In a place and time about as remote from us as possible in the real world, two texts emerged which expressed a philosophical perspective that came to be known as Taoism. In the millennia after the seminal works of Taoism took their basic shape, scholars of various persuasions have struggled to interpret that philosophical perspective. It is my view that the main line of thought used in the interpretation of Taoism has frustrated understanding of the interesting philosophical core of Taoism and should be regarded as a failure. The reason, simply put, is that the scholars, looking at Taoism through the ideological filters of either Buddhism, superstitious Taoism, Han Confucianism, and eventually Christian mysticism, have clung to an assumption that the main topic is the metaphysical Tao/way—a monistic and mystical absolute. This assumption has landed all of the interpretations in bald contradictions which the interpreters cavalierly dismiss by claiming that the Taoist philosophers approved of contradiction. No evidence for this bold claim is offered, of course, that goes beyond the fact that the interpreter's own theory is contradictory.

In recent years, scholars have become suspicious of the claims of Chinese illogicality and have tried various strategies to clarify the understanding of Taoism. The interpretive strategy which has been most popular has been to divide Taoism into "strata." One then offers a coherent interpretation for just one stratum and then tries to show some more general connection to the other layers.

The basic stratification has been between philosophical and religious Taoism. The philosophical layer has been further divided into "contemplative" and "purposive" components. I propose further to divide the "contemplative" into speculative (mystical-metaphysical) and critical (semantic-epistemological) layers. I will propose an interpretation of the critical philosophical strata as the "core" of Taoism and give an account of its relation to the purposive and metaphysical strata of Taoism.

The critical philosophy of the Tao Te Ching is seldom the focus of attention of interpreters. It is, nonetheless, an important and natural inroad to understanding Taoism from the perspective of a philosophical culture which stresses epistemology and semantics. An analysis of epistemic contexts in classical Chinese suggests differences in the concepts of "knowledge" and "belief" which help make the critical philosophical theory of Taoism in the Tao Te Ching (the Lao Tzu) coherent and insightful.

THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE

Traditionally, the Taoist critical attitude toward knowledge has been regarded as stemming from the "Proto-Taoists" Shen Tao, T'ien P'ien, and P'eng Meng. Our main source of information on the doctrines of these three early
Taoists comes from the “T’ien Hsia” chapter of the _Chuang Tzu_. According to that account, Shen Tao advocated, among other things, “ch’i/discard, chih/knowledge, ch’ii/abandon, chi/self.”

Insofar as the _Lao Tzu_ shares Shen Tao’s concept of knowledge, there is an immediate contrast between it and the paradigm Indian or Western concept. That is, in Taoist thought, knowledge is not merely doubted or refuted, but is held to lack value. Knowledge is something to be “discarded.” It is not so much that knowledge was doubted as that it was disapproved of. We may, in other words, assume we do have knowledge, but that we would, for some reason, be better off without it. Also we find nowhere in the _Lao Tzu_ any reference to “belief.” “mere opinion,” or any epistemic counterpart. That contrast between “belief” and “knowledge” is the central and motivating distinction behind Indo-European epistemology and skepticism.

These contrasts strongly suggest that there are differences between the Chinese term chih/know and the English verb “to know.” The hypothesis considered in this article is that where Western or Indian analyses of knowledge focus on propositional knowledge (knowing-that), Chinese, especially Taoist, critical theory focuses on practical knowledge _cum_ skill (knowing-to or knowing-how-to). What we ordinarily regard as propositional knowledge can be viewed as a linguistic or intellectual skill. Intellectual knowing is knowing to (or how to) use a linguistic form as part of a behavioral response to some situation. To use a linguistic form is to conform to social conventions. Knowing names is knowing how to employ them in accordance with those conventions. Thus knowledge is essentially a conventional skill.

Both traditions share a third part of the concept of knowledge—knowledge of—awareness or acquaintance. Critical or skeptical arguments in both traditions tend to emphasize how much the other respective kinds of knowledge are involved in “awareness.” Western skepticism, for example, usually allows that we might indeed be aware of _something_, but finds almost any statement of what that knowledge is subject to the skeptical attack on propositional knowledge. Taoism, on the other hand, suggests that all “ordinary” awareness involves our acquired, shared ability to discriminate among things in accordance with our conventional linguistic practices.

The argument for this hypothesis has two parts. First the hypothesis that knowledge is viewed as a species of skill helps explain, interpret, and understand the text. Second, that Chinese thinkers would so view knowledge can, in its turn, be explained by Chinese syntax. That is, we can understand why someone operating with a language like classical Chinese would be likely to focus on different concepts of belief and knowledge.

Traditional Western thought has focused on propositional knowledge and the vehicle that generates the problems of propositional knowledge (skepticism) is the contrast between knowledge and belief. This contrast is made natural by their similar grammatical structure. English, for example, has two
basic and grammatically parallel epistemic structures, that is, “x knows (that) ...” and “x believes (that) ...” Both structures are completed by inserting some ordinary declarative sentence into the grammatical structure. “X knows that P” entails “X believes that P” but not vice versa. “X knows that P” entails “P is true” while “X believes that P” does not.

Western skepticism, then, works from a picture of belief as a mental state—an instantiation of the propositional content in some spiritual or mental medium. That belief is expressed in the sentence that follows “believes” or “knows”. This makes us talk of that propositional content as the belief (thought or idea). Only when the content—the belief—corresponds to some objective state of affairs, that is, is true (and produced by a reliable procedure) does one have knowledge of that content.

From that representationalist picture, any number of familiar arguments flow which are supposed to show that we can be justified only in asserting the belief claims. Thus Western skepticism argues that knowledge, given the picture suggested by the grammar, is impossible. That our beliefs are true is just another belief in an inescapably subjectivist circle. Consequently, all seeming knowledge is merely belief. We are unable to break out of the subjective epistemic circle since our beliefs are all to which we have access.

This contrast between belief and knowledge may be further copied in an account of sense experience. Skepticism of the senses is motivated by reflecting on a parallel contrast between two kinds of “seeing.” In one sense of “see,” I see the Easter lily in front of me. In the sense of “see” which is more like “believe” I “see” an Easter-lily like mental item—an appearance. That contrast produces, in both India and the West, the familiar theory of skepticism of the senses. When I assert that I see an armadillo, the skeptic corrects me and says, “you see an armadillo-like mental representation,” (image, sensa, and so forth). The correction amounts to a translation into a theory of seeing of the claim that you only believe you see an armadillo—you do not know one is out there. The new sense of seeing used in sense skepticism may be motivated by stories of dreams and illusions designed to yield the crucial premise “you don’t know that ... since it is possible that you are dreaming or hallucinating that ...”

Arguments from dreams and illusions to a theory of subjective mental states of seeing or believing are not the basis of Taoist (or any pre-Han) skepticism. Phenomenalism, the philosophical theory that such states are the basic form of the real, was introduced into China by Indian Buddhism. And even when introduced, the force of the phenomenalists’ arguments was not felt very strongly in China—witness the quick demise of the Consciousness Only school. Anti-Buddhist writers delight in attacking what seems to them to be an absurd Buddhist attitude that the world is an illusion.

The grammar of Chinese explains the lack of appeal of these familiar skeptical arguments. The grammar of classical Chinese belief contexts suggests a notion of an epistemic activity rather than an epistemic state. Classical
Chinese does not have a simple verb “to believe.” Instead there are a number of verb and co-verb structures which are conventionally translated into English belief contexts. One particularly interesting structure takes a one-place predicate (intransitive verb, adjective, or noun) and uses it as a two-place predicate (transitive verb), that is, “x F y” “Ta/large chih/it” is conventionally translated either as “enlarge it” or “treat it as large” (the so-called causative and putative readings). The putative reading could justify a behaviorist translation of “believe it to be large,” that is, attach the modifier “large” to nouns which designate the object; use the one-place predicate “large” with individual constants which designate the object (or as a free-standing utterance in the presence of the object, and so forth); respond to this object in ways regarded as appropriate by the linguistic community employing the term “large,” and so on.

There is a more lengthy epistemic pattern in Chinese which is also conventionally translated into a similarly behaviorist approximation of a belief context, that is, “x i/with y wei/make:do F” (again where F is a one-place predicate—an adjective or a noun if simple, a two-place predicate plus term when complex). This structure is frequently translated straightforwardly as “believes that y is F” but it is widely regarded as a more accurate reflection of the grammar to translate this structure as “x takes (deems, construes) y to be F.” Again we can use the dispositional concept of belief in explicating this structure. That is, x acts (wei/do) toward y in such and such ways, uses the term “F” of the object y, etc. To “i/with y wei/do F” is to be disposed to conform to some linguistic and related conventional practices. Accordingly, in Chinese semantic theories the emphasis is not on whether an expression is true or false, but whether it is k’o/assertible: admissible. That some expression is assertible depends on a mix of the linguistic conventions and the actual circumstances. Taoist skepticism about language is not skepticism about its accuracy in describing what cannot be described, but doubt that there is anything other than the social conventions about which it can be right or wrong.

Chih/know(ing) can be understood in parallel ways. The Chinese relation chih/know usually is followed by either a noun (or noun phrase) or a predicate (adjective or verb phrase): for example, “x chih/know wo/I,” and “x chih/know jen/benevolent.” So there is a grammatical affinity with two of the three concepts of knowledge in Western languages: knowledge-of or knowledge-about and knowing-to or knowing-how-to—that is, acquaintance and skill.

The Neo-Mohist epistemological definitions reflect these features of the grammar of chih/know. There are several different definitions. The basic definitions are “chih/know ch’ieh/contact yeh/assertion particle” and “chih/know ts’ai/ability yeh/assertion particle.” These definitions appear to correspond to the use of chih/know followed by a noun and chih/know followed by a verb. The Neo-Mohists also classify the objects of knowledge as ming/names, shih/stuff, ho/union, wei/make:do. These can all be construed as forms of
knowing how. In a rather well-known example, the main text of the *Mo Tzu* uses the example of a blind man to explain the difference between knowing names and knowing things. The blind man can construct all the appropriate sentences using *pai/white* and *hei/black*, but he cannot separate black and white objects placed in front of him. The example treats the blind man's knowledge of names as the ability to construct standard sentences using the words *hei/black* and *pai/white*. The blind man's lack of knowledge of the *shih/stuff of hei/black-pai/white* is then demonstrated by his lack of ability to choose or discriminate them. The knowledge of names is the ability to conform to the accepted social practices in the use of that name in constructing expressions. The knowledge of things is the ability to conform to the community's practices of discriminating things. These two abilities are combined (*ho/union*) by most members of any linguistic community. Those linguistic skills then lead to the skill of being able to *wei/do*: act in the ways associated with the name and the discrimination by that community. Someone who fully understands a name also “knows-to” act in certain ways in certain situations. As we noted earlier, all of these behaviors seem involved in what it means to “*pai/white*” something—to use the name in its presence, discriminate the white from the background colors, and treat the white object in ways which we would conventionally regard appropriate, for example, understanding “white” involves knowing-to respond to it as a symbol of purity; understanding “*pai/white*” involves knowing to react to it as a symbol of cruelty.

Like the behavioral belief-contexts, there is a grammatical form that transforms and embeds a sentence as the object of *chih/know*. The subject-term embedded in the sentence modifies the predicate (the subject term is followed by the attributive particle “*chih/s’*”). The grammatical form is “*x chih/know y chih/s F (yeh/assertion-particle).*” When the original sentence is an equation, that is, a sentence consisting only of nouns plus *yeh/assertion*-particle like “*x y yeh/pt*” (or uses the equational negative *fei/neg.*) then the embedded sentence frequently converts the “*y*” to “*wei/make: deem y*” which stands as the predicate (F) in the formula. The “*yeh/pt*” is optional but does seem to prevent confusing the “propositional” reading from a possible acquaintance reading, for example, *chih/know ch ’i/its pai/white yeh/pt* (know that it is white) versus *chih/know ch ’i/its pai/white* (know that part of it which is white).

If again we were to search for a translation convention which would be sensitive to the grammar of the Chinese concept *chih/know*, we could use either “*x knows (of) y’s being F*” or “*x knows y’s F-ing,*” which would assimilate *chih/s* followed by a sentence in this form to knowledge by acquaintance. Implicitly we treat the “*y chih/s F yeh/pt*” as a noun phrase.

But we can also reflect the structure, perhaps even more accurately, along the behavioral lines suggested by the various belief contexts discussed earlier. This structure could be treated quite naturally as a version of knowing-to or
knowing-how-to, for example, x knows to utter “F” in situations dealing with y, to discriminate y along F-like conventional lines, to respond and react to y in ways associated with the use of “F” in the appropriate community, and so forth. This construal would also make natural sense of the function of the assertion particle yeh/pt. Basically, x knows to assert F of y. To know to do those things is to have mastered a set of social practices which are related in central and important respects with linguistic practices, that is, a tao/way. The object of knowledge is a tao—a way of responding or interacting.

This is how I propose to understand the concept of chih/know in Chinese in general and Taoism in particular. It is important to see that our most familiar concept of knowledge would be misleading as a way of understanding the Chinese philosophy of chih/know. In particular it would make “discard chih/know” seem absurdly paradoxical, while on the conventional skill interpretation it would be a natural reflection of Taoism’s universally recognized anti-conventionalism.

What is not suggested by the structure of Chinese epistemic contexts (“know” and “believe”) is the Western solipsistic account of belief as a private mental content—a proposition, an idea, and so on. The point of focus for epistemic questions in general is not the individual subjectivity reflecting an objective reality. Instead the crux of critical concern would be the community’s scheme of distinctions and the associated “appropriate” attitudes and actions. Are the behaviors associated with the community’s terms of evaluation and discrimination a “constantly” reliable action guide? (This question takes the place of our natural question, are they “correct” or “true.”)

Epistemic activities are to be viewed as “takings to be,” construing as, treating as, that is, as conventionally generated and shaped responses of persons. We can suppose that chih/know has, like the English verb “know,” a “success” component. One chih/knows only when one construes correctly. The Taoist critique pivots on the suggestion that the correctness of the “skill” lies not so much in some mapping on a reality as in its conformity with the conventional practices. Ultimately then, the Taoist concept of knowledge (the one in question in slogans like ch’i/abandon chih/know) is the ability to make distinctions, evaluations, and undertake actions which are dictated by social convention.

Thus, the Lao Tzu depicts such conventional knowledge as a species of cleverness, skill, or glibness. The behaviors associated with chih/know comprise a system of practices of which the text is critical. That system links (1) words and language, (2) learning, (3) distinctions, (4) desires, and (5) actions. The following account of the relation of these elements suggests itself: To chih/know is to have an acquired or learned skill to discriminate and divide (and name) shih/stuff in accordance with the system of distinctions in the language (the names) and to have acquired the appropriate desires and attitudes leading to the approved-of actions.
Chih/know is a learned response skill—knowing (how) to respond verbally, emotionally, physically in concrete circumstances according to a conventional set of practices (a tao/way). Learning or education, accordingly, is not the mere acquisition of data, rules, and theories, but is a training in the appropriate responses. Even the Confucian absolutists view education more as moral training than as "science" or inculcating of items of true belief. The Taoists would never confuse learning with purely formal education in the Western sense. Learning begins at birth along with the acquisition of language and continues everyday of one's life. Learning a language is learning to make distinctions and discriminations that the other language users make and also to recognize and respond to others' uses of language. Language is a regulative, conventional activity which carries most of the burden of "socializing" us—generating in us and reinforcing attitudes and patterns of action.

The Contrast Theory of Language

The Tao Te Ching presupposes that there is a form inherent in language qua regulative core of a set of social practices. Virtually all the examples of terms and distinctions cited by Lao Tzu are evaluative dichotomies, for example, beautiful-ugly good-bad, high-low, long-short, front-back. These opposites in language are " hsiang/mutually sheng/born" and mutually dependent; that is, the names, distinctions, opposing attitudes and so on are introduced into conventional practices in pairs. Even if there is no specific name for an opposite, the acquired ability to make the distinction necessary for use of any term would "create" the ability to distinguish and react to the other via negation.

There is for each such pair of opposities in language just one distinction. Both terms grow out of the same ability. The difference between such evaluative opposites lies in the evaluative attitude or the desires created along with the names and the distinctions. Learning the terms "mei/beautiful" and "o/ugly" involves learning the distinction between them and then having a preference for objects described by one rather than the other. (If every living Chinese had followed the tao of reversal and preferred what was called o/ugly, we would have to conclude that that character should be translated "beautiful," no doubt leaving us with the problem of appreciating such perverse aesthetic judgments.)

The traditional metaphysical interpretation of these claims about opposites being born together is that it is a claim that corresponds somehow to a modern scientific view of quarks and antiquarks or the like. The metaphysical interpretation is grammatically possible because classical Chinese does not employ quotation marks to distinguish when a term is used to refer to something in the world and when it is being used to refer to itself, that is, when it is being used and when it is being mentioned. Mentions are frequently noticed and marked by translators and in punctuated versions of the text. But
the metalinguistic reading (treating terms as mentions) is grammatically appropriate in far more cases than is normally recognized. And given the elegance of the theory which views Taoism as a philosophy concerned with the nature of language and terms, it is much more appropriate to translate in quotations than to suppose that the Taoists were doing anything analogous to the physics of subatomic particles.

In any case, in discussing the critical as opposed to the metaphysical interpretation of these passages, we will concentrate on the theory of language, knowledge, desires, and action that is in the text. I shall argue that that core theory is sufficient to explain the overall theory of the text—that the metalinguistic reading is not presupposed or even helpful in explaining the network of beliefs found in the Taoist text. To the question, “What kinds of things are born together?” the answer that makes most sense (and most sense of the text and grammar) is the dichotomous terms and contrasting desires. These are culturally originated in pairs, learned in pairs, mutually implied in each instance of use. There is no reason to suggest that I cannot create something beautiful without also creating something ugly, or something high without something low, or even something good without something bad. Despite the temptation of finding parallels between Taoism and particle physics, the metaphysical interpretation does not have much plausibility.16

Given the hypothesis about the concept of chih/know in Chinese thought and in Taoism, we can explain the fundamental differences in the form of skepticism between China and India-Europe. The Tao Te Ching does not reflect any direct skepticism of the senses, that is, the suspicion that the senses might be giving us an incorrect picture show. But it does suggest that our conventional categorization of sensible qualities constrains and restricts the range of our ordinary sense capacity. “Wu/five se/color mang/blind yen/eye” is the clearest formulation of the application of the “conventional skill” analysis of knowledge to sensation. Were it not for the acquired practice of discriminating and responding to five recognized colors, we might have an unfettered “appreciation” of an infinite variety of shades and hues. Except for attacking such limitations introduced into our experience by language, the Tao Te Ching exhibits no direct distrust of the senses themselves.

The critical portions of the Tao Te Ching link discussion of the contrasts in language with other talk about how we kuan/observe the world. But in these cases it is not the sense material presented but the conceptual purpose that changes as we change our language focus. We may “treat as constant” either of the two terms in any given dichotomy and that creates a particular “point of view”—our taking that term as the constant term in the pair reflects a desire to use that term in a system of viewing the world that stresses certain conceptual goals. For example, to take wu/lacks as the constant term in the yu-wu dichotomy, is to desire to use that term in a system exploring the miao/subtle—the beginnings, the mysteries, the origins, and so forth. To take
This observation about points of view, unlike the hint behind the "five-colors" comment, need not have only negative implications. The tone of the discussion in the text suggests that either we might celebrate that taking one or the other point of view as "constant" allows us to view that aspect of the world or we might lament that it limits us only to that aspect and not the opposite. Having a point of view does limit our ability to appreciate what it ignores, but it does bring into focus things which would otherwise be ignored.

The most fundamental of the linguistically derived points of view—one which lies at the base of almost all the rest—is the yu-wu (exist-does not exist) dichotomy. As the preceding discussion suggests, we may focus on the different terms in this dichotomy as we desire to study mysterious, subtle, paradoxical, and so on topics or to study manifestations, actual process, and more. Traditional interpretations group all "negative" members of the evaluative dichotomies in the Lao Tzu as wu-aspects (or as yin-aspects—using the later yin-yang dichotomy as the basic one). But the most common error in that tradition is to suppose that the text implies that the negative terms are to be taken as constant while the positive terms are not. The logic of the Taoist position, however, must treat both halves of any dichotomy alike. If there are no constant terms, then the negative or yin-terms cannot be any more constant than the positive ones. Some interests would be served by either attitude and both lead to limitations of perspective. The text, as opposed to the common interpretations, is quite consistent on this point.

The systems of conventional knowledge which are implicitly being subjected to critical attack are all the formulated political philosophies of that period in China: Confucianism, Mohism, Legalism, and even proto-Taoism (Yang Chu selfishness). Logically the criticism would apply mainly to conventional Confucianism, not the antilanguage innatism of Mencius. Conventional Confucianism consists of a body of language (li/ritual texts, poems, history, and more) which the students diligently study and practice until they internalize the tao/way expressed in term, that is, they can follow their heart's desire and still conform to the Confucian tao/way. This constraining self-regulation by study of words and language is what the Tao Te Ching is usually taken to condemn. The attack, however, is much broader than a mere criticism of Confucianism. It applies to the doctrines of any school which is similarly based on some way of making distinctions and evaluating them. The critical target is really all learned, conventional, dividing systems of naming, distinguishing, evaluating and acting. In a sense, the attack is on culture itself—all social practices which can be acquired and transmitted in language. The mastery of these conventions we call chih/know (skill in following conventional social practices).

Another frequent mistake in interpreting Taoist philosophical theory is to
view the theory as critical of all moral injunctions in favor of “freedom” conceived in our Western sense as individualist, “doing your own thing.” But the texts do not have any clear theory of atomic, self-sufficient individuals. And the original slogan (repeated in the Lao Tzu, though more consistent in the Chuang Tzu) included the injunction ch’ü/discard chi/self. That reflects an awareness that the individualist interpretation ignores. Selfishness is itself a value system based on a dichotomy—the self-other distinction. Based on our acquired (and culturally relative) ways of distinguishing “self” from its opposite (“other”), we can spin out an equally complex and complete, and equally limited, system of associated desires, values, and implied actions. That system of selfishness is subject to the same analysis given Confucian conventionalism. The chü/discard chi/self part of the original slogan appears to be a quite consistent corollary of the ch’ü/abandon chih/know starting point.18

This interpretation of the critical philosophy of the Tao Te Ching shares with its mystical rivals a potential conflict within the text. The Tao Te Ching contains numerous passages which, in Lao Tzu’s own sense, can be called a teaching intended to give rise to a “knowing.” That is, the so-called practical or political portions of the text appear to be an attitude-inducing use of names and distinctions and language. The intention seems to be to get the reader (especially if he is a political ruler) to make evaluations and to act in ways associated with those evaluative expression.19

The most common interpretive practice is to take this positive linguistically statable tao/way as the theoretical consequence of the philosophical theory. That is surely a mistake. Surely all the same analysis that was directed against Confucianism would apply to a formally identical alternative system. Besides, this interpretation of Taoist political thought as a simple alternative to the doctrines of the day misses or downplays the fundamental insight of the school—the ultimate conventionality (nonconstancy) of all social practices which can be given formulation in language. For once we can formulate them, we can modify and alter them. All forms of social control through chih/knowing—all forms of social interaction—are subject to change via language. They are not constant, that is, they can be altered by conscious cultural processes. None of the ways of doing things which can be explained or guided by conscious use of language is immune to such deliberate change. “Tao/way k’o/can-be tao/way fei/is-not ch’ang/constant tao/way.”

This potential inconsistency between the skeptical-mystical and the practical in the Tao Te Ching is notorious. On the one hand, the text takes as an axiom that any tao which can be spoken is not constant and hints that we should give up names, distinctions, knowledge, and so forth. On the other hand it offers us its own system of names, distinctions, evaluations, and even associated actions and policies—a quite statable tao.

The problem posed by this practical Taoism is much broader than that embodied in the traditional Confucian accusation of “scheming methods”
According to that Neo-Confucian criticism of Lao Tzu, he advocates the "feminine" strategy of seeking for domination and strength by pretending to be weak and subservient (no doubt a recognized political tactic of Warring States statecraft). But the more basic problem is that he offers a statable tao of government at all—using the same dichotomies as the rival tao's. The actions advocated are all-purposive, that is, guided by a general normative political theory. Merely tampering with some details of the theory (for example, the cyclical movement image) will not avoid the problem.²¹

By sheer bulk the practical political advice is the larger portion of the work. An interpreter may choose to stick to his stratification and say, in effect, that the two aspects of the text cannot be brought into any harmony.²² Or he may choose to stress (take as constant?) one portion as the core and to read the other portion in a way that makes it as consistent and coherent with the suggested "core" as possible. This strategy requires some criteria for deciding what is to be taken as the core. A tempting, but not particularly imaginative, rule is to take the larger portion of the text as the core. I shall call this the sheer-bulk rule. If we were to follow this rule then we would join with that half (including the Legalists) that says the text is a book of politics against that half which says it is a book of mysticism.

I shall, of course, reject the "sheer-bulk" rule—not to recover the mystical core, but the even more interesting critical, semantic and relativistic layer of the work. That suggestion would commit us to the view discussed earlier that the practical portion is just another alternative political theory rather than a critique of all such taos.

One important consideration is that taking the practical doctrine literally leaves the contradiction unresolved. It amounts to saying, "Yes there are some passages which suggest nihilism and relativism, but the work is basically a down-to-earth discussion of politics." The inconsistency is not resolved by such an interpretation. It is just ignored and swallowed.

It is not surprising that the practical layer of Taoism should be traditionally regarded as the core of philosophical Taoism. That interpretation is quite in the interest of the Legalists—who seriously advocate some of the practical principles. It is also in the interest of Confucians (such as Wang Pi, the single most influential commentator). If Taoism becomes merely an antitraditional rival tao/way of government, it is much less threatening to Confucianism and Legalism than is an attack on all statable taos.

A coherent interpretation is possible which does not require complete separation of critical and political layers of the text and explains many of the other traditionally recognized consequences of Taoist theory.

This Taoist tao/way-of-acting is fully the equivalent of and stated in terms of the same linguistic distinctions as Confucianism, Mohism, and Legalism. How do we make the theory coherent? The answer is really quite in tune with the critical theory. The stated tao/way in the text uses the same distinctions as
the existing doctrines but invariably suggests we should reverse the pro and con attitudes associated with them, for example, do not be benevolent, do not seek for utility, discard the sage, even discard the self. This is the really significant feature of that practical advice that is concealed by viewing it as merely an alternative political strategy to Confucianism. The practical doctrine is really just a set of heterogenous arguments for reversing various conventional ways of evaluating and acting. The government disvalues all the activities conventionally taken to be its role—it does not wei/act (as opposed to Confucian and Legalist economic intervention). It does not seek to inculcate values or chih/knowing, and so forth. The “purposive” stratum in the Tao Te Ching is a heuristic to get us to reject each existing conventional attitude—not the statement of an unstatable tao/way.

Take the critical philosophy as the core. We assume (here with the tradition) that some ordinary or conventional body of social practices (mainly Confucian) is the immediate object of the criticism. Theoretically the attack takes in all such chih/knowing. The key to the criticism is that the account of relativism, like the conceptions of knowledge, desire, names, and so forth centers on a theory of linguistic form—the contrast theory of terms. All opposing terms used to encode the differing political perspectives are in some sense t'ung/same. That is, there is one distinction for each pair of terms. What distinguishes the pair is our practice of associating different emotions with the contrasting terms. If Taoism can show that a direct reversal in attitudes is just as plausible an action guide as the ordinary evaluative attitude, then it will have done all it can to show that the existing dichotomies are not absolute (constant) action guides. So the Lao Tzu can be taken as consisting largely of an illustration of the general critical doctrine of language. It illustrates how such a complete reversal is plausible. Hence the practical “art of government” portions of the Tao Te Ching can be explained as an effective heuristic illustration of the point made in the critical philosophy of Taoism. It is a part of the attack on conventional taos by illustrating the plausibility of a tao constructed by simply reversing the evaluation we ordinarily associate with opposites.

The plausibility of this “negative tao” is suggested in several ways—appeals to self-preservation, suggestions that events change unpredictably, use of proverbs, aphorisms, and more of “common sense” or village elder lore, vague references to mystical attitudes, and the sheer force of poetic imagery—in order to support anticonventional evaluations. No single motivation or perspective need be taken to be the one used for all the negative claims. They are the relatively ad hoc bases of particular statements of a negative political theory. None of these ad hoc bases of the heuristic illustration is the theoretical basis of Taoism or even a central theme. We thus reject the notion that any statable, deliberative, purposive, desire-assuming, and name-distinction utilizing political doctrine is to be taken as the philosophical point of the critical system of the Tao Te Ching.
Accordingly, the seeming stress in the text on wu/lack and the other wu-terms (lower, submissive, dark, behind, and so on) do not indicate that a constant tao would necessarily be based on a constant wu/lack. It is stressed in the body of the text to balance the common or conventional bias in favor of yu/exists. To say, as Confucian critics are wont to, that Lao Tzu “knew” wu/lack but not yu/exist is misleading precisely because it ignores the logic of the critical philosophy and the function of the negative tao as an illustration.

It is possible, of course, that one or several of the authors or editors of the Tao Te Ching were psychologically disposed to prefer the political policies stated in the text to those being followed at that time in China—for example, Confucian or Mohist “meddling.” But that is quite irrelevant to evaluating the logical role of that seeming advice in the theory. None of the specific formulae or even the general thrust of the political layer can consistently be interpreted as a constant, that is, nonspeakable tao.

An immediate advantage of this heuristic reading of the practical layer of Taoism is that it offers a coherent and satisfactory defense of the Lao Tzu against the accusation of scheming methods. We treat the passages with such indirect goals of domination as merely other instances of ad hoc presentation of reasons for reversing our usual emotive attitudes attached to names. The point is only that there would be occasions and situations in which it would seem plausible to reverse our usual preference for domination. They are just one of the heuristic ways of showing how we might argue for valuing the lower over the higher. The text uses them, but not as instances of an absolute, constant action guide.

The pedagogical technique implicitly attributed to Lao Tzu on this account is a familiar one in China—that is, teach according to the level of the student. The first step is getting students to see the reversibility of values. This knowledge of reversal (knowing how to reverse) is something that can be stated and quite naturally makes up the body of the text. That is all that Lao Tzu could consistently teach.

An interpretation of this text could conceivably postulate three levels of knowledge operating in Taoist theory:

(1) Conventional knowledge, for example, Confucianism.
(2) Knowledge of reversibility, that is, the system which results from reversing all the attitudes and action guides in any given system of conventional knowledge, for example, the main body of political advice in the Tao Te Ching.
(3) Skepticism-mysticism, that is, the knowledge that is no-knowledge. Supposedly mastering (2) should lead to some sort of “leap” to this level of knowledge.

I include (3) mainly as a concession to the mystical tradition of interpreting Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu does speak at times of a “profound” insight and describes the ordinary view of a sage as someone who is not “clear-cut,” who is “dull,”
“stupid,” and as one who makes no distinctions. But, in addition to being rather more compatible with a skeptical than a mystical reading, such passages might be subsumed under (2) as views drawn from mystical insights also to inspire the intended audience to “reversing” the values they place on clarity, definitiveness, wit, intelligence and so forth. This third level could hardly be chih/knowledge in the same sense in which (1) and (2) are chih/knowledge. It would seem to those in the conventional mode that we would describe such a state in mostly nonknowledge terms, for example, “indiscriminate,” “dull,” “stupid,” and so on. In that state one makes no distinctions, has no socially shaped desires, undertakes no socially conditioned action (wu/lack wei/make: deem)—one is not, in other words, in a state of knowledge.

Since, as we noted earlier, the text cannot consistently state, describe, or advocate such a thing, we can just as consistently regard all such mystical talk as a part of the heuristic *ad hoc* devices to illustrate the reversibility of evaluative terms. It would give us a reason to respond affirmatively to being characterized as “confused,” “obscure,” and “dumb.” The critical philosophy underlying the Taoist theory does not presuppose or entail the existence of any mystical entities at all or that there can be any constant tao. Any of the major conclusions of the Lao Tzu can be explained purely by the critical philosophy. The mystical or metaphysical claim that there is an unspeakable tao is not only internally incoherent but unnecessary to understanding the theory of the text.

The critical theory allows us neither to say there is such a mystical tao nor that there is not one. To say the former would be to say yu/have was constant with regard to tao; to say the latter would be to say that wu/lack was constant. And by hypothesis in the first chapter we can say neither is constant.

The view of Taoism that emerges from this study of the concept of knowledge in the critical philosophy of the *Tao Te Ching* can be understood without any metaphysical or mystical assumptions at all. All conclusions follow simply from the relativist and skeptical analysis of language, names, and distinctions, and from a view of knowledge as a skill. The practical sections are rendered consistent and intelligible. The text can, consistent with its own principles, give no way to choose between commitment to a mystical, unspeakable entity and skepticism of it. From the point of view of what can be said, written, and interpreted of skepticism and mysticism—these two are one! That whereof Lao Tzu could not speak, commentators may not interpret.

NOTES

2. *Chuang Tzu*, SPPY 10:17A–18B.
3. Almost all the “abandon knowledge” slogans appear in chapters and contexts where they appear to be parts of the purposive strata. Thus they appear suspiciously like political techniques for making people easy to manipulate rather than an epistemological doctrine. But there are also lots of antiknowledge claims in other more philosophical chapters (10, 47, 71) and Lao Tzu also talks approvingly of being dumb, dense, confused, or some other opposite of knowledgable, for example, “My mind is that of a fool—how blank! Vulgar people are clear, I alone am drowsy. Vulgar people are alert. I alone am muddled.” (chapter 20) (translation follows D. C. Lau). At the same time, his attacks on knowledge-related notions, namely, cleverness, learning, desires, action, names, language, distinctions, purposes, and so forth are ubiquitous. The goal image of the child not yet able to express a smile reflects the relation between this attitude toward knowledge and all socialization or enculturation.

4. Even the nonpejorative occurrence of chih/know are strikingly non-Western, namely, as injunctions: “chih/know the male,” “chih/know when to stop,” “know contentment,” and so on. It would be grammatically aberrant to use “know” as an imperative in English, that is we would not normally say, “know that King’s peak is due North of Altamont.” These imperative uses also suggest a “skill” concept of knowledge.

5. A good deal of the motivation for Western skepticism, given this contrast, is the observation that “X knows that P” entails P while “X believes that P” does not. Justifying the belief claim then seems quite easy, while justifying the knowledge is made to appear impossible—often by appeal to an implicit modal mistake, namely, concluding from “necessarily if X knows that P then P is true” that “if X knows that P” then P is necessarily true.

6. The most tempting counterexamples to this claim are found in the Chuang Tzu stories of dreaming. I will not develop the alternative interpretations in detail here, but in their context, it seems clear that they are not being presented as grounds for a particular appearance-reality distinction. They are rather being used to illustrate the phenomenon of perspective reversal and to undermine any claim that the dream/reality distinction is natural rather than conventional. Only such an approach can render these passages coherent with Chuang Tzu’s philosophical position.

7. I draw attention to these grammatical points not to argue that the Chinese were restricted by their language and unable to conceive of or to formulate the belief-knowledge distinction. The point is rather that the form in which philosophical questions are put does influence the model on which we conceive what would be an answer. I am simply noting that the grammar of Chinese would not lead them to tacitly assume a representational account of belief and knowledge that is so natural in India and the West.

8. There may be exceptions to this, viz., where the subject term is a pronoun a possessive may be used, for example, wu/my or ch’i/its. Where the subject is not given (a common practice in classical Chinese) the embedded sentence will be just like an ordinary verbal sentence except for the optional particle yeh/pt.

9. The Taoist is not distinguished by his conception of knowledge as skill in the use of distinctions. As we have seen, the Mohist concept of knowledge is quite similar. Mencius, the original antilanguage mystic, regards wisdom as originating in an innate disposition to make shih/this fei/not-this distinctions and usually speaks of knowledge as a disposition to behavior, for example, a child chih/knows to love his parents.

10. The radical nature of the Taoist critique lies in the fact that like Hermongenes in Plato’s Cratylus, the Taoist holds that not only are the names conventional but the distinctions they purport to represent and reflect are part of the same language convention. It is not just the sounds, but the system of divisions associated with them which are social-conventional. The Taoists further, reflecting the general Chinese concern with the regulative function of language, associate both the names and the distinctions with behavior—guiding attitudes (desires) which are also creations of convention. It is not clear if the critical part of Taoism entails (a) that the distinctions in reality are other than those marked in language, or (b) that there are no natural (nonconventional) distinctions at all.

11. Note the occasional translation of chih/wisdom as “cleverness” by D. C. Lau.

12. The most suggestive single image connecting these aspects of the Taoist theory is the uncarved block which is variously linked with distinctions, names, and desires. See especially chapters 19, 32, 37, and 57.
13. The prescriptive part of the critical philosophy, embodied in the slogan “abandon knowledge,” is not entailed by any of the observations that these elements are linked. Traditionally it is supposed that Lao Tzu had pacificistic reasons for wanting to jettison the whole apparatus of knowing, namely, the creation of “unnatural” desires in the use of names is responsible for people’s not “knowing contentment.” The multiplication of desires leads to strife in competition for scarce goods. A more “manipulative” explanation is the legalist interpretation that without such learned desires and actions, the people are more malleable to the ruler’s will. The mystical explanation is that the distinctions distort “The Tao,” which is essentially one and without such distinctions.

14. See chapter 48 “In pursuit of learning one increases every day.”

15. See chapters 2, 21, 22, 26. The context clearly suggests that even what we regard as descriptive distinctions have regulative emotive impact. One of the alternative punctuations of the traditional text (chapter 1, lines 3–6) illustrates how even the dichotomy of wu/lacking and wu/lacking has emotive, action-guiding associations, that is, we concentrate on “wu,” desiring therewith to perceive subtleties.

16. See Capra, The Tao of Physics. One reason for the traditional cosmological view is that the earliest commentary by a twenty-year-old worshipper of Confucius, Wang Pi, was motivated by a desire to assimilate the Tao Te Ching with the philosophically vulgar cosmogony of the I Ching (Book of Changes). He was followed by equally obtuse and confused Buddhist commentators who assimilated the concept of Tao with the metaphysical Buddha nature. The ontological interpretation of the meaning of tao has never been presented in a coherent or even an internally consistent way. This failure by the interpreters has usually been blamed on their object of study and it has become the accepted wisdom that Taoists themselves are deliberately inconsistent. One should instead consider the possibility of alternative interpretations of the philosophy of the school before abandoning the possibility of intelligible interpretation. The suggestion that any Taoists have a conscious antilogic bias does not seem to me to have any basis beyond the incoherence of the way these other schools have interpreted the text.

17. This reading of the first Chapter of the Tao Te Ching depends on a punctuation that is possible in the traditional but not the Ma Wang Tui silk manuscript versions of the work. Many scholars have concluded that because the Han version has such punctuation, there is no longer any plausibility to an interpretation of the traditional texts which postulates a different punctuation. I have yet to hear any convincing argument for such a view.

18. See also chapter 19. It is frequently assumed that the Tao Te Ching exhibits more interest in “self-preservation” than the more sophisticated and mature version of Taoism found in the Chuang Tzu. I tend to agree.

19. See chapters 2 and 43.


21. Again, an interesting discussion of the cyclical view of the movement of the Tao is in Lau, op. cit. pp. 25–30. He substitutes a roller coaster view for the traditional cyclical view. Still, the movement of the Tao seems to follow a knowable, statable pattern and Lao Tzu’s advice is purposive and presupposes desires and distinctions.


23. On this interpretation, Lao Tzu’s preference for negative terms in presenting his philosophy is not due to their being less limiting (contra Lau, op. cit., p. 21), since in fact they have the identical limit—the line of distinction between them. Rather this focus is explained by the fact that we “ordinarily” value the “being” terms, for example, “good,” “beautiful,” “high,” “life,” and so on. By showing the equal value of the negative side of the distinctions he hopes we will abandon such distinctions entirely.