: 91) and Kahn (1979: 22) Heraclitus' *Logos* is related to the notions of measure, proportionality, reasonableness. It is a regular law, which, according to Minar (1939: 341) could be connected to the Pythagorean ideas of harmony and rhythm.

Graspings: things whole and not whole, what is drawn together and what is drawn apart, the harmonious and the discordant. The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one.(Heraclitus, DK 10)

From a metaphysical perspective, Heraclitus describes the Principle through a series of oxymoric expressions. A clear example is fragment DK 10⁹, in which the opposition between the two contrasting sides of the Principle is embodied in a sort of "dynamic tension" (Kahn, 1979: 284) in which one opposite periodically flows into the other. The "positive" side of the principle ("whole", "harmonious") is inseparable from the "negative" side ("not whole", "discordant")¹⁰, in the same way that the total could not exist without its parts and the parts without their total. This interdependence makes all aspects of reality intertwined with each other. Thus, while these sides are opposite to each other, they are nonetheless fundamentally united in virtue of a systematic pattern, a "latent structure" (Long, p. 93) which stands at the basis of the cosmic order of reality.

The opposites are not to be thought as repulsing each other, as they often were depicted in Homer or Hesiod, but rather "co-present, interdependent, liable to change into one another, tacitly cooperating" (Long, 1999: 94). This idea becomes clearer if it is understood that, in the antithesis, the negative term assumes a sort of positive role, in that it "functions as a point of contrast by reference to which the

⁸DK 50: "Listening not to me, but to the *Logos*, it is wise to agree that all things are one." If *Logos* and Heraclitus' theory were ultimately the same thing, the distinction drawn in DK 50 would make little sense.

⁹Other fragments that display the opposition of contraries are DK 53, 60, 63, 67, 80, 88, 103, 126.

¹⁰It is to be noted that negative is here characterized as "not whole" (descriptive statement of absence of positiveness) rather than ugly or wicked (moral evaluation in ethical terms).

positive contrary is made conceptually definite and distinct" (Kahn, 1979: 209). As Heraclitus makes clear in the second part of fragment DK 10, the opposites are ultimately and fundamentally a unity which manifests itself in different forms and which, as Heraclitus writes in DK 84, "rests by changing". This unity helps to breach the "apparently unbridgeable opposition of monism [the identification of a single Principle] and pluralism [the manifestation of multiple things in the world]" (Long, 1999: 105).

Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tension (*palintropos harmonie*), like that of the bow and the lyre. (Heraclitus, DK 51)

Men do not know that the diverging agrees with itself: a structure turning back on itself (*palintropos harmonie*) such as that of the bow or of the lyre. (Heraclitus, Kahn LXXVIII)

The "diverging" forces which form the *Logos* ultimately "agree with each other", i.e. are different manifestations of a single unity, resulting in a harmony (*harmonie*). The original meaning of the term "palintropos harmonie", as used by Homer and Herodotus, is that of something that joins or fits together. It could be used in a technical sense to indicate a work of carpentry, but also in a figurative sense to indicate agreements between hostile men and, finally, in a musical sense to indicate the harmonious sound produced when different strings play together (Kahn, 1979: 196). Interestingly, these three levels of understanding the term *harmonie* deal with three very different aspects of reality: the material one, the human one and the artistic one. In choosing this particular term, Heraclitus seems to suggest that this harmony has a wide range. It is not limited to humankind, but to the whole reality. This generalization is further reinforced by the use, in the Greek text, of the neuter pronoun for "itself" (also used in DK 10 and DK 84).

Also the use of the adjective "palintropos" is relevant to the generalization of *harmonie* to the whole reality. "Palintropos" is an unusual epithet for the term "harmonie". Kahn (1979: 199) notes that this term contains the same root as the word "tropai" ("turnings") used in DK 31, with which Heraclitus describes fire (according to Heraclitus, the exterior manifestation of the *Logos*).

The images of the bow and the lyre further reinforce the generalization thesis. The two opposing but connected tensions of the tending and releasing of

the bow are unified and find actualization in the flight of the arrow. The tense strings of the lyre mirror the image of the bow: only in tending and releasing them the final harmony can be obtained. The images of the bow and the lyre also seem to contrast and complement each other: “the music of Apollo’s favourite instrument and the death-dealing power of his customary weapon must be taken together as an expression of the joining that characterizes the universal pattern of things.” (Kahn, 1979: 197).

All in all, it is in the very notion of “palintropos harmonie” that Heraclitus brings together his anthropocentric¹¹ doctrine of opposites with the notion of cosmic *Logos* (Ibid.: 200). The unity implied in the “palintropos harmonie” seems to be more fundamental than the opposites, in the sense that it underlines them, and yet it could not be such without them, since it is a harmony that has to “turn back on itself” (Kahn), is made of “opposite tension” (DK).

II-2. The Bridge to Epistemology

Traveling on every path, you will not find the boundaries of the soul (*psychè*)
– so deep (*bathùs*) is its *Logos*. (Heraclitus, DK 45)

This principle of *Logos*, a law implying an underlying harmony of contrasting opposites, is defined in fragment DK 45 as “*bathùs*”. Betegh notes that the expression “*bathùs logos*” refers in ancient Greek to a doctrine “which expresses some important truth but is difficult to communicate” (p. 408). The depth of the *Logos* is interesting especially in its connection with the notion of *psychè*. There is, in this fragment, a bridge between Heraclitus’ metaphysical notion of *Logos* and his epistemological idea on how (and if) we can know it. The key of this bridge is *psychè*, the human soul. As Wilamowitz (quoted in Kahn, 1979: 167) notes, Heraclitus is the first to have given “serious thought” to the human soul¹². In this fragment, *psychè* plays the role of a “principle of rational cognition” (Ibid.:

¹¹Kahn sees the doctrine of opposite as anthropocentric in that the opposites are often seen from a “human” perspective: for example, the oppositions in DK 88 (life/death, awake/asleep, young/old) are a clear illustration of this. This idea is, however, questionable if we turn to other fragments, such as DK67 (day/night, winter/summer).

¹²In Homer, for example, *psychè* is simply the *flatus vitae*, only mentioned when it leaves the body.

127), the human faculty which is potentially able to inquire into the nature of the cosmic Principle¹³.

New light is shed on the word *psychè* if it is considered in its association to the word "peirata". The attribution of "boundaries" to the soul implies that the soul must be of an extended nature. This extension, once again an unusual feature of *psychè*, relates it to the cosmic principle. Furthermore, the etymology of the word "peirata" recalls Anaximander's cosmic principle of *apeiron* (Ibid.: 127), thus closely tying together human soul with the Principle governing reality.

The *Logos* of the soul, thus, is not, and cannot be, fundamentally different from the *Logos* governing the world. There is, as Diels (quoted in Kahn, 1979: 21) notes, an "identity of structure between the inner, personal world of *psychè* and the larger natural order of the universe." Thus, "an understanding of the human condition" is "inseparable" from an understanding of "the Universe." In connection with DK 45, Heraclitus' fragment DK 101 ("I searched myself") can be interpreted not as an inward turn of the focus of the philosopher on himself, but rather as a starting point in the epistemological process of understanding the cosmic reality.

A *Logos* so deep cannot be limited to the human soul, but also, in turn, the human soul can have such a deep *Logos* only if it "travels" to seek a comprehensive experience and understanding of the world (Betegh, 2009: 411). Betegh (Ibid.: 402) notes that DK 45 is the only fragment in which Heraclitus uses the second singular person, directly addressing the reader: this search for understanding the ultimate reality, Heraclitus seems to say, must depart precisely from yourself, from the exploration of your inner soul and of its *Logos*¹⁴, ultimately the same *Logos* that governs reality.

Heraclitus writes in DK 2¹⁵ that "*Logos* is common (*xynos*)". The Principle is shared not only by all humans, but also by all living and non-living beings. It is a law by which everything abides, which "suffices for all things" (DK 114).

In DK 113, Heraclitus uses the same adjective "xynos" to connote the faculty of "thinking" (*phronèin*), common "to all (*pasi*)". The interesting ambiguity of "pasi" (which could mean "to all human beings" but also "to all things") mirrors

¹³This link between soul and rationality was very unusual for Heraclitus' contemporaries, as noted by Betegh, p. 409.

¹⁴A similar idea to the core Orphic principle "Gnothi Seauton" ("Know yourself").

¹⁵This concept is also repeated in DK 114

and reverses the bridge from metaphysics to epistemology which was drawn in DK 45. “Phronèin” is not only the epistemological process which conveys the “nous” (“understanding”, DK 40) which *all human beings* can potentially aim at, but is also the common metaphysical Principle (the *Logos*) shared by *all things*, i.e. the whole reality.

II. Lao-Tzu’s Tao: Metaphysics

II-1. The Notion of Tao

Tao called Tao is not Tao.

...

Nameless: the origin of Heaven and Earth.

Naming. The mother of ten thousand things.

(Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 1, AL&AS)

Lao-Tzu’s *Tao* is also a term difficult to translate. Its original literal meaning is “the way”, but Lao-Tzu makes use of it in a more metaphysical sense, as indicating a cosmic principle. In the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-Tzu draws the important distinction between unnamed and named *Tao*. They ultimately amount to the same thing (“same source, but different names”, ch. 1), but the named *Tao* is the external manifestation in the plurality of the world (“thousand things”), while the unnamed *Tao* is the real, core principle of reality which gave origin to the most basic features of the world (“Heaven and Earth”).

Everything originates from *Tao*; however, *Tao* is not a creator God, being entirely “without substance” (Cooper, 2002: 81) and often described in negative terms (nameless, ineffable, “something unformed and complete ... solitary and silent”, ch. 25). *Tao* is a source and precondition of things, but it is not in any way over, above or outside them. *Tao* is the way of reality, it *constitutes* reality, “pervading all things without limit” (ch. 25).

Is and Isn’t produce each other.

Hard depends on easy,

Long is tested by short,

High is determined by low,

Sound is harmonized by voice,

After is followed by before.

(Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 2, S.A. & S.L.)

The symbol of Taoism offers a visual image of the Principle, a circle in which black and white flow one into the other. The two contrasting sides are named *yin* (the white, positive, strong, masculine, bright) and *yang* (the black, negative, weak, feminine dark)¹⁶.

As noted by Smith, (2011: 274), the two sides are in tension but not in clear opposition; rather, they integrate and balance each other reciprocally: “each invades the hemisphere of the other and ... in the end they’re both defined in the circle which surrounds them.” This is supported by a textual analysis of ch. 2¹⁷, in which the pairs of opposites are not simply juxtaposed and contrasted, but related to each other through verbs like “depends on” and “determined by”.

Heaven's Tao

Is a stretched bow,

Pulling down the top,

Pulling up the bottom.

If it's too much, cut.

If it's not enough

Add on to it:

Heaven's

Tao

(Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 77, S.A. & S.L.)

Kupperman (2007: 118) calls this opposition of contraries continuously redefining each other the “dynamic order” of the universe. This dynamic order is illustrated once again in the image of the bow. At a first reading, this could look like as a static image (there is no shooting of the arrow like in Heraclitus), but it ultimately involves a sort of movement in potency in the tension of the string. The bow is not dead and still, but full of energy, in continuous movement within

¹⁶As in the case of the opposition within the Logos, the negative seems here not to be related to a necessarily unfavourable, negative evaluation, but rather to a ‘not-this’, a descriptive absence.

¹⁷Other chapters that substantiate this point are 22 and 45.

itself: the top and the bottom are pulled down and up at the same time, maintaining the essential balance of the bow itself. Feng (quoted in Loy, 1999: 345), in fact, notes how also the image of the circle in which yin and yang complement each other is not a static, but a dynamic one: “when a thing develops to the highest point it changes to the opposite direction which is decline”, and vice versa. The fundamentally polar structure of reality, thus, results in a harmony which resides in the dynamic balance of opposites (Cooper, 2002).

Empty of desire, perceive mystery (*miao*).
 Full of desire, perceive manifestations (*chiao*).
 These have the same source, but different names.
 Call them both deep (*hsuan*) –
 Deep and again deep:
 The gateway to all mystery.”
 (Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 1, S.A. & S.L.)

The ancients who followed Tao:
 Dark, wondrous (*miao*), profound (*hsuan*), penetrating,
 Deep beyond knowing.”
 (Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 15, S.A. & S.L.)

Lao-Tzu recognizes the presence of two layers of reality. According to a strict etymological reading *miao* can be understood as something “too small to be seen”, which “diminishes to the vanishing point” (Boodberg, 1957: 611). It is a concept closely related to spirituality and holiness, and something that is ultimately impossible to fully know. By contrast, *chiao* denotes the world of the apparent, superficial manifestations. Its etymological reading contains the notion of “make bright”, and it indicates all what we easily perceive in our everyday life. Paralleling unnamed and named *Tao*, also *miao* and *chiao* are not two fundamentally different concepts, but rather two different levels of the same concept. The sameness of *miao* and *chiao* is said to be *hsuan*. Boodberg (Ibid.: 617), relating this concept to its verbal root “to darken”, proposes a translation of *hsuan* as “reaching from the mystery into the deeper mystery”. As Cooper (Cooper, 2002: 572) notes, “for anything to exist there must be a profound origin or source that cannot itself be conceived as a thing or a being”. That source is the “bottomless”, “never exhausted” *Tao* (ch. 4). The recurrence of terms like *miao*

and *hsuan* in the description of *Tao* suggest that, indeed, its true nature is deep “beyond knowing”. The depth of *Tao* prevents any human being from attaining ultimate knowledge of it.

Loy (Loy, 1999: 122) suggests that the unattainability of this knowledge might come from the fact that it is impossible, for men, to objectively observe reality from the outside. Men live in the world, and thus cannot fully grasp it. Left with no possibility of investigating the real nature of reality, to the sage only one option is left: if he cannot understand the *Tao*, he should do nothing else but follow it. The impossibility of a proper epistemology carries with it ethical implications.

II-2. The Bridge to Ethics

*Better to be like water
which ... does not contend.
It pools where humans disdain to dwell,
Close to the Tao.
(Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 8, S.A. & S.L.)*

The idea of a harmonious, dynamic order unifies the two contrasting opposites. In fact, as Loy (Ibid.: 374) notes, the distinctions between such opposites might even be merely logical, only present in our mind and language. If we understand this, we can transcend them, reach the ultimate harmony and eventually “be like water”. Lao-Tzu’s concept of harmony, indeed, is not simply a *description* of the nature of reality, but also a *prescription* of how the sage (potentially every man) should behave. Grasping the intrinsic harmony of the world and abandoning oneself to it are, for the sage, one and the same thing. To follow the *Tao* is “never actively to go against the rhythms of the world”, i.e. to adapt oneself to the natural course of reality, to abandon oneself to its flow¹⁸.

The way, thus, assumes a three-layered meaning: it is the way of the ultimate,

¹⁸This idea of abandonment to the flow of reality is called by Lao-Tzu *wu wei*, an attitude of spontaneous and effortless, non-assertive approach to life. Cooper (2002: 83) comments on this notion: “The manner of our action should be submissive, weak, feminine, yielding. ... The water is a symbol of the way itself ... water influences without dominating, it is the source and sustainer of life, but does not interfere with it.”

underlying reality (unnamed *Tao*), the way of the universe as we perceive it (named *Tao*), and the way according to which every human being should live (*Tao* as the way to follow) (Smith, 2011: 253).

For Lao-Tzu, it is in the notion of harmony that constitutes the bridge between metaphysics and, this time, ethics (rather than epistemology), is to be found. We, humans, should *be* this harmony, rather than try to understand it. And, in fact, many of Lao-Tzu's chapters have a normative rather than descriptive tone. The main message Lao-Tzu wants to convey is not a rational, descriptive explanation of the Principle of reality but, rather a prescriptive rule that every single man, if sage, should abide by: "Live in accordance to the *Tao*" (ch. 55).

Conclusion

The notions of *Logos* and *Tao* display several similarities. For both Heraclitus and Lao-Tzu, the fundamental Principle of Reality is constituted by a set of dynamic oppositions which do not combat but, rather, define and complement each other giving birth to an underlying balanced harmony, the real core of the universal order. In both cases, the harmony seems to be more fundamental than the opposites, but at the same time it seems to depend on them and cannot transcend them. This harmony is also in both cases fundamentally mysterious. The world is composed of two layers, a deep one and a superficial one. Ordinary men only grasp one layer, the superficial one. But it is the deep layer which constitutes the real, fundamental, core feature of reality.

Here is where the main difference between the two authors can be identified. For Heraclitus, the task of the sage is to investigate the nature of this deeper layer. His is an *intellectual* philosophy, the ultimate focus of which is understanding how the world works. There is, indeed, a way to grasp (although maybe not to *fully* understand) the ultimate nature of the *Logos*: looking at one's own *Logos*, that of the individual soul, and understanding that, in virtue of its depth, it cannot be fundamentally different from the "common" *Logos* which governs reality. The investigation of the depth of the individual soul is the bridge between metaphysics and epistemology, between the existence of the "palintropos harmonie" and the understanding of it. For Lao-Tzu, instead, the sage is he who abides by *Tao*, the way, the natural order of the world, without striving to reach an understanding of it, which is ultimately unattainable. His is an [sic] *practical* philosophy, "a knowing *how* rather than knowing *that*" (Kupperman, 2007: 117).

Understanding the way which governs the world and behaving according to it are one single action. The concept of harmony is the bridge between metaphysics and ethics: once one has realised the harmonious relations which govern the world, he will abide by it, if he is sage.

Referring once again, in conclusion, to a *textual* analysis, the choices of the particular words *Logos* and *Tao* to indicate the Principle are very illustrative of this point. It is no coincidence that the authors chose these particular words, which had precise etymological implications and were connected, in the minds of their contemporaries, to use in specific contexts. *Logos* is a word which has to do with the mind, with the power of understanding, with the notion of measure. *Tao*, instead, indicates “the way”, a path, a route, a mode of behaviour.¹⁹

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¹⁹One final note: I would like to emphasize that the analysis and comparison in which I have engaged in this essay is an attempt to identify key similarities and differences between two very distant authors, while trying to stay as close as possible to the original text. Given the fragmentary and obscure nature of the primary sources, a degree of discretion in interpretation is unavoidable if one wants to draw any meaningful conclusion. The beauty and fascination of both texts, however, primarily lies, in my opinion, in their “linguistic density”, i.e. a “meaningful ambiguity” which involves “lexical and syntactic indeterminacy as a device for saying several things at once” (Kahn, p. 92). The “hermeneutical generosity” of both texts thus leaves us with questions that can never fully be answered. And while this could make the interpretative work at times hard or frustrating, it undoubtedly enriches its depth, making it even more absorbing and intriguing.

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