

# What Can the Teachings of the Taoist Classics Contribute to Western Education?¹

## ¿Qué pueden aportar las enseñanzas de los clásicos del Tao a la educación occidental?

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### Ruitian Xu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1530-5638>

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

### Agustín de la Herrán Gascón

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9156-6971>

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

### Pablo Rodríguez Herrero

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2152-0078>

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

### Abstract

Educational Taoism, as taught by Tao masters, also called philosophical Taoism, *daojia* (written 道家, is an indispensable part of Chinese and universal culture. It has a little-known educational potential that has scarcely been transferred to globalized education systems, where it has not been taken into account or been included explicitly as part of Western education. The aim of this essay is to determine whether the teachings of the classical Taoist texts (*Tao Te Ching*, *Zhuang Zi* and *Lie Zi*) can be of use in informing and promoting education for

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a more conscious life. To this end, a hermeneutic analysis of the three texts was performed, based on the radical and inclusive approach to education created by the authors almost three decades ago. Four transferable radical pedagogical foundations were identified: *Tao*, *ziran*, *wuwei* and *Te*. The discussion and conclusions argue that globalized Western education, currently revolving around competencies, and the teachings of the Tao masters are complementarity. A combination of Western education, stemming from the Socratic tradition, with the Taoist classics, may contribute to founding a more complete education, better adapted to the complexity of the human being. Such a goal is far removed from the guidelines of international educational bodies: UNESCO, the World Bank and the OECD. These pedagogical affordances may be applied to any education system at any stage of formal education (from early childhood to university), as well as to non-formal and informal educational contexts.

**Keywords:** Education, Taoism, radical and inclusive approach to education, consciousness, pedagogy, didactics

### Resumen

El taoísmo educativo, también llamado filosófico, *daoia*, escrito 道家, enseñado por los maestros del Tao, es una parte imprescindible de la cultura china y universal. Incluye un potencial educativo poco conocido y apenas transferido a los sistemas educativos globalizados, en los que no se ha tomado en cuenta, ni formado parte expresa de la educación occidental. El objetivo de este ensayo es comprender si las enseñanzas contenidas en los textos clásicos del taoísmo (“*Tao Te Ching*”, “*Zhuang Zi*” y “*Lie Zi*”) pueden ser útiles para fundamentar y favorecer una educación para una vida más consciente. Para ello, se realizan análisis hermenéuticos de estos textos, apoyados en el enfoque radical e inclusivo de la educación, creado por los autores desde hace casi tres décadas. Se identifican cuatro pilares pedagógicos radicales transferibles: *Tao*, *ziran*, *wuwei* y *Te*. La discusión y conclusiones apuntan a la complementariedad entre la educación occidental globalizada, que actualmente gravita en torno a las competencias, y las enseñanzas de los maestros del Tao. Una convergencia entre la tradición occidental, de tradición socrática, y basada en los clásicos del Tao, puede contribuir a fundamentar una educación más completa y ajustada a la complejidad del ser humano. Este anhelo queda lejos de las directrices educativas de los organismos supranacionales de educación: UNESCO, Banco Mundial y OECD. Las implicaciones pedagógicas son aplicables a cualquier sistema educativo, etapa de educación formal (desde la educación infantil hasta la etapa universitaria), así como a contextos de educación no formales e informales.

**Palabras clave:** Educación, taoísmo, enfoque radical e inclusivo de la educación, conciencia, Pedagogía, Didáctica

## Introduction

The educationalist Maria Teresa Román (2006) once asked herself: “Is there a more selfish, tiresome and fruitless intellectual position than floating in the cloud of rejection of other ways of constructing reality?” (p.14). Current Western education essentially only recognizes what it sees as its own history, rather than other ways of understanding education. It responds almost exclusively to social demands, without considering that not all educational needs are explicitly required by society, especially if the need is a deep one (Herrán, 2014).

Recent directives from the international organisations that govern the course of world education (e.g. OECD, 2021; UNESO, 2021) continue to link education to social and economic development. Innovative, democratic, inclusive, socially just, high quality education is promoted, under pressure from the consumer society and technological scientism. The historical precedent stems from Socrates. Following the path laid down by the Athenian philosopher, education has been based on the learning-knowledge paradigm, with the result that Western education has been oriented more towards acquiring and disseminating knowledge that contributes to the profitability of human systems than towards the development of humanity based on consciousness (Herrán, 2018).

The radical and inclusive approach to education (Herrán, 2014) argues that educational development is markedly externally-oriented and superficial, and that our schooling pays scarce attention to the depth of the human being. Pedagogy excludes from its corpus and from institutionalised discourses key constructs such as egocentrism, consciousness, the human being’s essential self-knowledge and the states and ways of consciousness, without which a truly in-depth education is not possible. The radical and inclusive approach, however, stresses that while a high level of education is accessible through acquiring knowledge and competences via relevant, meaningful learning, true education also requires opposite or differing processes: for example, loss, deconditioning, undoing attachments, letting go, downgrading certain priorities, forgetting, halting the flow of thoughts and partial deaths.

In short, the history of Western educational innovation, in the wake of Socrates, has up to now followed a path as fertile as it is currently limited and incomplete, if we wish it to be real education.

The educational teachings of the Eastern classics represent a set of models where we may find what we lack today. For example, in the yogic guidelines of ancient India, in the Chinese *chan* tradition or in Japanese Zen Buddhism, types of education were fostered that focused on working with the ego, consciousness, essential self-awareness and the states of and paths towards consciousness. For educationalists and education professionals in the West, however, these traditions are exotic and/or unknown, although some prestigious scholars have investigated them (e.g. Goleman, 1984). Due to this same Western-centredness, neither are the teachings and thought of the Eastern classical pedagogues sufficiently known, although they are especially deep and are oriented towards the development of education through consciousness. Amongst these, the most important are the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the first Buddha, and the Taoist classics.

The complementarity and potential combination of the two educational traditions, the Western and the classical Eastern (Herrán, 2018), has been conceived of as “a fuller education,” suitable for developing people who are both conscious and competent (Herrán y Sabbi, 2021). Predominantly competence-based education has been associated with a pedagogical approach that is biased and open to criticism (Takayama, 2013). Between this methodology, internationally fomented by the national education systems, and a fuller education, the necessary bridge is a radical, deep transformation of the individual, although the scope of this may be both personal and social (Yang, 2019). Transformation requires not only education itself, but also an openness towards making a radical shift in the notion of what education and educational change are.

In this article we explore the teachings of those traditionally seen as the three classical masters of the Tao: Lao Zi (Lao Tse), Zhuang Zi (Zhuang Tse or Chuang Tse) and Lie Zi (Lie Tse), whose corpus is immense and varied, although scarcely studied in Western pedagogy and didactics. The objective of the study was therefore to determine whether the ideas found in the classical Taoist texts may be of use for grounding and fostering a form of education and teaching for a more conscious life.

## Introduction to Taoism

Taoism is one of the most important educational philosophies in Chinese culture. According to Needham (1956), “Many of the most attractive elements of the Chinese character derive from Taoism. China without Taoism would be a tree some of whose deepest roots had perished” (p.164). Taoism has often been described as both a philosophy and a religion. In China, Taoism has two branches: the philosophical, educational and classical branch, *daojia*, written 道家 and taught by the masters of the Tao; and the religious branch, *daojiao*, 道教. The first, *daojia*, originates mainly in the three most important representatives of the Chinese classical age: Lao Zi (or Lao Tse), Zhuang Zi (or Chuang Tse) and Lie Zi (or Lie Tse), and in their three eponymous classics: the *Tao Te Ching* (Lao Zi, 2012; the version found in Mawangdui, China, in 1973), the *Zhuang Zi* (Zhuang Zi, 2015) and the *Lie Zi* (Lie Zi, 2016). The second, *daojiao*, refers to Chinese religion, which takes the Tao as the highest belief and seeks immortality, similarly to many other religions.

The relationship between *daojia* and *daojiao* is disputed. Some scholars believe that the two are completely opposed. However, others think that, although there are differences, there are also similarities. In this article we do not discuss this distinction; instead, we focus on *daojia* Taoism, the educational branch taught by the three classical masters. *Daojia* Taoism is based on four essential radical pedagogical foundations: the Tao, *ziran*, *wuwei* and *Te*.

### The first radical pedagogical foundation: the Tao

The first foundation stone of Taoism is the Tao, written in Chinese as 道. All Taoist understanding derives from the Tao. It is difficult to find an equivalent concept to the Tao. Etymologically, it means “way” or “path.” It has been interpreted as a “guide to behaviour” (Robinet, 1999, p.19). The written symbol for the Tao is composed of two ideograms: “walk” on the left and “head” on the right. Rather than a “guide to behaviour” it is a “leaving the road behind you” (Jung, 2009) or a “path of consciousness” (Herrán, 2006). Machado (1998) writes that “your footsteps are the path, nothing else [...] Walking, you trace the path; looking behind, you see the road you will never travel again” (p.152). In the West we like to walk

with guides and certainties. For the classics, on the other hand, the path is every step we take.

Other meanings attributed to the Tao are: principle, method, law, rule, doctrine and order (e.g. Elorduy, 1983; Preciado, 2012; Watts, 2003). In old Chinese, Tao also means “to speak, express oneself, say.” Yet Lao Zi (2012) gives the word an ontological significance (Fung, 1952) in which its educational potential is rooted. This interpretation of the concept is important, since classical Taoism developed on the basis of Lao Zi’s legacy (Lao Zi, 2012).

With Lao Zi (2012), the Tao became the highest, deepest and most unfathomable ontology in Chinese wisdom. Tao is the word that represents the central concepts of Chinese culture (Chen, 2016). Lao Zi (2012) raises it to the level of the origin or root of the universe, the first cause, although he also sees it as both totality and void, considering it the foundation and reality of the world (Elorduy, 1983; Robinet, 1999; Watts, 1976). Tao is the origin and supreme principle. According to Lao Zi (2012):

The Tao begets the one,  
the one begets the two,  
the two begets the three,  
the three begets the ten thousand beings.  
The ten thousand beings embrace the yin and the yang,  
Whose vital energies (*qi*) blend into a harmonious whole (p. 227).

All beings are created by the Tao, which is the “mother of the ten thousand beings” and the “mysterious female.” Zhuang Zi (2015) alludes to the Tao in Lao Zi (2012) as meaning the “root,” also personalizing it as the creator or progenitor of the world. In this role, however, the Tao does not attempt to possess its creations:

The Tao begets them and feeds them,  
it makes them grow and flourish,  
it brings them stability and rest,  
it nourishes and protects them.  
It begets them without possession,  
It benefits them without gratitude,  
It nurtures them but does not rule.  
This is its name: mysterious virtue. (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 245).

Neither is the Tao affected by the ten thousand beings: it creates them without being influenced by them (Robinet, 1999). As Zhuang Zi writes (2015):

The Tao makes things full or empty, though in it you will find neither fullness nor emptiness; it makes things weaken or diminish, though in it you will find neither weakening nor diminishing; [...] it makes things gather or disperse, though in it there is neither gathering nor dispersion (p. 240).

The Tao is objective and absolute existence. Zhuang Zi (2015) asks:

Were there things before Heaven and Earth existed? That which makes things exist is not itself a thing. Things could not have come out of what came before the Tao. From it there came things, and its begetting of things has never ceased (p. 243).

Moreover, the Tao depends neither on conditions nor on creation. The *Lie Zi* (2016) tells us that “what begets beings is not itself begotten and what transforms beings is not itself transformed” (p. 42). It also notes that the Tao is a timeless existence: it has no beginning, no end, no birth and no death. In contrast, the existence of perceivable beings is relative. They have beginnings and endings, births and deaths. The existence of the Tao is not comparable to either living or non-living beings. “The Tao has no end and no beginning; things, on the other hand, are born and die, and in temporary existence, cannot take root. Either empty or full, they lack permanent form” (Zhuang Zi, 2015, p. 184). Furthermore, the Tao has no name (*wu ming*), nor does it have form (*wu xing*). Lao Zi (2012) writes that:

The name that can be named  
is not the eternal name.  
That which has no name (*wu ming*)  
is the origin of Heaven and Earth.  
That which has a name (*you ming*)  
Is the mother of all beings (p. 307).

The Tao, then, is believed to be timeless; and what can be named can never be timeless. Names have limits, but the Tao is limitless (Zhuang Zi, 2015). Even “the name ‘Tao’ is only a borrowed name” (Zhuang Zi, 2015, p. 285). “I do not know its name. They call it ‘Tao’” (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 355). The Tao is not only anonymous, but also invisible and intangible.

You look at it and you don't see it,  
its name is *wei*.  
You listen to it and you don't hear it,  
Its name is *xi*.  
You feel it and you don't touch it,  
Its name is *yi*.  
[...]  
You follow it and don't see its back,  
You face it and don't see its head (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 333).

Zhuang Zi (2015), similarly, explains: “The Tao cannot be seen or heard. So where is it? The Tao is everywhere in the universe, in all beings. It is in an ant, in a blade of grass, in a roof tile, even in dung and urine.”

The Tao is the Great One, the Supreme One, the undifferentiated One. It is the “first simplicity,” the “original purity” (Zhuang Zi, 2015, p. 141). There is no such thing as something superior to the One. From the Tao, there can only be losses. It is like light and darkness: they define each other and cannot exist separately; only in darkness can light be seen (Zhuang Zi, 2015).

The Tao is also emptiness. Although it is emptiness, its efficiency is never exhausted (Lao Zi, 2012). This emptiness is not “a lack of content, matter or essence” (*Real Academia Española*, 2021). It is the container of all content, of the heterogeneity and diversity of all beings: its emptiness is also fullness. In emptiness, there is only silence (Lao Zi, 2016). Silence can bring the Tao closer.

## The second radical pedagogical foundation: *ziran*

The second radical educational foundation stone of Taoism is *ziran*, 自然, although this rarely appears in the classics. In the West it is translated as “nature” or “spontaneity.” *Ziran*, however, has other interpretations



that can clarify its literal meaning. For Liu (2015), *ziran* cannot be represented by any particular word. In Mandarin, Taoist *ziran* refers to the natural world. Mou (2005) explains that:

*Ziran* in Taoism is not the same as the nature of the natural world. Nor is it equivalent to Western “naturalism.” “Naturalism” and “materialism” are similar. It is a kind of materialism referring to the natural world, studied by the natural sciences; and since the sciences always study physical phenomena, it refers by nature to the physical world (p. 71).

In Taoist culture, it has a different meaning. For Mou (2005), the *ziran* of the Taoists is a term referring to that which “cleaves to the spiritual life; that is, free and tranquil, like oneself, without leaning on anything” (p. 71). In the *Tao Te Ching*, *ziran* is said to be practiced by the sages, and appears five times (chapters 17, 23, 25, 51 and 64). The sage is the ideal model of the ruler (Liu, 2015), the recipient of these teachings. An ideal ruler neither commands nor imposes; he leads though the laws of the Tao. He lets the ten thousand beings express their original nature. However, in this classic, the meaning of *ziran* is neither unequivocal nor clear. Zhuang Zi (2015) also does not often mention it, but the following quotations may help us understand the term:

- “Continuously accommodate oneself to Heaven (*ziran*) and use no artifice to augment life” (p. 84).
- “Let things take their natural course (*ziran*), and do not entertain self-interested thoughts. Then the world can be well governed” (p. 100).
- “Conform to natural spontaneity (*ziran*)” (p. 160).
- “At that time, no one acted and everything followed its natural course” (*ziran*) (p. 175).

Furthermore, the classical Taoist masters speak of *ziran* from the perspective of *ben xing* 本性. *Ben xing* is a Chinese word that literally means “the particular nature that we have at birth” or “our particular virtue.” Since ancient times, the Chinese have used the word *xing* 性 to refer to the “quality” or “essential characteristic of things” (Liu, 2015); for example, “The most beautiful beauty of things is their *ben xing*.” The *ziran* of Taoism is its natural truth. This true state of things also relates

to *shiran* 使然. *Shiran* is, literally, “a state where truth is in bondage to vulgar uses.” In this state there are external pressures. Taoism teaches the desirability of conforming to the natural spontaneity of beings and returning to the tendency of Heaven –in Chinese culture, the meaning of Heaven is the same as *ziran* (Liu, 2015).

*Ziran* can be understood as *tian ran* 天然, the antonym of *ren wei*, “man-made.” It is an ancient Chinese way of life: “*tian ren he yi* 天人合一” (Liu, 2016), meaning that Heaven and man become one. “To see Heaven and man as one, is to agree with Heaven; to think that they are not so, is to agree with man. Heaven and man are not opposed to each other” (Zhuang Zi, 2015, p. 87).

The Taoist masters thought that the original nature of every being had its particular *raison d'être*, and that this *ziran* should be respected. All beings are as they are simply because they are as they are. Their *ziran* gives them their use. To respect *ziran* is to use things without abusing them, without violating them. It is compared to “using the eyes to see what the eye can see; using the ears to hear what the ear can hear; and using the mind to understand what the mind can understand” (Zhuang Zi, 2015, p. 271). The classics are against human deeds that violate the state of *ziran*. Human deeds that stray from *ziran* can lead towards death:

A sea bird landed on the outskirts of the capital of Lu. The Marquis of Lu welcomed it at the Temple of the Ancestors, where he offered it the finest wines. He played music to please it, and a great sacrifice was held to feed it. But the bird, with a confused look and a sorrowful air, dared not eat a single morsel of meat, nor drink a sip of wine, and, after three days, died (Zhuang Zi, 2015, pp. 196-197).

The bird was not fed according to its nature. Self-centred human action violated its *ziran*. To respect a bird's *ziran* is “to let it perch deep in the forest, roam freely across the sandbanks, swim in the rivers and lakes, eat minnows and eels, join flocks of its own species and live in its own way” (Zhuang Zi, 2015, p. 197). *Ziran*, here, is a state of consciousness attuned to one's original nature. The same is true of the legs of animals: if they are long they should be long, if they are short, short. “Nothing can be added to what is long in itself; nothing can be taken away from what

is itself short” (Lie Zi, 2016, p. 131). The myth of Procrustes, for example, illustrates the antithesis of these teachings.

According to the *Zhuang Zi* (2015) “Conscious men never help Heaven with human action and are in supreme joy.” What is the difference between Heaven and man? Zhuang Zi (2015) explains, “Let the buffalo and horse have four legs, that is Heaven. Putting the bridle on a horse or piercing the nose of a buffalo, that is man” (p. 185). The classics oppose human restraints and are against the intentionally carved and artificially decorated. *Ziran* refers to a state of being that lacks human hypocrisy or intervention. Human action harms true nature.

*Ziran* is the state of the “newborn” or “the state of wood” (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 361). Because of its beauty, nothing in the world can compare to *ziran* (Zhuang Zi, 2015). It is equivalent to returning to the “woody” or original state (*fan pu gui zhen* 返朴归真 or *fu gui yu pu* 复归于朴). “The swan does not need to bathe every day to be white, nor the crow to stain itself every day to be black. White and black belong to original nature, and there is no need to discuss them” (Zhuang Zi, 2015, p. 166). The swan is white, but not because it bathes every day. The crow is black, but not because of the sun. Both are intrinsic, natural. In Taoism, *ziran* is “pure simplicity; and nothing in the world can compete with it in beauty” (Zhuang Zi, 2015, p. 148). In China, pure simplicity is termed *pu su* 朴素. *Pu* is uncarved wood, while *su* means a white or original colour. *Pu su* is therefore the primitive nature and state of things. To return to the internal state of *pu*, we must remove the artificial distortions that can damage original human nature. Human actions are characteristic of a civilized or corrupt society (Callahan, 1989). In contrast, we should practice *wuwei* 无为.

### The third radical pedagogical foundation: *wuwei*

*Wuwei*, 无为, is the third foundation stone of Taoist teachings. It applies to society, daily life, the environment, governance, education, teaching, and so on. It translates, literally, as “not acting,” “non-action (absence of action)” or “non-doing.” It has also been translated as “not acting deliberately” or “acting naturally,” to avoid being associated with passivity (Ames, 1986). In ancient Chinese, *wu* means “not,” and can be read in two ways: as the negative or the imperative. Thus, *wuwei* has two meanings: “they did

nothing” and “do nothing.” “They did nothing” refers to an existing state. It does not mean that there was no action, but rather that something occurred in its natural state, without external effort, or in an ideal state without resistance, thus eliminating inappropriate actions. “Do nothing,” on the other hand, is intended to prevent certain behaviour. Yet it does not prohibit all behaviours; only those which go against nature. At the same time, it affirms behaviours that are in accordance with nature. In conclusion, *wuwei* is not the negation of all action (the complete negation of *wei* 为), but a dialectical view of behaviour, oriented towards action.

*Wuwei* can be understood from two perspectives: the behavioural and the cognitive (Slingerland, 2003). On the behavioural plane, the application of *wuwei* is *wei wuwei* 为无为 (practicing non-action). As Lao Zi (2012) advises us: “act without acting, busy yourself with not being busy, savour that which has no taste” (p. 161). This *wei wuwei* is not complete passivity: Loy (1985) calls it “the action of passivity” (p. 75), with a positive connotation. *Wuwei*, then, means acting as little as possible. It also means surrendering or retreating, rather than forcing, since force leads to exhaustion and loss. Both Watts (1976, 2003) and Loy (1985) give the same example: under the weight of a heavy snowfall, the branches of the pine tree break; but the willow sags and lets the snow fall without breaking, returning to its original position. This passivity forms part of the negative way of the Taoist classics. It is “negative” because it does not follow traditional or conventional concepts of action (Slingerland, 2000). The meaning of *wuwei* is not to attain a higher position; instead, the Taoist tradition cherishes the lower position and weakness and softness (*rou ruo* 柔弱) as the essences of a life-sustaining existence. Lao Zi (2012) writes:

Man, at birth, is weak and soft,  
But at death becomes rigid and hard.  
Plants and trees are tender and fragile at birth,  
but become dry and stiff at death.  
Hence the saying:  
“Strength and hardness lead to death,  
weakness and softness lead to life.”  
That is why strong weapons do not win,  
And the vigorous tree breaks.  
Hence that which is strong and great is below,  
and that which is weak and soft is above (p. 299).

*Wuwei* means conforming to *ziran*, flowing with nature. In Alan Watts' words: "going with the flow, [...] swimming with the current, setting sail with the wind, following the tide in its flow" (Watts, 1976, p. 111). The ten thousand beings are born through *wuwei*. They do not act but are still respected. Zhuang Zi (2015) tells us:

Heaven does not act and hence its purity, Earth does not act and hence its stillness; if Heaven and Earth are in harmony in their non-action, the millions of beings are transformed. [...] the variety of beings is infinite, and all are born of non-action (p. 193).

Observing nature and the universe, we see that the natural world moves in a spontaneous, orderly and harmonious way: the mountains are high, the ocean is deep and wide, the moon and stars are bright, the changes of the four seasons, in which the ten thousand beings are begotten and grow, are natural and harmonious. Heaven and Earth do not act, but beget everything: *wu-wei-er-wu-bu-wei* 无为而无不为: "Since they do not act, nothing is left undone" (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 239). Therefore, the great masters of Taoism take *ziran* as the source of a consciousness-based education. *Ziran*, understood as "attunement to nature," is just as important to people's education and upbringing as is subject or transversal knowledge, especially in a consumer society that has fallen out of harmony with nature.

Acting on the basis of the human ego, the more we strive, the further we move away from our destinies. "He who acts, fails; he who clings to something, loses it" (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 271). That is why the Taoist masters steer education towards consciousness, grounding it in *wei-wu-wei*. Without acting, everyone follows their proper course.

The application of *wuwei* to behaviour depends on its cognitive application. To reach the state of *wu yi wei* 无以为 (non-estimation), we should act naturally. According to Laudo (2010), any fixed intention goes against the Tao, as it leads to unfulfilled desire and to conflict. In the classics, *wei* designates action directed towards achieving goals. Our actions stem from our desires (*yu*, 欲), and this signifies the destruction of *ziran*. Our desires drive us to pursue knowledge, longevity, happiness, well-being, power, wealth, fame, nobility, recognition, etc.; and these are like great spider webs binding human existence (Preciado, 2012). With

them, we can never achieve stillness (*jing* 靜) and peace. Taoists, then, believe that we can only attain supreme happiness through *wuwei*.

On the cognitive level, *wuwei* means abandoning our intentions and desires, letting go, letting ourselves be. This is the “negative” way, the way of meditation, of deconditioning, of stopping the flow of thoughts, of not knowing; different from but complementary to the “learning-action-knowledge” triad of Western education (Herrán, 2014). *Wuwei* also involves the disappearance of selfish desires, attachments and personal tendencies. In other words it is *wuyu* 无欲 (without desires, which is also *zhi zu* 知足, or knowing how to be content); and also *wuqiu* 无求 (without obsessions, without neurosis), and *wuzheng* 无争 (without strife).

To reach the state of *wuwei*, knowledge must gradually dwindle until it becomes emptiness: “Through study [knowledge] is accumulated day by day. Through the Tao [knowledge] diminishes day by day” (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 27). The Taoist masters stress the importance of this emptiness, of non-being, of overcoming opposition and duality. Therefore, we should free ourselves from the values, categories and norms which condition the human mind. The spirit of the perfect man is empty. As it is empty, not knowing, it is spontaneously, automatically and effortlessly in tune with nature (Herrán, 2014).

*Wuwei* is found everywhere in Taoism. In the teachings of the Taoist masters, there are many terms derived from *wuwei*: *wuyong* 无用 (without utility) or *wuyan* 无言 (without words or speech), for example. These argue for “the usefulness of the useless”: only trees without utility live a hundred years and complete their natural course, whereas trees that are prized for their wood or fruit do not complete their life cycle. On the basis of *wuyan*, teaching takes place without words: “Teaching without words, the benefit of not acting, little in the world can compare to these” (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 229). Rousseau (1987) also refers to the usefulness of “teaching by silence” and “doing nothing” (p. 127).

#### Fourth radical pedagogical foundation: *Te*.

In ancient times, *dao**jia* Taoism was also called *daode jia* 道德家, or at one period the Tao *Te* school. Both *Te* and Tao are central concepts of Taoism. However, in Western studies of Taoism, *Te* is given less

attention than Tao. In Western scholarship, *Te* has been translated as “virtue,” although this is not appropriate. According to Chen (1973), “virtue” is moral perfection, the result of conscious education and the accomplishment of what is considered good and ethical (decent). Virtue develops as the triumph of good over evil. If we see *Te* as virtue, then, it necessarily involves a moral dualism, the distinction between good and evil. According to Waley (2005), however, “*Te* can be both bad and good. What is ‘bad virtue’? Obviously, ‘virtue’ is not a satisfactory equivalent” (p. 31). According to Lao Zi (2012), when the Tao degenerates, the need for *Te* arises:

[...] when the Tao is lost, virtue appears;  
when virtue is lost, benevolence appears;  
when benevolence is lost, righteousness appears;  
and when righteousness is lost, the rites appear.  
The rites, undermining loyalty and trust,  
are the origin of chaos (p. 219).

The Taoist classics distinguish between lower *Te* and higher *Te*. In the verses above, *Te* refers to lower *Te*. Benevolence, righteousness and the rites come under the aegis of lower *Te*, as they are the origin of disorder and chaos. They are harmful to personal and social evolution. Lower *Te* is a degradation of *Te*, and therefore it is not *Te*. These lower levels of *Te*, however, are the virtues exhorted by the Confucian school (1969) and in the West, where virtue becomes goodness and is displaced by a social reading of the concept (Camps, 1990) or by “values education.” The terms “virtue” and “values” do not capture the substance of the higher *Te*, which is directed inwards, towards consciousness.

The Taoist classics refer to higher *Te* as “mysterious *Te*,” “great *Te*” and “eternal *Te*,” distinguishing it from conventional or lower *Te*. Zhuang Zi (2015) says: “the Maker (Tao) endows men, not as we experience them, but with their original nature” (pp. 340-341); and: “to accommodate oneself to things by bringing them into harmony, that is Virtue” (p. 238). Here, the meaning of *Te* is equivalent to *ziran* and *ben xing*. For Chen (1973), *Te* is more dynamic than *ben xing*: with *Te*, we see how things move and operate from within. *Te* is the original nature of being, distinct from learned virtue. Also, it is unconscious: “when one is conscious of

*Te*, it ceases to exist, for it has become an object” (Hansen, 1992). In this regard, Lao Zi (2012) tells us:

The man of superior virtue is not virtuous,  
and therefore is in possession of virtue.  
The man of inferior virtue clings to virtue,  
and therefore lacks virtue.  
The man of superior virtue does not act,  
nor does he seek to achieve any end (p. 219).

Lao Zi (2016) states that he who has superior virtue “practices virtue without considering himself virtuous” (p. 71). Those who are in the higher states of *Te*, do not esteem their *Te*. They conform to *ziran*, they do not do things deliberately, they have no intentions or judgments. These two facets coincide with other ideas associated with *wuwei*: *wu yi wei* (not esteeming) and *wu-wei-er-wu-bu-wei* (since they do not act, nothing is left undone). The perfect *Te* of the Taoist masters appears imperfect, like the gnarled pines and rugged hills of Chinese paintings (Watts, 1976). Lao Zi (2012) tells us:

The highest virtue looks like a valley floor,  
great whiteness seems unclean,  
all-embracing virtue appears lacking,  
firm virtue seems weak,  
The absolute truth seems false (p. 223).

Zhuang Zi (2015) describes people with physical disabilities (the mutilated, lame, etc.) or great ugliness as men with perfect *Te*, because a strange mind is more meaningful than a strange body (Watts, 1976). One symbol of *Te* is the “newborn”:

The man of great virtue  
is like a newborn baby.  
Wasps and scorpions do not sting him,  
poisonous snakes do not bite him,  
wild beasts and birds of prey do not attack him;  
his bones and sinews are weak,  
but his hand grasps firmly;



he does not know of the union of male and female,  
but his male member rises,  
for his vital energy is at its height;  
he cries all day long and does not grow hoarse,  
for his harmony is perfect (Lao Zi, 2012, p. 253).

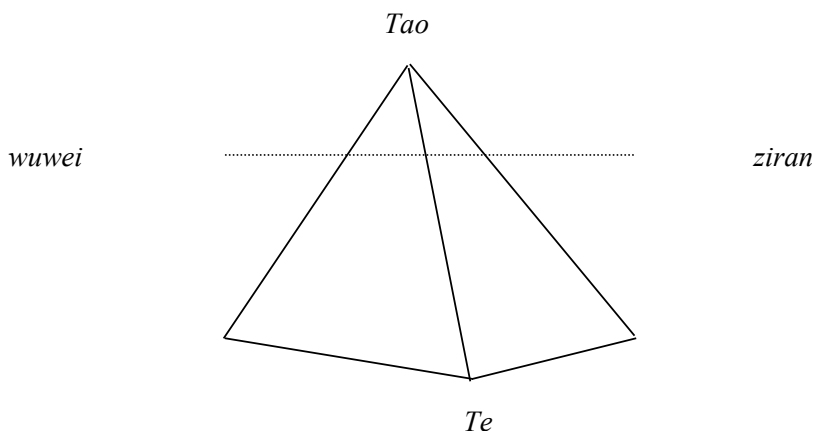
The newborn baby symbolizes the fullness and wholeness of *Te*. Since it is in harmony with the beings in its environment, none of them harm it. It holds the highest vital power of *Te*, but does not waste its energy in distinguishing opposites, knowing that distinction is vain. The newborn baby thus symbolizes the original perfection of *ziran* (Chen, 1973).

## The relationships between the four educational foundations

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FIGURE I. The four educational foundations of Taoism.

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The relationships between the four foundations of Taoism (Figure I) can be summed up in the following outline. The Tao is the core of a radical Taoist understanding of education. *Te* is the multiplication of the Tao into the ten thousand beings. *Te* is manifested if one follows the way of Tao as *ziran*. The efficacy of *Te* comes through *wuwei*. Tao is

experienced by observing *ziran*. In *ziran* we can see the *wuwei* of the Tao. *Wuwei* is the manifestation of *ziran* and the Tao. The higher state of *Te* manifests itself in *wuwei*, which means holding to our own *ziran*, without destroying the *ziran* of others.

## Discussion and conclusions

The *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* (2019) defines Taoism as “a religious and philosophical doctrine founded in China by Lao Tse in the 6th century BC.” *Daojia*, or educational Taoism, however, is not a doctrine, nor is it religious, nor is it philosophical. The foundations of the Tao enable us to consider another way of understanding education and, perhaps, of redefining it through integrating into it constructs such as consciousness, egocentrism and self-knowledge (Herrán, 1995).

It is inappropriate and contradictory to call this a “doctrine,” since doing so would contradict and destroy men’s original simplicity. As Lao Tse (2012) tells us: “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the true Tao.” Thus, it is more anti-doctrine than doctrine. According to tradition, the *Tao Te Ching* was composed unwillingly by Lao Tse (2012) in his old age, when a border guard demanded it as a condition for his passage. The Taoist masters, in the same way as Lao Tse (2012), did not set up norms, rules, opinions, systems of reason or schools. “The Taoist sage is not a preacher, nor a master who creates a school of devoted disciples. Even Lao Tse himself does not set himself up as a teacher” (Viñao, 2005, p. 243); just as Socrates did not consider himself wise (Plato, 2003).

According to Viñao (2005), “some authors qualify Taoism as a negative and negativist pedagogy, without venturing to speak directly of a Taoist pedagogy” (p. 242). If there exists a methodology that seeks to unlearn all methodology, this is Taoism.

Educational Taoism is *daojia*. Religious Taoism is *daojiao*. Therefore, it is incorrect to see educational Taoism as a religion. *Daojia* lacks creeds, rites, priests and followers. Religions condition people, create dependence and attachment, emphasize the vulnerability, misery and suffering of the follower. By seeking God’s help, the person becomes religious (Osho, 2012).

The Tao harmonizes life and nature, the existential and the essential, and leads to awareness and calm. For Maillard (1995), Taoism is an inner path of “relinking” or reunion with the essential principle of being:

Taoism is a pattern for and a path towards self-knowledge, a set of methodological guidelines that, beginning their action from the first, inner stages, pursue it through the different degrees of spiritual perfection until the highest clarity of understanding is achieved. It does not seek to teach –and therefore rejects both beliefs and conceptual teaching—but to open up higher levels of consciousness (p. 7).

It is also incorrect to describe *daojia* Taoism as a philosophy. Despite this, Viñao (2005) considers it an “ecologist,” “anarchist” and “anti-pedagogical” philosophy. Watts (2003) also calls Taoism a “philosophy of nature.” However, as Maillard (1995) says, philosophy is based on logical discourse: it is knowledge coming from knowledge for the sake of knowledge. It connects with education from the standpoint of the will to know (Espinosa, 2019), responds to prior philosophical currents and gives rise to new doctrines. In contrast, the Taoist masters experimented in their own lives and conveyed their knowledge in the form of observations and experiences, not in order to know more or understand better, but to “know how to live” (Maillard, 1995) and to live more consciously. For these masters, what is essential is not only assimilating knowledge, but also eliminating it, renouncing it, halting the flow of thought, deconditioning ourselves, disidentifying with things and ideas, not knowing, experiencing the essential emptiness. They offer no final answers. Taoism, then, is not the same as philosophy. The teachings of the Taoist masters concur with Socrates (Plato, 2003) and particularly with his disciples Antisthenes and Diogenes of Sinope (Laertius, 2008). For Herrán (2012), Lao Tse, in addition to Siddhartha Gautama, Socrates, Zhuang Zi, Lie Zi, Antisthenes and Diogenes of Sinope, were not philosophers: their aim was not to know, nor to attain wisdom, but to enquire into life and educate themselves for their essential awakening and to live more consciously; to that extent, it made sense to gather an audience, to teach others as they had taught themselves. Their grounding and orientation were profound and radical. Therefore, they can be seen as radical pedagogues:

What has been translated as [Taoist] “philosophy” is really pedagogy, since its purpose and guidelines lead to an education centred on consciousness. It is oriented towards personal growth, towards the development of social relations and the search for wisdom (Herrán, 2012, p. 313).

In the teachings of the Taoist masters, just as in Comenius (1984), metaphors are included in profound writings that are lessons for a more lucid life. Nevertheless, they are not simply assimilable to the modern “education for life,” advocated by scholars and organisations from Pestalozzi (1923) to UNESCO (2021). Instead, this life is closer to the “good life” (Plato, 2003) described by Socrates and Diogenes of Sinope (Laertius, 2008), although the latter is at a lower, more ethical level.

The radical Taoist pedagogical foundations can be applied as educational principles in the theory and practice of empowering and renovating forms of pedagogy. (1) The Tao can only be intuited through “higher states of consciousness,” which have everything to do with high levels of education (Herrán, 2006; Herrán y Sabbi, 2021). (2) Teaching based on the Tao helps us move away from the superfluous and from indoctrination, desires and fears; it helps us to live in harmony with the universe (Viñao, 2005). It favours the awakening of consciousness and the inner evolution of human beings. (3) From the perspective of *ziran*, nature is taken as a teacher or educational resource (Herrán, 2012), experienced close at hand and by observation. (4) Practising *wuwei* helps make up for egocentric actions that harm nature. The idea of “non-doing” has also been developed by Western pedagogues and educators such as Rousseau, Montessori, Rogers and Neill.

Herrán (2012) has advanced the hypothesis that Rousseau (1987) was familiar with the Taoist tradition, and specifically with *wuwei* and *ziran*. *Wuwei*, as “doing nothing” or “letting things happen,” was part of Rousseau’s “negative education,” motivated by the “educational” barbarities of his time that he denounces in *Emile*. *Ziran*, because he understood, in a compatible way, that human action harms true nature. If this hypothesis is true, then *daojian* Taoism is at the heart of Western education:

The first education must therefore be purely negative. It consists in teaching neither virtue nor truth, but in defending the heart from vice

and the spirit of error. If you could do nothing and not let him do anything [...], very soon in your hands he would become the wisest of men; and, by beginning with doing nothing, you would have created a prodigy of education (Rousseau, 1987, p. 101).

(5) *Te*, as a quality of the very young and even the prenatal child (Herrán, 2015a, 2015b), enables us to develop renewed foundations of education and teaching. (6) The inclusion of the foundations of the Tao in training for teachers and other educators, such as families, would enable its transfer to formal education at all stages, from early education to university, and, in non-formal and informal contexts, from prenatal to gerontological. (7) The teachings of the Tao and its classics complements the current competency approach, from the standpoint of an education based on awareness. (8) An education based on the higher meaning of *Te* transcends education in values, virtues and ethics, through a meditative, natural and unconscious depth approach that would be susceptible to conventional research. (9) A way of teaching based on the Tao can support a silent, more respectful, more humanistic form of educational guidance, based on *wuyan* 无言 (without words or speaking) and *wuwei*. Rousseau (1987) agrees with this: “Few in the world come to understand the usefulness of teaching by silence and by doing nothing” (p. 127). (10) We can derive from Taoism a meditative approach to research and enquiry (also research and enquiry into ourselves), without ego, expectations, action, desires or goals of knowledge, without obsessions or debates, without duality or opposites, without publication or recognition, without knowing or not knowing, starting from and leading towards emptiness.

What could *dao* Taoism mean for universal education? A clear definition of Taoism would be difficult to achieve and would pervert its meaning. The suffix *-ism*, in fact, corrupts its beauty: “Under *isms* ideas are transformed into ideologies and around them followers gather [...] Followers and affiliates: those who follow and those who form lines. Schools are tendentious” (Maillard, 2021, p. 12). *Isms* are creations of the collective ego (Herrán, 2008). That is why education is incompatible with conditioning, and takes place beyond it. A analogue of Taoism is the constantly flowing water of streams, the oceans, the mountains, the air, and so on. Its flow reflects the movement of the Tao. Water does not fight, nor does it act; it flows downward. Everything depends on water, which is at relative rest.

The most important thing in education is to understand its deep meaning for each being, linked to inner human evolution. This is a matter of judiciously setting the compass point of our own education, before we move outwards to the circle we have drawn. Just as Cebes (1995), a disciple of Socrates, critically and consciously refuted the pseudo-education of his time, today's pedagogy and didactics need to stress complementary theoretical alternatives to competency-based education, which is biased towards the existential and the external. The teachings of the three Taoist classics give form to an education of consciousness based on the uniqueness of our being and its harmonious relationship with nature. By including much of what we are missing, this has enormous potential for the radical development of pedagogy and Western education.

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**Contact address:** Agustín de la Herrán Gascón, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Facultad de Formación del Profesorado y Educación, Departamento de Pedagogía. C/ Francisco Tomás y Valiente, 3, postal code 28049, Madrid. E-mail: [agustin.delaherran@uam.es](mailto:agustin.delaherran@uam.es)

