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The Journey from Essence to Existence in Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*

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Abstract

This article examines Lao Tzu's classical work Tao Te Ching with the concepts of essence and existence that predominantly guide the philosophy of existence propounded by Jean-Paul Sartre. Tao Te Ching provides the way to pursuit identity in the world. It centralizes on the making of the self. To cultivate the identity, one should face the reality. Then one realizes that existence antecedes the essence because one becomes what one chooses. Essence is simply biological and not the destiny rather what we create out of multiple choices construct our individuality. This realization is the perfect way to be an evolved individual. This is another way of defining the concept of existence delivered by Tzu and Sartre. Likewise, both Tzu and Sartre agree that human exists at first. His/her existential journey starts with the materialization of facticity that s/he crisscrosses in the world. All these aspects are the fundamentals of Tao Te Ching and Sartre's philosophy of existence. This paper becomes a landmark to perceive how the philosophical beats vibrate equally both in classical work and modern philosophy. To examine all these concepts, the article has used the textual analysis method, following the paradigm of qualitative approach to research.

Keywords: Choice, essence, evolved individual, existence, facticity, Tao

Introduction

This article explores the fundamentals of Jean- Paul Satre's philosophy of essence and existence in Lao Tzu's philosophical work *Tao Te Ching*. This book paves the ways that we have to follow in our life. Tzu in this work talks about the evolvement and making of the self. He believes that the elixir of existence to cultivate one materializing the worldly dynamics opens the elixir for genuine existence. This rising enables one to realize the facts and reality of the world. Existence predominates essence. Essence is biological while existence is constructed. How one constructs and makes the self

determines the journey from essence to existence. Besides, *Tao Te Ching* projects that when one faces the facticity of life, one starts to exist. All these are the fundamental aspects of Sartre's philosophy. Thus, the exploration of Tzu *Tao Te Ching* with the perspective of Sartre's concepts of essence and existence proves to be justifiable.

Lao Tzu was an ancient Chinese philosopher who lived in the sixth century BC. He is the main propagator of Taoism. His great book *Tao Te Ching* has been considered the major book of Taoism. It epitomizes all of the ideas about the world and its realities. Generally, Tao stands for the way. Blakney writes that Tao is "A road, a path, a way by which people travel, the way of nature and finally the Way of ultimate Reality" (37). It opens the ways of life. Understanding Tao means perceiving the truth of life. So, the quest of Tao consolidates all of the pursuits of human's life.

Review of Literature

Since the time of publication, *Tao Te Ching* has been inviting different shades of interpretations and criticism. This classical work of human intellectual tradition has elicited major philosophical and religious ideas too. It amalgamates different religious and philosophical ideas. P. T. Raju relates Taoism with religious mysticism. He views that Taoism "is like the ultimate Dharma of the Buddhism, their *Tathata, drarmadhātu*, or even the neutral Brahman of the Upanishads...For the Taoist, on the whole, life according to the Tao is to be here itself, in the family, state and society" (121). It signifies that Tao is realizing the personal self with society. This is another way of interpreting Sartre's philosophy postulated in his works *Existentialism and Humanism* and *Being and Nothingness*.

Michael LaFargue talks about the foundation of existentialism and self-cultivation in *Tao Te Ching*. He says, "The "point" of Laoist origin sayings is not instructional, but celebratory, celebrating existentially "foundational" character of Tao as concretely experienced in the self-cultivation practice of ideal Laoist" (208). If LaFargue notes the issues of "existential foundational and self-cultivation practice" in *Tao Te Ching*, then it is significant that this book demands a new interpretation from Sartrean concepts of essence and existence. Lama Surya Das believes that this classical work crystallizes the "tantalizing existential mystery" (Foreword para 2). If he notes about the issues of existence, then a fresh revisiting is a must. Blakney vitalizes the entire message of *Tao Te Ching*. He opines that this book has still a great message for the world. Its message is important because "the old compartmentalization of the world is so shaken by the idea of "one world". In "one world" the *Tao Te Ching* would be quite at home" (49). This view justifies the power of Tao for the modern world. The philosophy that it propounds has still the greater significance in the present-day world.

The above commentaries prove that Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* has been felicitated by various critics. Even some scholars like Raju, LaFargue, and Surya Das have noted the tones of existence in the book. However, they have overlooked the journey from essence to existence in *Tao Te Ching*. In this regard, this paper fulfils the gaps by exploring *Tao Te Ching* with the concepts of essence and existence that Sartre postulates.

Methodology

This paper has applied the paradigm of qualitative approach to research because according to Ranjit Kumar this approach is flexible, unstructured and intends to radiate the diversity of perceptions (379). It has used the textual analysis method to explore the concepts of essence and existence in Tzu's philosophical book *Tao Te Ching*. For this reason, it has used the lenses of Sartre's philosophy of Essence and Existence that he has developed in his works *Existentialism and Humanism* and *Being and Nothingness*. The poetic lines from *Tao Te Ching* have become the primary sources of concepts. Related criticisms, book reviews and relevant cross-references have been used as the secondary sources of concepts to justify the argument.

Essence and Existence in Sartre's Philosophy

Jean-Paul Sartre advocated existentialism during the years of the Second World War. His philosophy propagates the valuable notion of freedom and its relationship with personal responsibility. He believes that "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 28). This enables humans to be conscious of his/her existence. This is the difference between plants and human beings. Gaarder opines that for Sartre inanimate things are just in themselves while humankind is for himself (456). If the human has to exist for himself, then the concept "I exist" becomes more important than "what I am." This is the stand-point of existentialism. By birth, human has a certain biological essence, an innate nature. However, the way one makes and creates oneself gives rise to existence. This evolution gives rise to a consciousness of why s/he is here for. Thus, Sartre says, "It is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 29). Human, in this sense, has no basic nature to rely on. One has to create and nurture one's "own nature or 'essence,' because it is not fixed in advance" (Gaarder 457). This point is the crux of his philosophy that presupposes human's existence is superior and distinct from the physical universe and the body. Sartre writes, "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 28). One is never free of one's situation but one is always free to deny the situation and can make attempts to change it. So, "to be human, to be conscious, is to be free to imagine, free to choose, and responsible for one's lot in life" (Audi 812). That's why; it is useless to search the meaning of human life in a general sense.

The human feels alien in a world where there is no fixed meaning of life. When Sartre talks about human's alienation, he is very near to Marx. Man's sense of "alienation in the world creates a sense of despair, freedom, nausea, and absurdity" (Gaarder 457). At the same time, for our existence, we are free to make our choices in life. We must always take responsibility for our actions. For Sartre, we always collect the body of facts that become true for us. However, while living, "We remain free to envision new possibilities, to reform ourselves and to reinterpret our facticity in the light of new projects and ambitions—our transcendence" (Audi 813). It brings a sense that we have to define our life as it is. At the same time, we try to get free from the entanglement of

this life. So, there is always a dialectic relationship between the facticity of life and its transcendence. The real journey from essence to existence begins- as Sartre postulates in his work *Being and Nothingness*- when one is in the relation of the self to the object-oriented world. In *Being and Nothingness*, he says, "Facticity is only one indication which I give myself of being to which I must reunite myself in order to be what I am" (83). To perceive others in relation to oneself brings existence.

Nevertheless, the diversity in the history of philosophical schools developed by Lao Tzu and Sartre must not be ignored at any cost. The entire philosophical quest for the existence in both systems has a unity in diversity like "the same blow of entering into the different pipes of an organ makes them resound in a variety of musical effects" (Tola and Dragonetti 334). The quest for evolution only differs on paths laid by these two philosophers in different ways in different epochs. However, their final destination is to reach the same goal that is to be immersed into the knowledge that lies beyond the domain of existence.

Evolvement as Existence in *Tao Te Ching*

From the very beginning, *Tao Te Ching* delves into the gravity of existence as evolvment. He inspires an individual to rise beyond the periphery of the essence and create his/her own existence. In this course, an individual has to realize the facticity of life. The moment one drops the expectations and envisions the new possibility of reformation, one is in the total stage of making oneself. An individual is in the way to finding the reality of this world. The way to Tao is nothing other than the reforming of the self and realizing the others in oneself. To create one own existence then becomes the final destination of Sartre and Tzu. Do not they speak the same voice in this context? Of course, they do. The following lines from the *Tao of Power* better justify the philosophy of existence. It sounds as if Tzu speaks Sartre's philosophy in classical form while Sartre metamorphizes Tzu's philosophy in his doctrines of existence:

The Way - cannot be told.
The Name - cannot be named.
The nameless is the Way of Heaven and Earth.
The named is Matrix of the Myriad Creatures.
Eliminate desire to find the Way.
Embrace desire to know the Creature.
The two are identical,
But differ in name as they arise.
Identical they are called mysterious,
Mystery on mystery,
The gate of many secrets. (Kline trans 7)

One has to create and make out of oneself. The way and name are not already fixed. If the way is fixed, then it does not possess its value. One is in the alien situation of dualities while in process of making oneself. This is one of the fundamentals of Sartre's philosophy. Rising beyond the dualities of the "Myriad Creatures" is the basic way to bring existence. Tao philosophers Mantak Chia and Tao Huang in their book *The Secret Teaching of the Tao Te Ching* opine that when one interacts with many dualities,

one becomes a true individual (Chapter 6, The Wisdom of Taoist Sage “Non-Dualistic Mentality” para 2). The embarkation of dualities opens the way and that way is the Tao—the Tao of existence.

Tzu in the above lines suggests the elimination of desires, expectations, and preoccupied ideas. The moment one drops expectations, one becomes free. Then, the horizon of the mind is enlarged. Instead of perceiving what and where things are in their determined condition, one should perceive the subtlety of things rather than understanding what and where things are. This is also the basic premise of Sartre's philosophy as he opines in his work *Existentialism and Humanism*: “For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom” (34). Thus, the desire to know and make the meaning out of the situation is the fundamental quest of human beings. In this point, Tzu and Sartre make a similar quest about the human

Tzu's philosophy to realize the perfect way is to realize the totality, the dialects and extreme polarities. Discarding one part for another is not the real quest. In the process of evolving oneself, one must be aware of physical rules that guide our world where every pole, action and aspect is conjoined by its opposite side. Realizing this dichotomy is the realization of the perfect way—the Tao. How beautifully Tzu unravels the meaning of the world and its existence:

When all the world knows beauty as beauty,
There is ugliness.
When they know good as good,
There there is evil.
In this way
Existence and nonexistence produce each other.
Difficult and easy complete each other.
Long and short contrast each other.
Pitch and tone harmonize each other.
Future and past follow each other. (Wing trans 2)

In these powerful lines, Tzu clarifies Sartre's journey from essence to existence. Tzu projects that evolved individuals are in search of the knowledge that balances nature and essence. They never overlook anything because one exists because of existence of its opposite. In the multiple strata of the existence, one makes choices. This is the reality of Tao. In search of creating and making themselves, they avoid extremities. They shape the events according to their choices because one polarity produces another as logically expressed in the above lines. Choosing one aspect means grasping each and everything because Tzu believes in the totality of existence not in fragmentation because he opines “Evolved individuals... are a part of All Things and overlook nothing” (Wing trans 2). Sartre too expresses this key point of existence in his work *Existentialism is a Humanism* as he says, “When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself he is choosing for all men”(24). They both claim for the universal string which becomes clear from these discussed points that both enjoy tunes of music played in different instruments.

Once the process of making and creating oneself gets a plenum, one should not let it decline. Holding the situation is the crucial one. The person seeking existence never ceases to grow. Tzu says, "Holding to fullness is not as good as stopping in time" (Wing trans 9). It signifies that in the process of existential growth, one should not stop. In this journey, one should run. If one can not do that, it is better to walk. If this too is not possible, one should crawl at least. The important thing is one should move at any cost. Stopping means dying. The movement one moves, one is in search of existence. That's why, Grayling conjoins the Tao with identity and existence. He says that Tao "is often given as 'potency', a sort of life force towards self-realization. On this view to follow the Way is to apply, direct or unleash one's life -potential" (547). Tao is life force for self realization. By realizing the potentiality of life, one can have a better walk on the way of life.

Lao Tzu energizes the inner power in the quest for existence. When one believes in oneself and inner power, then the real journey for the existence begins. The inner cultivation is important because the human has to create and make oneself. She has no inherent nature to rely on. This is the fundamental of Sartre's philosophy for existence. Tzu's ideas of evolvment qualify Sartre's concept. Tzu says, "Produce things, cultivate things; produce but do not possess; act without expectation" (Wing trans 10). When one does not cling to the worldly affairs, one does not expect from its holdings. If one is free from holdings and trappings, one is free to create one's own identity. If one creates oneself, one is responsible for that. Sartre also expresses the same overtones of Tzu regarding his journey from essence to existence. Flynn justifies, "What you are (your essence) is the result of your choice (your existence) rather than the reverse. Essence is not your destiny. You are what you make to be" (8). Cultivation of oneself is the quest for existence. This voice of Sartre reverberates in Lao Tzu concept of evolvment that he expresses in Tao Te Ching. Tzu says:

To know the Absolute is to be tolerant.
What is tolerant becomes impartial;
What is impartial becomes powerful;
What is powerful becomes natural;
What is natural becomes Tao. (Wing trans 16)

The evolvment is awareness, an expansion that gives rise to existence. The more one tolerates the problems, the more one expands consciousness. One becomes stoic. One drops the expectation and realizes the inner power. It opens a new horizon, a new zenith of existence from where existence dawns. This is the sole message of Sartre and Tzu.

When one attains a higher level of consciousness and attitude, one becomes free. Breaking the entanglements is another way of perceiving existence. The quest starts from this point. The journey of existence opens the gate of freedom. The inner search germinates for the sake of liberation and freedom. Tzu always forces to "Attain the highest openness/Maintain the deepest harmony" (Wing trans 16). This is only the perfect way. Openness and the deepest harmony thus are the first stage of existence. So, Tzu believes in the magnification of small and the increase of the few as he says, "Magnify the small; increase the few" (Wing trans 63). Only the person with existence and evolvment can do this. The actions motivated with vibes and positive drives can

bring this height. In this regard, Sartre in his work *Existentialism Is a Humanism* was right to say, "Existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action (54). To act is the way to exist. Fundamentally, the motive to exist leads to the existence.

Facticity and Existence in *Tao Te Ching*

Tzu's work *Tao Te Ching* unravels the concepts of facticity and existence as projected by Sartre. For Sartre, our situation is a conglomeration of facticity. Flynn justifies that "'Facticity' denotes the givens of our situation such as our race and nationality, our talents and limitation, the others with whom we deal as well as our previous choices" (65-66). The existence rises how we adjust with our situations according to our choices. So, one is responsible for his/her choices.

In this course of handling the responsibility, the cultivation, existence and evolvment radiate. The following lines from Tzu presuppose these ideas:

Cultivate the inner self;
Its Power becomes real.
Cultivate the home;
Its power becomes abundant.
Cultivate the community;
Its power becomes greater.
Cultivate the organization;
Its power becomes prolific.
Cultivate the world;
Its power becomes universal. (Wing trans 56)

The cultivation leads the evolution steps by steps to a higher stage. The small reaches to a universal stage. In the quest for identity, one must always move for the betterment with the rays of hope because existence rises in optimism. Choices make us powerful. The act of choosing one for another adds value to our choices. This is another point of Sartre because he writes in his work *Existentialism is Humanism* as, "We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all" (24). Our choice becomes universal if we magnify our cultivation of inner- self from a small beginning to the universal one. All these ideas have been better projected in the above powerful lines of Tzu.

The more one faces the facticity and face the situations that lead to transcendence. This is the stage of evolvment and the attainment of perfect existence. In this perfection, there lies the meaning and the core motto of life. Flynn clarifies Sartre's philosophy when he says, "'Transcendence' or the reach that our consciousness extends beyond these givens, denotes the taken of our situation, namely how we face up to this situation" (66). The more we face our situations and change them according to our nature, we are in the stage of transcendence. Transcending the facticity is to evolve as the existential being. Tzu postulates these ideas in the following lines:

Therefore through the inner self,
The inner self is conceived.
Through the home,
The home is conceived.

Through the community,
The community is conceived.
Through the organization,
The organization is conceived.
Through the world,
The world is conceived. (Wing trans 54)

To realize something is by understanding it as expressed in the above lines. Thus, one understands the dynamics of existence by conceiving the existence itself. So the notion of facing the facticity and our denoted situations is the ultimate way. Tzu ideas, in this regard, justify Sartrean notion of existence. Webber justifies that "Sartrean existentialism is simply as individual's character consists in the projects that person pursues" (xi). The moment one pursues reality, one gets a higher existence. Alienation and absurdity do not remain there. The sole mission of existence and evolvment reinforces for the final way.

The existential journey has a grand project. One construct his own way. Sartre in his work Existentialism is a Humanism opines that anyone can claim about the existence of human's universality. It is not an essence, not a given way, rather it is constructed perpetually. While choosing, we construct ourselves (43). While constructing oneself, the journey starts from a footstep. One must not lose his\her hope in this project of constructing of self. These most quoted lines from *Tao Te Ching* intensify this idea:

A Tree as wide as a man's arms
Grows from a tiny seed.
A tower nine stories high
Rises from piles of earth.
A journey of a thousand miles
Starts with a single step. (Kline trans 85)

These aphoristic lines crystallize the core part of Tzu's philosophy related to facticity. Using the image of tree, tower and journey, Tzu inspires one to adopt reality and face the challenges that come in our life. Human endures the ups and downs of life to construct the self. In the journey from essence to existence, one constructs the inner-self. Lama Surya Das clarifies, "This enigmatic story concerns the inner journey to the very center of things, beyond the dichotomy of doing and being and yet including both" (Foreword para 5). When one handles all the dichotomies of worldly happenings and correlates them, one rises beyond the antagonistic polarities. Sri Krishna in the Bhagavadgita also makes this inner growth in a significant way: "You must free from the pairs of opposites. Poise your mind in tranquillity. Take care neither to acquire nor to hoard" (Prabhavananda and Isherwood trans 40). In this regard, to cope with the facticity is to go ahead in the path of existence. The Great journey starts inwardly and silently.

Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* always teaches us to realize the facticity and grow rich in the quest for identity. The first thing in this way is to realize the facticity and its consequences. Then an attitude surely builds up that knowing we do not know anything is real wisdom. Socrates also proclaimed the similar tone of reality. His final verdict about the knowledge of the world was: "One thing only I know and that is that I know nothing" (qtd in Gaarder 68). If this is the reality, Sartre's concept of realizing the facticity and transcendence remain as the metamorphosis of Socrates and Tzu. Tzu also makes the

similar claim as he says:

To know that you are ignorant is best;
To know what you do not, is a disease;
.....
It is the Wise Man's way to know himself,
And never to reveal his inward thoughts;
He loves himself but so, is not set up;
He chooses this in preference to that. (Blakney trans 124-25)

The above lines conceptualize that realizing that what we learn is just a tiny drop in the infinite ocean. The whole ocean is yet to know. So the long journey in search of identity starts from minuscule to the great part. We are part of universality. Sartre in his work *Existentialism Is a Humanism* justifies, "Our responsibility is thus much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all mankind" (24). It proves the notion that we are the infinite ocean in a tiny drop, and we all are the flowers of the same tree. Sartre's voice of perceiving the others about oneself brings the real existence is fully justified here.

Conclusion

Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* projects Sartre's philosophy of essence to existence. The book significantly reveals that the existence lies in evolvment. Everyone has biological essence, but what provides the existence is the process when one evolves out of multiple choices. This process of making oneself is the real quest in one's life. So, *Tao Te Ching* reflects that existence supasses essence. This is the core philosophy of Sartre regarding essence and existence. Besides, Tzu in his book *Tao Te Ching* and Sartre both agree that human's first drive is to exist. Human faces and perceives the world, and then starts to define and make himself/herself. Sartre calls this process as the making of individual identity while Tzu explains it as evolvment. They both explain the same ideology of existence. In every line of *Tao Te Ching*, Tzu suggests the ideology of being an evolved individual. He talks about the cultivation of self. This is another way of explaining the Sartrean philosophy of essence and existence. In this sense, Tzu proves to be the landmark for proposing the philosophy of existence many centuries ago. If one reads Tzu and Sartre to find the way for the evolvment in life, one becomes insightful. The interesting facts about knowledge spring that eventhough time and context may differ, the underlying elixir message for the humanity remains the same. This article incites the readers to penetrate beneath the surface if one aims to embark message of the intellectual tradition. When Tzu's ideas on human's evolvment and existence presuppose Sartrean philosophy of essence and existence, it becomes clear that the intellectual tradition of the whole humanity has an equal thirst to explore the reality.

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