

THIRTEEN



THE TAO OF THE CODE

The Matrix is everywhere. It's all around us, here even in this room.

– Morpheus[†]

The Tao is hidden but always present.

– Lao Tzu

The *Tao Te Ching*¹ is one of the greatest works of China's rich philosophical tradition, and a source of inspiration throughout the *Matrix* films. Written by Lao Tzu² around the sixth century BCE, it focuses on both *metaphysics*, the nature of ultimate reality, and *ethics*, the matter of how one should live. "Tao" literally means *the way* or *the path*. "Te" refers to *virtue*, *excellence*, or *power*, and "ching" means *book*. Thus the most common translation of the title is *The Book of the Way and Its Power*.

The Word is Not the Tao

It is only a word. What matters is the connection that the word implies.

– Rama Kandra^{†††}

The study of Taoist philosophy can be a rather tricky matter, for as Lao Tzu tells us, the eternal Tao cannot be adequately captured in words. Thus, *Tao Te Ching* begins as follows:

1

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal name.

The unnameable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things . . .

This passage serves as a crucial point of entry into Taoist philosophy. Lao Tzu is about to tell us about the Tao, but he first wants us to realize that to talk about the Tao is to define it, to categorize it, to limit it. But the Tao itself is beyond limit. Words convey finite ideas and perspectives, but the Tao is infinite. Hence to talk about the Tao is to limit the unlimited. It is to capture but a small perspective of a much larger whole, and thus anything that you say will be a distortion of the truth. This leaves the Taoist philosopher with two options: either remain silent, or try to distort the truth in such a way as to bring maximum benefit to others, and minimum harm to the Truth. Given the importance of the Tao, and the need of human beings to understand and follow it, Lao Tzu chooses the latter approach. But when we study the Tao, we should always keep in mind Lao Tzu's urging that the Tao cannot be captured in words, or by any other means. As he beautifully puts it in the *Hua Hu Ching*:

6

If you attempt to fix a picture of it in your mind,
you will lose it.
This is like pinning a butterfly: the husk is captured,
but the flying is lost.³

While this point is crucial for understanding Taoism, it is also important for understanding the relationship between the Tao and the *Matrix* films. In this chapter, I'll suggest a number of parallels between various aspects of the Tao and the films. Some of these parallels are accidental, and others were intentionally created by the Wachowski brothers. But before we make these comparisons, I want to urge you to take them metaphorically, not literally. To compare the Tao to an object is like creating a road-sign. If the sign is understood correctly, it will point one's mind in the right direction – just as the symbol for a “curve ahead” will prepare the driver for what is to come. But the sign or symbol is never to be confused with the thing itself – the sign is not the road, and the metaphors are not the Tao.





With this point in mind, we can consider the Tao as a way or path that operates simultaneously on three distinct levels:

- 1 The Tao is *the way* of ultimate reality.
- 2 The Tao is *the way* of the world.
- 3 The Tao is *the way* of human life.⁴

The aims of this chapter are twofold. First, I will use passages from *Tao Te Ching* to show how Lao Tzu sees the Tao operating concurrently across all three of these realms *in our world*, and second I will illustrate how the Tao (or metaphors for the Tao) can be seen operating in these three realms *within the virtual world of the Matrix*.

The Way of Ultimate Reality: The Tao of the Code

I don't even see the code. All I see is blonde, brunette, red-head . . .

– Cypher[†]

With respect to ultimate reality, Taoist philosophy diverges sharply from the metaphysics of the West. The Western traditions have generally regarded “stuff” as ultimately real. The more technical name for this “stuff” is *substance*. “Substance” can be defined as *that in which properties inhere*. For example, *matter* is considered to be a substance. Properties such as being round, or 30 inches across, or 10 pounds, are said to be properties of a particular material object, but the object ultimately consists of *matter*, and this particular piece of matter just happens to have these distinct properties.

The central focus of Western metaphysics has been upon what kinds of substances there ultimately are. *Materialists* maintain that there is only one substance, and it is matter. Everything that truly exists, they say, is material.⁵ *Idealists* maintain that only immaterial substance exists. Reality is ultimately just immaterial minds and the properties of those minds, such as ideas.⁶ And many philosophers have been *dualists*. They maintain that there are *two* ultimate substances: matter and the mind, or the material and the immaterial.

Since these views all define reality in terms of one or more substance(s), they are called *substance ontologies* (“ontology” signifies a theory of existence). In contrast, Taoism is best described as a *process ontology*. It maintains that what is ultimately real is not “stuff” at all, but rather a process – a way of doing things.

For this reason, the Tao is identified with *nonbeing* rather than with *being*, as we see in the second passage:

2

The Tao is like a well:
Used but never used up.
It is like the eternal void:
filled with infinite possibilities.

One of the toughest things for the Western mind to grasp is how the Tao can be “nonbeing.” If it is not a thing, a substance, a being, then why should we suppose that it is real? Lao Tzu’s answer is that we can know the Tao through what it does. Nonbeing has power. It can do things, as illustrated in the following passage:

11

Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel,
but it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.
Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,
but it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends . . .

Here Lao Tzu shows us that nonbeing can be quite useful and valuable. Think of your cereal bowl. What you really need the bowl *for* is the empty space (the nonbeing) that it provides. You can fill it with Tastee Wheat time and time again, but the nonbeing will never be exhausted. You’ll never reach a point – say, after even a thousand servings – at which it needs to be replaced, because its empty space has been worn out.⁷

The function of the Tao, of course, is different than that of a wheel or cereal bowl. We can attribute to it two main tasks. First, it is from the “nonbeing” of the Tao that all “being” arises. Lao Tzu describes it like this:

25

There was something formless and perfect
before the universe was born.
It is serene. Empty.
Solitary. Unchanging.
Infinite. Eternally present.
It is the mother of the universe.
For lack of a better name,
I call it Tao . . .





And second, it is through the creative force of the Tao that all things are as they are:

34

The Great Tao flows everywhere.
 It may go left or right.
 All things depend on it for life,
 and it does not turn away from them.
 It accomplishes its task,
 but does not claim credit for it.
 It clothes and feeds all things,
 but does not claim to be master over them . . .⁸

We are now in a position to see how the Matrix code is analogous to the Tao of ultimate reality. There are four key parallels:

- 1 The code, like the Tao, is the ultimate reality within the Matrix.
- 2 The code gives rise to all the particular objects (being) within the Matrix.
- 3 The code itself is not an object within the Matrix. It is process (nonbeing).
- 4 The code gives shape and order to the interactions between objects in the Matrix.

The code is like the Tao insofar as it is what is ultimately real in the world of the Matrix. It is what stands behind all the appearances, and further, it makes them possible. It is only through their code that the objects of the Matrix (e.g., buildings, sidewalks, crows, agents, etc.) are able to exist in that world. Since the code is what is “really” going on in that world, it is what Neo perceives after he reaches a state of enlightenment at the end of the first film. Yet the code itself is not a “thing” within the Matrix. It is not an object: rather, it is what makes all the objects possible. It can be called *nonbeing*, for it accomplishes its tasks, not by its *substance*, but rather by its *process*. The objects within the Matrix are not created by simply amassing a bunch of symbols. Symbols that do not bear the appropriate relation to one another cannot make an object in the Matrix any more than an arbitrary string of letters “kjlldroqtieqfonssgg” makes a word. It is the relationships that hold between the symbols that create the virtual world of the Matrix. Yet a relationship is not a substance. And not only do relationships (process) create the virtual world of the Matrix, they also order it. All the rules of that system, such as gravity, magnetism, and photosynthesis, are governed by the relationships expressed by the code.

The Way of the World: The Tao of the Matrix

The Tao gives birth to both good and evil.

– Lao Tzu

You should know, Mom.

– Agent Smith^{†††}

The way or Tao of the world has to do with how the universe is ordered – its natural processes. While there are innumerable processes and relationships being played out within the natural world, *Tao Te Ching* suggests that the grandest and most fundamental of all is the principle of *yin–yang* or the complimentary co-inherence of opposites. Taoism regards the constant flux of life to be an endless interaction between two opposite yet complimentary forces, *yin–yang*. Things in the world can be divided by the yin–yang polarities (see figure 6). These polarities are embodied in the yin–yang symbol (figure 7).

YIN	YANG
Receptive	Active
Soft	Hard
Night	Day
Moon	Sun
Winter	Summer
Female ⁹	Male
Valley	Hill
Water	Stone
Emotion	Reason

Figure 6 The yin/yang polarities

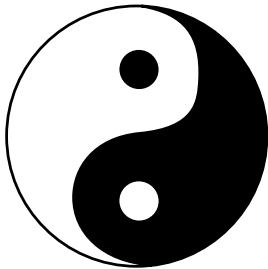


Figure 7 The yin/yang symbol

The symbol itself is quite telling of the philosophical ideas at work here. Notice that each side gets its particular shape in part because of the boundary that the other side creates. In this way yin and yang complete each other – you cannot have the one without the other. Also notice that within the black yin side there is a white dot, and within the white yang side there is a black dot. This represents the idea that nothing





consists entirely of one energy or the other. There is always some intermingling of these two polarities. Also, notice that both sides are equal in proportion. Although the universe is constantly changing, the forces of yin–yang call for balance. They are always bringing things back towards equilibrium. Lao Tzu writes:

2

When people see things as beautiful,
other things become ugly.
When people see things as good,
other things become bad.

Being and non-being create each other,
difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other . . .

36

If you want to shrink something,
you must first allow it to expand.
If you want to get rid of something,
You must first allow it to flourish.
If you want to take something,
you must first allow it to be given.
This is called the subtle perception
of the way things are.

We can see the energies of yin–yang at work in the Matrix as well, especially in *Revolutions*. We find yin–yang in subtle elements, such as the Oracle’s jade yin–yang earrings, but also in the most crucial aspects of the film. The Oracle represents primarily yin energy. She is an intuitive program who is guided at a more emotional level than her opposing force, the Architect, who is dominated by reason. Fitting to Taoist philosophy, she is represented through a female “shell” while he takes the male form. The Oracle tells us that the Architect’s purpose is “to balance the equation,” while her purpose is “to unbalance it.” In this way they also represent order and chaos.

We also see these opposites play out in the conflict between Neo and Smith. Neo fights for life, while Smith fights for death, saying, “the purpose of life is to end.” Neo’s aim is to free humanity from “systems of control,” while Smith is out for “total control.”



As the Oracle explains it: “He is you. Your opposite – your negative. The result of the equation trying to balance itself out.” And we see the *balance* of yin–yang exemplified through the ever-increasing powers of Neo and Smith. An excess in one polarity is inevitably responded to by the other – every action leads to an opposite reaction. Thus, when Neo (representing the softer, emotional, yin energy) gains incredible powers within the Matrix, Smith’s yang energy increases to compensate. When Neo develops the ability to fly, and to stop bullets in mid-air, this is soon balanced out by Smith’s ability to copy himself. And when Smith finds a way (through the body of Bane) to exert his power outside of the Matrix, Neo soon finds that his own powers extend beyond the Matrix, as he destroys a group of sentinels just by thinking it.¹⁰

The main lesson Taoism teaches regarding yin and yang is that these powers must be understood and respected. They are the way of the world and cannot be improved upon. Those who fail to appreciate this principle become the architects of their own destruction. This is also the main lesson of *Revolutions*. Although the Architect is *trying* to balance the equation, his failures lie in the fact that he is dominated by the mathematical and rational aspects of life. He excludes emotion, and therefore his very means of solving the problem is out of balance. His methodology goes against *the way* of the world, and yin energy naturally responds. Only through the Oracle’s “chaos” can a harmony between reason and emotion, machine and human, be realized.¹¹

The Way of Human Life: Walking the Path of the Tao

If you want to awaken all of humanity, then awaken all of yourself. . . . Truly the greatest gift you have to give is that of your own self-transformation.¹²

– Lao Tzu

There is a striking dissimilarity when we move to the third realm – the way of human life. In the first two realms the path of Tao is followed quite naturally and necessarily. Ultimate reality and nature can do no other – Tao is simply their way. But human beings do not *necessarily* follow the way of the Tao. The path we take is up to us – we can choose to follow the Tao or not. So to be clear, we should say that the Tao is the way of human life *when it is lived well*.



As we have seen, Taoism sees the world as operating through the balance of yin–yang. Similarly, in *Hua Hu Ching*, we are told that to live well we must respect this principle within our own lives:

58

Unless the mind, body and spirit are equally developed and fully integrated, no [wisdom] . . . can be sustained.

. . . When the mind and spirit are forced into unnatural austerities or adherence to external dogmas, the body grows sick and weak and becomes a traitor to the whole being.

When the body is emphasized to the exclusion of the mind and spirit, they become trapped like snakes:

frantic, explosive, poisonous to one’s person.

All such imbalances inevitably lead to exhaustion and the expiration of the life force.

The most common imbalance within human life, especially in the realms of business, politics, and technology, as they have been shaped predominantly by *men*, comes in the form of excesses toward the yang polarity. People are all too inclined to be overly assertive and aggressive. One way in which this theme arises in the *Matrix* trilogy regards technology. Humanity’s unrelenting pursuit of technological advances leads ultimately to the destruction of nature. The entire biosphere is destroyed; even the sun itself is blotted out by the scorched sky. The earth has become so dark, cold, and inhospitable that humanity has retreated to underground caverns. Although *Tao Te Ching* was written long before the “technological age,” it warns us about such ambitions:

29

Do you want to improve the world?

I don’t think it can be done.

The world is sacred.

It can’t be improved.

If you tamper with it, you’ll ruin it.

If you treat it like an object, you’ll lose it . . .

A life that follows the Tao rejects this sort of assertiveness. It does not strive to conquer nature, or other beings, but to live harmoniously with them.¹³ Thus the life that follows the path of Tao is much closer to yin. Lao Tzu’s favorite metaphor for the Tao is water, which exemplifies the subtleness and flexibility of

the yin polarity. He suggests that human beings can learn to live in accordance with the Tao by carefully observing the activity of water:

8

The supreme good is like water,
which nourishes all things without trying to.
It is content with the low places that people disdain.
Thus it is like the Tao . . .

78

Nothing in the world
is as soft and yielding as water.
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,
nothing can surpass it.

The soft overcomes the hard;
the gentle overcomes the rigid.
Everyone knows this is true,
but few can put it into practice.

In these passages we see several key aspects of *the way* of human life. Water nourishes all things without trying, but also (as some translators put it) without competing with them. Water is also humble – it takes the low path. It stays close to the earth, to nature, and does not strive to be “high and mighty” – a valuable lesson for both humans and machines. Another crucial feature of water is its fluidity – its utter flexibility. This is a key feature of yin energy that we must cultivate in our own lives. But, as Lao Tzu points out, few can put it into practice. Thus Taoism urges us to focus not on achievements in the world, but instead on ourselves. Just as Neo had to work on “freeing his own mind” before he could be of any real service to others, *Tao Te Ching* suggests that all real power begins with self-mastery:

33

Knowing others is intelligence;
knowing yourself is true wisdom.
Mastering others is strength;
mastering yourself is true power . . .

But the self-mastery that Lao Tzu is talking about is not that of *control*, but rather, of *freedom*. As Morpheus puts it, “You have to let it all go . . . fear, doubt, and disbelief. Free your mind.” You must allow the yin energies to make you



supple and flexible, so that you can follow the path that the universe itself lays out for you:¹⁴

57

If you want to be a great leader,
you must learn to follow the Tao.
Stop trying to control.
Let go of fixed plans and concepts,
and the world will govern itself.

The ultimate expression of this ability to follow the flow of the Tao's path is what Chinese philosophers call *wu wei*, "the action of non-action." The curious thing about the Tao is that it is essentially *nonbeing* that acts through *non-action*:

37

The Tao never does anything,
yet through it all things are done . . .

This makes the Tao doubly mysterious. How can something (or no-thing) do things without acting? On its face the idea seems ridiculous,¹⁵ but Lao Tzu's meaning here is subtle. "Non-action" does not mean no action whatsoever. Rather, it is, as the late martial arts master Bruce Lee referred to it, "natural action." In *Striking Thoughts: Bruce Lee's Wisdom for Daily Living* (a collection of writings from Lee's personal journals) Lee describes *wu wei* as *spontaneous action*, which is "neither to oppose nor to give way, but to be pliable, as a reed in the wind."¹⁶ This idea can be clearly illustrated through Lee's Kung Fu. If your opponent is charging at you, and is about to strike a blow to your face, you've got a couple of options. On the one hand, if you are extremely powerful (like Agent Smith or the post-enlightenment Neo), you could put out your hand and stop the punch in mid-air. Such a method utilizes the yang energy of the hard and brittle, but for most of us, it will not be effective. An attractive alternative is to step aside, perhaps grabbing your assailant's arm as it brushes past you, and then use *their* energy to propel them to the ground. This exemplifies action through non-action – it is to expend the minimal amount of exertion to achieve your goal. *Wu wei* effortlessly turns the aggressive yang energy against itself.

Lao Tzu suggests that water also exemplifies the principle of *wu wei*. Think of how ocean waves wear away at any rock or cliff that stands in their way. Or, imagine how water causes something as hard as iron to wither away into a crumbling pile of rust. What does water *do* to defeat the world's hardest substances? Nothing, really – it just flows naturally. Water acts through non-action. It is fluid and flexible. Force it into any space, and it will meekly oblige. But



through its flexibility, and persistence, it eventually overcomes the hard and brittle.

In the conclusion of the *Matrix* trilogy, we see that Neo achieves the impossible – he defeats the ever-multiplying, increasingly powerful world of Smiths – through the principle of *wu wei*. He is victorious through the action of non-action. At first the two battle it out, yang energy against yang energy, pounding each other through walls and into the pavement. But Smith has the numbers on his side. Neo cannot defeat them all (even if he could defeat one) in this manner. So Neo starts winning only at the point at which he stops fighting.

After Smith explodes out of the side of the hole in the city street, and begins his final tirade, shouting: “This is my world! . . . my world!,” in response Neo suddenly becomes calm and still. Like water, Lao Tzu suggests that the best way for people to achieve clarity is through stillness:

15

. . . Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself? . . .

Through his stillness, Neo allows Smith the space to pause also, and see the future with his newly acquired eyes. Smith then receives his vision:

Wait . . . I’ve seen this . . . this is it, this is the end. Yes, you remain right there, just like that. And I . . . I . . . I stand here, right here. And I’m supposed to say something . . . I say, “Everything that has a beginning has an end, Neo.”

But suddenly, Smith becomes confused:

What? What did I just say?

Here the film doesn’t explain exactly why things happen as they do. We are left to our own interpretations. But as I see it, by uttering the sentence “Everything that has a beginning has an end, Neo,” Smith inadvertently activates the code that Neo carries within him¹⁷ for restarting or “rebooting” the Matrix. The fact that Smith is surprised to hear these words come out of his mouth suggests that it is the Oracle’s doing. (Keep in mind that the Agent Smith that utters these words is the “Smith” that had been copied onto the Oracle. Her programming was “overwritten,” but the fact that he has *her* vision suggests that the overwrite is not 100 percent.)¹⁸ So I suspect that it is the remnants of *her* programming that caused him to utter the fatal phrase.





Neo's response to this turn of events also illustrates *wu wei*. He becomes as flexible as water, and with a certain peace and tranquility, he gives in completely to Smith, saying, "What are you afraid of? You were right Smith. You're always right. It was inevitable." Neo's submission encourages Smith to "overwrite" him, but in so doing, Smith becomes the cause of his own annihilation. In the characteristic style of *wu wei*, yang energy is turned against itself. Almost like hitting the "Enter" key on your computer to start up a program, Smith's act is the final stroke that brings about the rebooting of the Matrix. The virtual world suddenly renews itself – minus Agent Smith, his numerous copies, and the path of their destruction.

In the end, it was Neo's ability to let go of his own assertiveness and to follow the path that the universe had laid out for him, which leads to *peace*, the most revered of Taoist values:

31

Weapons are tools of violence;
all decent men detest them.

Weapons are tools of fear;
a decent man will avoid them
except in direst necessity
and, if compelled, will use them
only with the utmost restraint.
Peace is his highest value . . .

And in the dangerous game played out by the Oracle and the Architect, it was the Oracle's yin energy, restoring things to balance, that ultimately prevailed. In the final scene in the park we see that the Architect is begrudgingly humbled by the experience. He realizes that her way is the only viable way, and agrees to free "the others" – those who want out of the Matrix. Like water, the Oracle applies constant pressure toward a true balance, and thereby achieves the harmony that is Tao.

Suggested Reading

Herbert Giles, *Chuang-Tzu: Mystic, Moralist and Social Reformer*, London: Bernard Quartich, 1989).

Bruce Lee, *Striking Thoughts: Bruce Lee's Wisdom for Daily Living*. Boston: Tuttle, 2000.

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, tr. Stephen Mitchell. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.

Lao Tzu, *Hua Hu Ching*, tr. Brian Walker. Livingston, MT: Clark City Press, 1992.

Notes

- 1 *Tao Te Ching* is pronounced *Dao De Jing*, and often this alternative spelling is used. All passages quoted are from Stephen Mitchell's translation (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), unless otherwise specified. Also, thanks to Carlos Aguas for encouraging me to pursue the comparison between the *Matrix* and the Tao, and to Randy Firestone for his helpful comments.
- 2 Some scholars are skeptical about whether *Tao Te Ching* was written by a single author named Lao Tzu.
- 3 *Hua Hu Ching* is said to be Lao Tzu's other book, but there is some scholarly debate on this matter as well.
- 4 This idea is expressed in passage 25 of *Tao Te Ching*: "Man follows the Earth. Earth follows the universe. The universe follows Tao. The Tao follows only itself." The analysis here is also indebted to Huston Smith, whose work has greatly influenced my understanding of Taoism on this and many other points.
- 5 For more on materialism see chapter 3. Of something that is seemingly immaterial, such as love, the materialist will have to deny that it exists, or argue that it is ultimately comprised of matter, e.g., love is just a particular biochemical state of a person.
- 6 For more on idealism see chapter 10.
- 7 In passage 4 of *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu writes: "Tao is empty (like a bowl). It may be used but its capacity is never exhausted."
- 8 For this passage I have used a translation from Wing-tsit Chan's *The Way of Lao Tzu* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).
- 9 The association of "female" with the passivity of yin energy is easily construed as sexist. In this regard it is important to note that water, Lao Tzu's favorite metaphor for the Tao, is also associated with the yin polarity.
- 10 Thanks to Rebekah Levy for bringing this parallel to my attention.
- 11 The Oracle causes chaos because without her help the human rebellion could easily have been squelched. By helping the humans she causes more discord in the present moment in order to establish peace for the future.
- 12 This quotation comes from *Hua Hu Ching*, passage 75.
- 13 When the British scaled Mount Everest the feat was widely hailed as "the conquest of Everest." In response, renowned Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki remarked that "We orientals would have spoken of befriending Everest." Also in the spirit of noncompetitiveness, the Japanese team that scaled Anapurna, the earth's second highest peak, stopped just 50 feet from the summit.
- 14 We see Neo allowing the Tao of the universe to guide him when he chooses to follow his visions by taking the Logos to the machine world – despite the utter insanity of this idea. Another interesting Taoist parallel can be found in the way in which the blinded Neo "sees" the machine world. In an interview Keanu Reeves referred to this new vision as seeing "the life force" – a term often used for the Tao. So a Taoist interpretation of this unexplained aspect of the film is that Neo is seeing the Tao inherent in everything within the machine world. Passage 22 of *Hua Hu Ching* puts it like



this: “How can the divine Oneness be seen? In Beautiful forms, breathtaking wonders, awe-inspiring miracles? The Tao is not obliged to present itself this way. If you are willing to be lived by it, you will see it everywhere, even in the most ordinary things.”

- 15 This code is mentioned by the Architect at the end of *Reloaded*.
- 16 Bruce Lee, *Striking Thoughts: Bruce Lee's Wisdom for Daily Living* (Boston: Tuttle, 2000), p. 34.
- 17 In passage 41 of *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu writes, “when a foolish man hears of the Tao, he laughs out loud. If he didn't laugh, it wouldn't be Tao.”
- 18 As the Oracle explains to Neo at their previous meeting, “Some bits you lose, some bits you keep.”

