

# Life Philosophy: A Study on Western Ontology and Taoism of Form and Spirit Dualism

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**Abstract:** The paper, starting from the perspective of philosophical exploration of life, combines historical literature with ontology and dualism as the focal points, integrating features from various fields such as psychology, traditional Chinese medicine, and phenomenology. It conducts a comparative study on the similarities and differences between Western ontology and Taoist dualism of form and spirit. The article elucidates how the ‘outward-extending material world and inward-purifying spiritual world’ are unified in the principle of the amalgamation of ‘human body.’ It also provides specific methods and theoretical explanations for the discovery of the spiritual world in the East and West.

The external world is defined as the material realm discovered by science, while the internal world is the spiritual realm revealed after the purification of the mind. Both idealism and materialism have tended toward extremes in two directions. Both Western ontology and Eastern Taoist dualism of form and spirit have discovered the phenomenon that ‘the spirit can exist independently in this time and space through specific exercises such as meditation.’ Taoism, with its unique medical foundation in the study of ‘form,’ recognizes the interaction of form and spirit, leading to the development of their respective religious, philosophical, and theological traditions. Interdisciplinary and cross-regional studies in religion, particularly in the field of mental and physical health, are expected to become significant trends in the future.”

**Key words:** Philosophy of Life, Ontology, Dualism, Taoist Medicine, Doctrine of Form and Spirit, Meditation

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## I. Introduction

With the improvement of material living standards, there is an increasing emphasis on the quality of spiritual life. The question of ‘Where do we come from and where are we going?’ has been a profound topic in the ontology of humanity throughout history. Comparative studies between Eastern and Western perspectives, particularly the introduction of Taoist dualism of form and spirit, have brought new dimensions to this discourse.

This paper employs research methodologies from psychology, history, traditional Chinese medicine, phenomenology, and sociology. It aims to explore the philosophical considerations of ‘ontological perspectives in Eastern and Western philosophies, combined with the practical aspects of Taoist dualism of form and spirit.’ Through such investigations, the paper elucidates the

similarities and differences in the religious and philosophical understandings of life between the East and the West. Additionally, it offers new directions for interdisciplinary and cross-regional studies in the field of mental and physical health.

## I. Philosophy of Life in the East and the West: Transcendental Ontology and Dualism

Starting from ancient Greek philosophy, ontology has always been a crucial way in the Western tradition to understand the world and the essence of life. In modern philosophy, Descartes employed meditation as a method to contemplate mathematics, philosophy, and physics. He proposed the theory of “mind-body dualism,”<sup>1</sup> which was later extended to medicine to understand the regularities of human life activities<sup>2</sup>.

For traditional Chinese Taoism, there also exists an explanation centered around the concept of “Yuan Shen”<sup>3</sup> (primal spirit) as its ontology. However, Taoism emphasizes the concept of “Xing shen ju miao”<sup>4</sup> (harmony of form and spirit) and puts forward a philosophical viewpoint that achieving the status of “Shen Ren”(divine person) is facilitated through the medium of the “Tao”. As the renowned Taoist figure Sima Chengzhen further explained that “under the influence of the Tao, the form and the primal spirit achieve unity which is named ‘divine beings’ “and proposes a philosophical viewpoint that utilizes the “Tao” as a medium to achieve the status of “divine beings.”<sup>5</sup>

In Taoism, the tangible body serves acting as both the domain and the medium of experience. It is the starting point and space where other values can be realized.<sup>6</sup>

Starting from ontology, various schools of Western philosophy throughout history have been arguing for the existence of “God (or soul),” especially in Christian philosophy, which involves more transcendental philosophy. Influenced by the Eastern “mystical and Orphic elements,” Plato, in his theory of Forms, distinctly asserts that the ultimate truth lies in the transcendent world of “Ideas.” Augustine believes that God not only created human physical life but also created spiritual life, emphasizing the value of spiritual life. Thomas Aquinas, influenced by Aristotle, accepts the

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1 Zhao Dunhua, *Xifang zhexue shi* [History of Western philosophy], (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe [Peking University Press], 2001), 218-219.

2 Zhang Daoning, Li Mingyang, *The Trinitarian Life View of Form, Qi, and Spirit and Descartes' Dualistic Life View*, Chinese Journal of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Vol.38, No.2, (2023), 561.

3 Dong Ning, Liang Qi, *Chang Qingjing Jing* [A treatise on ancient Taoist meditation], in “Chuanshuo·Lundao [Legends and Taoism]” (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2016), 12.

4 *Ibid.*, 4.

5 Sima Chengzhen (639-735) :*Zuo wang lun* [Sit and meditate], *Dao zang* [Taoist Collection, 22], (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe[Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House], Shanghai:Shanghai shudian[Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore], Tianjing: Tianjing chubanshe [Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House], 1988), 896.

6 Chen Xia, “Harmony of Form and Spirit: A Modern Interpretation of Taoist Body Theory”, *Philosophical Trends*, No. 4, (2005), 35.

idea that “a person is a tangible entity composed of body and soul,” later transformed into the notion that “philosophy is the handmaiden of theology.” Kant inherits Plato’s ideas and proposes the doctrine of the “two worlds,” hoping to leave space for faith. In the modern era, due to the doctrines of Bacon, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Comte, and others, along with the development of scientific philosophy and technology, there has been an increasing emphasis on material development.

The prominent figure of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse, in his book “One-Dimensional Man,” argues that due to the extreme expansion of modern material civilization, a society that originally had demands in both material and spiritual aspects has transformed into a society where material needs are satisfied, but spiritual aspirations are left unfulfilled – a “one-dimensional” society characterized by material affluence and spiritual emptiness. According to Marcuse, individuals in such a society become “one-dimensional” as well.

After Schopenhauer, it wasn’t until Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911)<sup>7</sup> proposed that the traditional philosophical perspective, which separates matter and spirit and clings to each end, is erroneous. The object of philosophical inquiry should not be purely material or purely spiritual; instead, it should be something that tightly connects the two, achieving an absolute unity of subject and object. Life itself is the source of our thoughts and evaluations, and only life should be the subject of philosophical study.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in the East, Ge Hong also presented similar views: “The great virtue of heaven and earth is called life. Life is that which is cherished. Therefore, among the secrets and priorities of Taoism, none surpasses the method of longevity.”<sup>9</sup> He further stated, “Ancient sages said, ‘Life bestowed upon me is indeed of great benefit.’ In terms of its value, even if one holds the title of emperor, it is not comparable to this method. In terms of its significance, even if one possesses all the wealth in the world, it is not worth exchanging for this art. Therefore, there is the metaphor of a dead king envying the life of a mouse.”<sup>10</sup> In his perspective, the value of a deceased king is not comparable to that of a living mouse, emphasizing the preciousness of life. His philosophical viewpoint on life exhibits the characteristic of “harmony between heaven and humanity” and falls within the realm of natural mythology.<sup>11</sup> Logically, he asserted that, for Taoism to preserve life, the most crucial aspect is to obtain methods for longevity, aligning with the “great virtue of heaven and earth.” As a Taoist proficient in Confucianism and medicine, he integrated both material and spiritual dimensions into his approach to life practices.

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7 Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), a member of the Prussian Royal Academy of Sciences, was a German philosopher, historian, psychologist, and sociologist. He introduced the concept of “philosophy of life” and established a new discipline called “human science.”

8 Xie Dikun, “From Philosophy of Life to Bioethics”, *Guangming Daily*, 15 edition, (2019).

9 Wang Ming, “Annotated Edition of the Inner Chapters of Baopuzi” [A book about Taoism, Confucianism and medicine by Ge Hong], (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985), 252.

10 *Ibid.*, 259.

11 Lü Daji, *An Outline of Religious Studies*, (Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2003), 148.

From the perspective of modern medicine, the content of the human body's "form" mainly includes "five viscera and six bowels, skeletal muscles, skin and hair, brain and nerves, essence and blood, bodily fluids, as well as oxygen and carbon dioxide inside the body," and in short, all tangible organs, tissues, and components of the human body fall within the category of the human form.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the cessation of human life is the demise of the "form," such as when breathing stops, the heart ceases to beat, or brain death occurs, rather than the demise of the "spirit."

Simultaneously, ancient Taoism often exhibited characteristics of "tenets and nine medical practices," as seen in renowned figures like Dong Feng, Bao Gu, Sun Simiao, Hu Yin, Zhu Danxi, and others. Some medical Taoist works such as "*Elbow Reserve and urgent Prescription*", "*Qianjin Prescription*", "*Lu Zu Medical Dao Recovery*" and so on, which also shows that the ancient Taoism has the knowledge of in-depth research on human medicine, therefore, the Taoist "cultivation" is not only out of the need of faith, but more for the scientific thinking, research and practice of real life and health.

The "*Shangqing Jiudan Shanghua Fetal Essence Record*" explicates the mechanism of death through the interrelation between individuals and the cosmos. It states, "Hence, a person resembles the heavens and the earth, and their vital energy follows the natural course. The vital energy of nature all originates from the essence of the nine heavens, transforming into the human body, nurtured within the womb, reaching its peak in the ninth month when the celestial energy fills the heavens. In the tenth month, birth occurs. The formation and transformation of the embryo bring both auspicious and inauspicious outcomes, along with various lifespans, influenced by inherited predispositions. When the vital energy formation is impure, and stomach stagnation accumulates, the six organs deteriorate, injuring both form and spirit, making the body unable to receive spiritual influences, and when the breath of life enters the orifices, how can it continue to exist?"

The explanation of the death process serves as a necessary foundation for the reversal of death, while the elucidation of the causes and mechanisms leading to the decay of the body points toward the technology of immortality—this technology aims to reverse or avoid the death process.<sup>13</sup> These concepts of the separation of "form and spirit" and the ability to enable the "spirit" to exist independently in the real world are prevalent in the philosophical works of Taoism. It involves techniques such as "death but not perishing,<sup>14</sup>" as seen in the commentary on the *Tao Te Ching* by Lv Yan during the Tang Dynasty. He proposed, "When the Dao is achieved, the body is discarded, the radiance harmonizes, and the nature remains, even if one departs from the world, one does not truly die... The temporary form may perish, but the radiance

12 Yang Yuhui, *Research on Taoist Anthropology*, (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2004), 24.

13 Cheng Lesong, *Daoism: Body, Immortality, and Mysticism*, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2017), 330-331.

14 Huang Yuanji, *Lectures on the Tao Te Ching*, (Beijing: Jiuzhou Publishing House, 2014), 92.

endures.”<sup>15</sup> In the Qing Dynasty, Huang Yuanji pointed out, “For ordinary people, death leads to the dispersion of the spirit, while for sages, death is akin to the spirit being complete. Though the form may die, the spirit remains alive, harmoniously enduring with the heavens and the earth.”<sup>16</sup>

The aforementioned notions of “existence of the soul” are frequently encountered in records of various world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and others. Many philosophers and scientists have altered their perception of the world based on their mystical experiences. In Greek philosophy, Plato observed instances of transcendental meditation, particularly focusing on the transcendent origin of life. In his work “*Phaedo*,” he proposed that the “body is the tomb of the soul.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the concept of the “soul wearing the cloak of the body” was prevalent during the Empedoclean era.

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist, philosopher, and theologian, even depicted in his work “*Heaven and Hell*” that, after entering a trance, he witnessed the souls of departed friends who were “Christian believers,” along with other extraordinary observations. In the Chinese context, beyond religious texts like Daoism, there is also a plethora of “miraculous” occurrences. For example, during the early Warring States period, Mozi, a philosopher, claimed to have encountered numerous souls and established the “Three Categories” system to affirm the existence of spirits.<sup>18</sup> These phenomena, based on individual experiences, sometimes become collective experiences during periods of turmoil. However, they typically occur under specific conditions, such as being rare occurrences over a century, making them statistically infrequent and challenging to observe repeatedly, especially in the presence of political, cultural, and customary interventions.

Nonetheless, the need for repetitive verification is often documented from an observable perspective of “physical transformations.” For instance, the phenomenon of “hair turning white to black, teeth falling out and regenerating,” as recounted in the biography of Rongcheng Gong in “*Biographies of Immortals*,” or the observation of Emperor Xuanzong’s “teeth falling out and regenerating”<sup>19</sup>, recorded in the “*Old Book of Tang*”<sup>20</sup>, has been documented and reproduced.

From a psychological perspective, regardless of Eastern or Western civilizations, the exploration of the world typically begins with the individual’s cognitive understanding. Individual cognition is partly derived from sensory perception, including vision, smell, taste, and touch.

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15 Han Qi, *Lv Zu’s Secret Notes: Tao Te Ching Heart Transmission*, (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2014), 66-67.

16 Huang Yuanji, *Lectures on the Tao Te Ching*, 93.

17 Mircea Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*[*Zongjiao Sixiangshi*], translated by Yan Kejia, *Zongjiao Sixiangshi*, 606.

18 Mou Zhongjian, Zhang Jian, *General History of Chinese Religion*, (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2019), 142.

19 *Taoist Canon*, Volume 8, (Jointly published by Wenwu Press, Shanghai Bookstore, and Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 1988), 6112.

20 *Jiu Tangshu*[The Old Book of Tang, Section on Crafts], Volume 129.

Another part originates from sources like books, experiences, logical reasoning, imagination, as well as the surrounding environment, education, and exploration. In this context, the Dunning-Kruger Effect and Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"<sup>21</sup> share similarities: the more ignorant a person is, the more confident they tend to be.<sup>22</sup> From a psychological standpoint, individuals usually exhibit characteristics such as skepticism, resistance, blind conformity, understanding, and depth of engagement when encountering new things. Therefore, in situations where the cognitive understanding of the majority is similar, the introduction of a new theory often faces significant challenges.

Dilthey asserts that life is an experience accessible to everyone through self-reflection, and people intuitively understand it. It manifests as perception, thought, and emotion, which further extend into language, morality, philosophy, law, art, religion, nation, social systems, and history, among others. All phenomena of social life are the objectification of life, and the entire human society relies on the flow of life to become an organic whole, known as the "objective spirit." This objective spirit not only represents the objectification of individual spirits but also the objectification of others' spirits, embodying the commonality of human existence, known as the "spiritual world."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Taoism is also a form of the "objectification" of life, possessing a "spiritual world" and delving into a deeper understanding of the soul's temporal and spatial aspects, such as the concept of "ten continents and three islands."

Quineer inherited Dilthey's philosophical thoughts on life, believing that the fundamental essence of the world is "life," which is not a tangible entity but rather a "vital force"—an unstoppable, eternal impulse. In this regard, there is a certain difference from Taoism's philosophy of life, which advocates "introspection (meditation)" and holds that by reaching the utmost emptiness and maintaining deep tranquility, one can achieve a return to the origin and true essence.<sup>24</sup> In other words, when ascending to a higher spiritual level, Taoism sees it as a process of the interplay of yin and yang through "stillness before movement" and "ultimate stillness giving rise to movement"—a dynamic balance where life encompasses the element of "stillness." This is exemplified by the typical Taoist classic such as "*The Classic of Purity and Tranquility*" which states, "The spirit of man loves purity, and the heart of man loves tranquility."

Most theories suggest that Chinese philosophy emphasizes practice and intuitive understanding, while Greek philosophy focuses on speculation and logic. However, in terms of understanding nature, both sides share similar views, namely, "nature is the macrocosm, and humans are the microcosm," with humans being a part of nature. The Taoist theory of the "human body as a microcosm" posits that humans are generated according to the principles of heaven and

21 Zhao Dunhua, *Xifang zhexue shi* [History of Western philosophy], (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe [Peking University Press], 2001), 50-52.

22 lei Bingxing, "Yuanli dake xiaoying [Distance from D-K effect]", *Qingnian bolan [Journal of Youth Expo]*, No.7, 2021): 45-45.

23 Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Biography of Wilhelm Dilthey*, (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2003).

24 Huang Yuanji, *Lectures on the Tao Te Ching*, 40.

earth, with a fundamental explanation rooted in Dao, as expressed in the ontology, “Man follows the Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows Dao, and Dao follows Nature.”<sup>25</sup>

Starting from the Ionian school’s theory of the primordial, to the conclusion of Neoplatonism’s mystical concept of the One, Greek philosophy primarily explores physis (nature, essence).<sup>26</sup> Building upon this, the Milesian school’s Anaximenes proposed the theory of “air” as the fundamental substance of all things, which, though differing somewhat from the Chinese concept of “qi” encompassing the theory of the five elements “metal, wood, water, fire, earth,” is remarkably close. In his definition, Anaximenes integrates Thales’s two propositions, asserting that air is not only “soul, breath, and respiration” but “also the factor that sustains the existence of life”<sup>27</sup>. Similarly, in Chinese Taoist temples, one can often see plaques with the inscription “Dao Qi Chang Cun(Dao and Qi Endure)” emphasizing the everlasting presence of Dao and Qi.

In Taoist culture, “qi” is a sophisticated energy that can exist both within the human body and throughout all things (“energy,” as commonly referred to in modern interpretations). However, based on Taoism’s dichotomy of form and spirit, it has also given rise to the dual concepts of “lead-mercury, body-mind, spirit-qi, and life destiny.” Particularly, the theories of Taoist alchemists<sup>28</sup> such as Zhang Ziyang, Xue Daoguang, Wang Chongyang, Zhang Sanfeng, Wu Shouyang, Huang Yuanji, Min Yide, Li Hanxu, and others, including their works on Inner Alchemy such as “*Wuzhen pian (Understanding Truth)*,” “*Daoshu [Tao Pivot]*,” “*Xing ming guizhi (Essence and Vitality Guideline)*,” “*Daodao lun (Great Dao Discourse)*,” “*Wu Liu tianxian famai (Wu Liu Heavenly Fairy Dharma pulse)*,” “*Dao de jing jiangyi (Lectures on the Tao Te Ching)*,” and “*Gushu yinlou cangshu (Hidden Books in the Ancient Tower Collection)*” and so on.

## II. Metaphysical Ontology: “Ontology” and the Taoist Dualism of Form and Spirit

### 1. Similarities and Differences: Metaphysics and Taoist Dualism of Form and Spirit

Western metaphysics tends to emphasize speculative philosophy, with only a small amount touching upon empirical philosophy related to form, particularly prevalent in religious philosophy. Daoism, on the other hand, predominantly adopts empirical thinking concerning form, concurrently engaging in philosophical reflections as seen in the ‘*Tao Te Ching*.’ Similarly, Taoist dualism of form and spirit stems more from individual and collective experiential practices.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Zhang Zhiwei, *History of Western Philosophy*, (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> The alchemists of Taoism are mainly divided into ‘Inner Alchemy’ and ‘external alchemy’. Among them, the alchemists mainly carry out the exercise of ‘Jing Qi Shen’, while the external alchemists mainly carry out the exercise of ‘chemical substances and traditional Chinese medicine’.

The history of metaphysics is ancient. René Descartes first referred to the study of entities or beings as “metaphysical ontology,” which has had a profound impact worldwide. Its core is the exploration of the fundamental principles of the universe. In the Taoist interpretation, the origin of the world is described as “generated by the Dao,” that is, “the Dao gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two, Two gives birth to Three, Three gives birth to all things.”<sup>29</sup> The Taoist philosophy summarizes this as “the mixing of existence, the preheavenly origin of heaven and earth... the mother of all under heaven... called Dao.”<sup>30</sup> The laws and principles of the natural world are also defined as the “Dao”. The existence of the soul is considered inevitable by Daoism, and the “sublimation of the soul” can be achieved through specific methods. At the same time, the relationship between humans and the natural universe is expressed as “the human body is a small universe, and the heavens and the earth are the large universe.”

In Western philosophy, the term “metaphysics” did not appear during Aristotle’s time. It was introduced around 60 BCE when Andronicus of Rhodes compiled Aristotle’s posthumous works. He arranged the sections called “Metaphysics” after Aristotle’s “Physics” and compiled them into a book, naming it *Meta physika*, meaning “Metaphysics.”<sup>31</sup> The Chinese translation of “metaphysics” as “Xíng ér shàng xué” is derived from a passage in the *The Book of Changes and Derivations* that states, “The Formless (Xing) yet encompassing is called Dao, the formed (Xia) yet specific is called an instrument.” This translation was coined by the renowned Japanese philosopher Tetsurō Watsuji during the Meiji era and has been widely adopted. Throughout the history of Western philosophy, the speculative mode has predominantly been employed to explore the fundamental nature of the world.

This kind of “metaphysics” gives rise to the characteristic features of speculative ontology, leading to a long-standing mode of thinking that centers around the existence of God, especially in Christian philosophy. The mainstream philosophy within Christian culture aspires to “see God” or “be one with God,” unlike Chinese Taoism, where followers can, through their efforts, become “gods (or deities).” Similarly, Islam, which shares a common origin, leans toward accepting “faith.” Even personal experiences are aimed at achieving “oneness with Allah.” “Allah, through the angels, reveals Himself in the *Quran* to His messenger Prophet Muhammad.”<sup>32</sup> The Sufi sect within Islam, known for its mysticism, and the mystical knowledge concepts of the mystic and intellectual sects are challenging for mainstream Islamic factions to embrace. “Sufis are staunch anti-rationalists; they believe that true religious knowledge can only be obtained through personal experiences, an instantaneous union with Allah.”<sup>33</sup> However, the majority of Muslims hope that following Allah, adhering to religious law, practicing the *Quran*, and following the teachings of Sunnah

29 Huang Yuanji, *Lectures on the Tao Te Ching*, 115.

30 *Ibid.*, 66.

31 Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 4 edition, (london: Taylor & Francis), 2018.

32 Mircea Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, 1040.

33 *Ibid.*, 1047.



are sufficient. This situation sharply contrasts with the early experiences of Prophet Muhammad in the cave, meditating day and night, and encountering the phenomenon of “angels descending to reveal messages.” From the perspective of Taoist doctrine, this phenomenon resembles China’s “descending truth” or the “possession” in witchcraft, a way of calling angels into the human body.<sup>34</sup> Even in early Jewish civilization, Moses on Mount Sinai had similar experiences. This pattern continues in Christian culture, evident in the early situations of “the Incarnation of Jesus,” the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom’s Hong Xiuquan, and beyond.

In view of the situation where “faith and social practices are emphasized while lacking a foundation in physical training,” regarding Judaism in the *Bible* and *Talmud*, as well as the modern Neo-Orthodox movement within Judaism, they, based on supernaturalism, dichotomize the real world into the natural and supernatural parts. They further assert that God exists in the supernatural realm, and the *Torah*, the law given by God to the Israelites, is a supernatural revelation. Beyond Judaism, both Christianity and Islam also identify themselves with this form of supernaturalistic religion.<sup>35</sup> To the extent that, deeply influenced by modern natural science and the rationalism of Spinoza and the pragmatism of Dewey, Kaplan fundamentally opposes the aforementioned division between the natural and supernatural. He believes that there is only one world, and the transcendent world posited by traditional religions does not exist in reality.<sup>36</sup> The above also illustrates the one-sidedness of these perspectives.

In Daoism, the concept of “form” encompasses the ideas of “yin-yang, five elements, and the structure of the body.” This concept is based on self-experience and the foundation of traditional Chinese medicine. For instance, Huangdi, revered as the founder of Daoism, in the medical work “Huangdi Neijing” that dates back to the pre-Qin period, expressed such ideas in the form of questions and answers. He said, “(Huangdi) asked: I have heard that in ancient times, there were true individuals... who grasped yin and yang... standing alone, guarding the spirit, their muscles and flesh as one, hence they could live long beyond the time when heaven and earth would wear out... There are those who have reached the level of great individuals... harmonizing with yin and yang... accumulating essence and spirit, freely roaming between heaven and earth, seeing and hearing beyond the eight directions. This enhances their lifespan and strengthens them... Following them are the sage individuals... moderately indulging in worldly pleasures... externally not straining the body with worldly affairs, internally free from the troubles of excessive thoughts... Their form remains intact, their spirit remains focused, and they can live to be over a hundred.”<sup>37</sup>

In ancient Western philosophy, although there were explorations of the physical form, it did not develop into a comprehensive system. This can be attributed to the ancient West’s lack of

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34 Dong Ning, Pu Jingxing, “Origin, Transformation and Application: Hong Xiuquan’s Mysticism in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom”, *Journal of Chinese Theology* 9: 1–22, 2023, 51.

35 Fu Youde, *Modern Jewish Philosophy*, (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1999), 298.

36 Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, (Jinan: Shandong University Press, 2002), 316.

37 *Huang Emperor’s Inner Canon*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2010), 23-25.

understanding and practical exploration of the body (form), and the predominant perspective of “faith” and hermeneutics from the metaphysical standpoint. Augustine’s viewpoint exemplifies this: he regarded humans as rational souls using perishable worldly bodies. In Eastern Catholic literature, the emphasis remains on being “justified by faith.” Missionaries and Chinese believers emphasize that the incarnation of Christ is challenging to comprehend through conventional thinking and requires faith. The missionaries, including Matteo Ricci, spoke of ‘faith, hope and love’.<sup>38</sup> Notably, Western philosophers and theologians appear to lack the experiential understanding, cognitive exploration, and empirical verification of life forms such as the “true individuals and great individuals” found in the *“Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor.”* This includes a deficiency in methods for transforming the body into “these life forms.” Although Dilthey, a pioneer in modern philosophy of life, recognized this shortcoming, his focus remained on the realms of “psychology and hermeneutics.” Dilthey opposed the prevailing empiricism in the West, which advocated the naturalization of all humanities and social sciences. He argued that natural sciences and humanities are entirely different disciplines.<sup>39</sup> The reasons include differences in the objects of study, with natural sciences focusing on external phenomena, while humanities focus on historical and social realities—human activities. Furthermore, the goals differ, as natural sciences seek to understand fixed and unchanging natural laws through the external causality of objects, while humanities seek to comprehend the rich and diverse meanings and values of human life through the inner experiences or understanding of individuals. Lastly, the methods vary, with natural sciences employing observation and experimental intervention in the external world, while humanities rely on the experiential and interpretative methods of the inner life or spirit.

However, there are exceptions. For instance, the pioneer of modern mechanics did not reject revelations about the mysterious origin, just as he did not reject the principle of material transformation. In his book “Optics” (1704), he wrote, “Bodies are transformed into light, and light is transformed into bodies; this is entirely in accordance with the laws of nature, as nature seems to be filled with the transformation of matter.”<sup>40</sup> This is somewhat similar to the concept of “light” mentioned by Lü Dongbin earlier. Professor Dobbs believes, “Newton’s force is very much like the mysterious sympathies and repulsions described in the literature of the Renaissance. Newton endowed force with an ontological status, equal to that of matter and motion.”<sup>41</sup>

Comparatively, Taoist philosophy is more enriched and encompasses multiple layers of meanings. Among them, the theory of Form and Spirit Dualism with “spirit” as the fundamental

38 Xiao Qinghe, “Matteo Ricci and a New Perspective on the Late Ming Intellectual World: A Response to Professor Xie Wenyu’s Article ‘On the Problem Consciousness of Catholic Realism and the Comparison between Chinese and Western Thinking’”, *International Journal of Chinese and Western Studies*, Issue 25, (2023), 160.

39 Chen Dingjia, “Contemporary Interpretation of Dilthey’s Hermeneutics of Life,” *Social Sciences Journal*, Issue 4, No. 231, (2017), 198.

40 Mircea Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, 1161.

41 Concepts of Force, *Force in Newton’s Physics. The Science of Dynamics in the Seventeenth Century*, (New York: History of Science Library, 1971), 211.

entity gives rise to the concept of “inner sage, outer king”<sup>42</sup>, influencing political governance theories. This phenomenon of metaphorically equating “spirit” to a monarch and extending it from the inner to the outer is often observed in the history of Chinese Taoism. For instance, Ge Hong from the Eastern Jin Dynasty proposed in the “*Baopuzi Neipian*,” “The body of one person is like the image of a whole country. The arrangement of the chest and abdomen is like the planning of a palace; the positioning of the limbs is like the outlining of the boundaries; the division of bones and joints is like the various officials; the interconnections of pores and tissues are like the crossroads. The spirit is like the sovereign, the blood is like the subjects, and the vital energy is like the citizens. Therefore, an exemplary individual who can govern their own body is akin to a wise ruler who can govern their country...”<sup>43</sup>

## 2. Taoism’s Theory of Form and Spirit Dualism and Contemplation on Life

Taoism’s content is categorized and interconnected, encompassing a wide range, including physiology, psychology, biology, chemistry, medicine, physics, and technology. In ancient times, renowned Taoist practitioners were often also Confucian scholars, medical experts, and some even possessed knowledge of Buddhism. Additionally, although the understanding of “form and spirit” in Taoism may vary across different eras<sup>44</sup>, spanning nearly fifteen centuries, notable figures like Zhong liquan, Ge Hong, Xu Xun, Lü Dongbin, Zhang Ziyang, Wang Chongyang, Min Yide, and others held fairly similar views on this matter.

A more explicit philosophical perspective, such as Taoism’s Tao Hongjing, stated in “*Reply to the Scholar’s Inquiry into the Nature of Immortality in Buddhism and Daoism*,” “All that is structured by substance and form pertains to the unity of form and spirit. When form and spirit are united, it is human; when form and spirit separate, it is spirit or ghost. Neither separation nor unity is beyond the scope of Buddhist teachings; both separation and unity are embraced by the Taoist path.”<sup>45</sup> He not only explains that the unity of form and spirit represents the normal state of a person but also suggests that if form and spirit separate, one can enter the states of an immortal (Buddha) or a ghost (spirit). Further elaborating on the interaction of form and spirit, Zhi Youzi, in “The Pivot of Dao,” states, “Spirit is the one who gives birth to form; form is the one who completes spirit. Therefore, if form does not have its spirit, it cannot generate itself; if spirit does not have its form, it cannot complete itself. When form and spirit unite, they generate each other, harmonize, and complete each other, and thus it is viable.”<sup>46</sup>

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42 Xiao Wubei, *Zhuangzi*, (Changsha: Yuelu Press, 2019), 323.

43 Wang Ming, *An Interpretation of Bao Puzi’s Inner Works*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985), 326.

44 Note: In the following text, “form” is consistently used to refer to the physical body of matter, “qi” is used in its physical sense as “air” or “vital energy,” and “qi” in Taoism refers to its specific concept. “Shen” is divided into categories of “yuan shen” (primal spirit) and “shi shen” (conscious spirit).

45 Huayang Tao Seclusion Collection, Orthodox Taoist Collection, volume 39.

46 *Dao Zang*, Vol. 20, 622.

In Taoism after the Song and Yuan dynasties, there is an interpretation involving the combination of “primordial spirit” and “pre-heavenly qi (advanced energy).” For example, in the collection “*The Secret of the Golden Flower*,” which includes English translations of Taoist classics “*Taiyi Jin Hua Tenet*” and “*Wisdom of life Sutra*,” the psychologist Carl Jung (1875—1961) discussed concepts like “Concentrating Spirit in the Qi Center” and “Taoist Embryo.”<sup>47</sup> “Form” typically includes the physical body of matter. Practitioners of Taoist Inner Alchemy believe that cultivating the Tao requires “pre-heavenly qi (energy),” with air being considered a part of the post-heavenly “form (physical body)” and the primordial spirit treated as a distinct category.

The “qi(炁, It is an ancient Chinese script)” in “pre-heavenly qi” has a different definition from the physics sense of “qi (气air).” In modern terms, “qi” can be understood as “some invisible but existent energy.” Yuanqi (元气) also belongs to a type of energy. This dualism of form and spirit has led to a new binary cognitive form. As Wang Chongyang proposed in “*On Nature and Life*,” “Nature is the spirit, and life is the qi. If nature perceives life, it’s like a bird catching the wind, fluttering lightly, conserving energy, and achieving ease. As the Yin Fu Jing says, ‘To capture it, control the qi.’ This is it. Those who cultivate the Dao must not neglect it. It should not be disclosed to the common people, for fear of divine retribution. Nature and life are the fundamentals of cultivation, so exercise them diligently.”<sup>48</sup>

The Taoist study of form is usually based on the foundation of ancient traditional Chinese medicine and is closely intertwined with it. Notable figures, such as the Taoist known as the “Medicine King” – Sun Simiao, have contributed to this field. With the progression of age, Taoist medicine, including the summarization and induction of the developmental patterns of the human body in traditional Chinese medicine, provides detailed explanations and reasons.

For instance, the “Huangdi Neijing” (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon) states, “At eight years old, the kidney’s qi is substantial, hair grows, and teeth are replaced. At sixteen, the kidney’s qi is vigorous, and the heavenly essence arrives, allowing one to produce offspring. At twenty-four, the kidney’s qi is balanced, and the tendons and bones are strong, causing the true teeth to grow to their maximum. At thirty-two, tendons and bones are flourishing, and muscles are full and robust. At forty, the kidney’s qi declines, hair falls, and teeth become yellow and brittle. At forty-eight, yang qi weakens, facial features age, hair turns white, and beard becomes sparse. At fifty-six, liver qi weakens, and the tendons lose their flexibility. At sixty-four, the heavenly essence is depleted, vitality is diminished, and the kidneys decline, resulting in the loss of hair and overall physical decline. The kidneys govern water, receiving the essence from the five viscera and six bowels and storing it. Therefore, when the viscera and bowels are abundant, one can expel. Now, as all the

47 [Switzerland] Carl Gustav Jung, [Germany] Richard Wilhelm, *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese book of life*, (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016), 179-209.

48 Bai Ruxiang, *Wang Chongyang Ji*[A book about Wang Chongyan], (Jinan: Qilu Publishing House, 2005), 278.

viscera weaken, and the tendons and bones deteriorate, and the heavenly essence is exhausted, hair turns white, and the body becomes heavy, with unsteady steps and no offspring.”<sup>49</sup>

This situation is also described in the “*Orthodox Taoist Canon · Manifestation of the Dao Sutra*,” which outlines the different physiological changes at various ages, including characteristics such as changes in the eyes, hair, and mental state.

During the Song Dynasty, Chen Nan proposed the idea that “the form is the dwelling place of the spirit”<sup>50</sup>. He stated, “If the dwelling place is not fully maintained to secure life and the body is not cultivated to nurture the spirit, then one cannot avoid the dissipation of vital energy, the return to emptiness, and the transformation of the wandering soul...”<sup>51</sup> This indicates the distinct functions of form and spirit; the physical body serves as the abode of the spirit (soul). According to the interpretation in the “Zhong Lu’s Taoist Collection,” form and spirit can exist independently, and it provides five regular states in which the “spirit” can exist separately from the “form” under specific circumstances. These states are systematically named as “Gui Xian (Ghost Immortal), Ren Xian (Human Immortal), Di Xian (Earth Immortal), Shen Xian (Deity Immortal), and Tian Xian (Celestial Immortal).” In reaching the state of Tian Xian, as explained by Zhong Li Quan in the “Ling Bao Bi Fa,” one can have a “body outside the body” and “(the spirit) goes out and returns (to the body), enters but does not exit (the body), then form and spirit are both marvelous, matching the years of heaven and earth, and enduring the great calamity without death. After entering and returning, departing without re-entering, like a cicada shedding its shell, migrating the spirit into the sacred; this is transcending the ordinary and becoming a true immortal, residing beyond the mundane, on three islands and ten continents.”<sup>52</sup>

An earlier figure, Xue Daoguang, provided a similar explanation but lacked an explanation for the “Shen Xian” state. “Immortals have several levels: the Yinxian (a type of unseen Immortal with no energy) is supremely spiritual and formless, an ethereal Immortal (soul); the Renxian (an immortal who will never get sick) lives in the world without illness and enjoys eternal life; the Dixian (an immortal with divine power) can fly through the air, walk through mist, is not hungry or thirsty, is immune to cold and heat, roams the islands, and lives eternally; the Shenxian (A superlative Immortal) possesses marvelous form and spirit, aligns with the Dao, walks without shadows in the sun and moon, enters metal and stone unhindered, undergoes endless transformations, and is mysterious and unpredictable, appearing old or young, supremely sage and divine. Unknown to ghosts and spirits, beyond the prediction of divination, this is the Tianxian (Celestial Immortal).”<sup>53</sup> The views of Chen Nan and Bai Yuchan, both belonging to the Southern

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49 *Huang Emperor’s Inner Canon*, 22.

50 “Mixed with Shortcuts and Preserving Spirit”, *Daozang*, vol. 4, 707.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Dong Ning, Liang Qi, *Legend and Taoism*, 140.

53 *Ibid.*, 140.

School of Taoism, are essentially indistinguishable in their dialogue in “*Discerning the Confusion in Cultivation*” from the Taoist canon above.

Before the Song and Yuan dynasties, the view of form and spirit often aimed for the state of “marvelous unity of form and spirit.” A notable example is Xun Xu from the Eastern Jin Dynasty, who achieved “sainthood in the flesh” and ultimately “rose from his dwelling and ascended.” Max Weber’s belief that Chinese mystics only held the view of “elevating the soul to attain the Dao... pursuing longevity is equivalent to nurturing the spirit”<sup>54</sup> is considered biased. In the Song and Yuan periods, a few individuals, such as Zhang Sanfeng and Huang Yuanji, achieved physical accomplishments due to practicing methods developed before the Song and Yuan eras. In 1813, at the age of 66, Min Yide experienced a momentary phenomenon of “white hair turning black, reverting to youth, suddenly becoming young”<sup>55</sup> during meditation. This was a result of practicing alchemical methods from the Tang and Song periods, including the traditions passed down by Zhong Liquan and Lü Dongbin. This kind of achievement in obtaining physical health through personal verification stands as a “historically repeatable proof” in comparison to predecessors.

Comparatively, during the Song, Yuan, and Qing periods, the Quanzhen Northern School, represented by Wang Chongyang, primarily pursued the achievement of “Yang Shen (Immortals with high energy).” As a result, there was a tendency to overlook or find it challenging to achieve the simultaneous accomplishment of form and spirit. Most practitioners, like ordinary people, experienced physical decline with age or continued to age conventionally, making it difficult to achieve a “rejuvenation of appearance and form.” This can be observed in the “Fifteen Discourses on Establishing the Quanzhen Teaching” where it is mentioned, “After a hundred years of diligent practice, shedding the mortal coil, ascending to the true self. With a completed elixir, the spirit roams the eight extremes.”<sup>56</sup> Influenced by this perspective, the Northern School often considered attaining “Yang Shen” as the fundamental goal, emphasizing the concept of “shedding the mortal coil for spiritual wandering.”

The “Yang Shen (Immortals with high energy),” although different from the commonly mentioned “soul” in general religions, ultimately weakens its connection with the physical body.<sup>57</sup> After the cultivation of “Yang Shen (Immortals with high energy),” it is intended to eventually detach from the corporeal form, that is, to shed the mortal coil and ascend to immortality, abandoning the physical body as the “spirit” transforms into an “Immortal.” This thought is significantly influenced by Buddhist concepts of the indestructibility of the soul and the cycle of rebirth. While not a pure belief in the immortality of the soul, it has, to a considerable extent, deviated from the traditional Taoist values of “the potential longevity of the physical life.” In the

54 Max Weber, *Confucianism and Taoism* (Hefei: Anhui People’s Publishing House, 2012), Translated by Fuqiang, 288.

55 Dong Ning, Zhang Shuqing. “A Survey of Min Yide’s Thought of Inner Alchemy”, *Journal of Hongdao*, No. 88, (2022), 67.

56 Bai Ruxiang, *Wang Chongyang Ji*, 278.

57 Wang Ti, “On the Philosophy of Life of Taoist Inner Alchemy,” *Journal of Qilu*, No. 2, (2009), 32.

later Tang Dynasty and beyond, due to the emphasis of the Inner Alchemy practitioners on the eternal existence of spiritual life, there emerged a tendency to depreciate the physical body.<sup>58</sup>

This situation is influenced, on the one hand, by the historical context of the brief lifespan during the turbulent periods of the Song, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, as well as the rulers' demands for social order based on thinkers' views on "governance."<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, it is due to the long-standing idea of the "integration of the three teachings" since the introduction of Buddhism to China. For various reasons, Wang Chongyang proposed a common "ontology" concept with the phrase "Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are connected; the three teachings have always shared a common origin." This idea matured further, especially during Qiu Chuji's meeting with Genghis Khan, and continued into the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Several members of the Quanzhen Seven<sup>60</sup>, in their interactions with the emperors of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, reflected an increased emphasis on the "divine." This situation persisted into the early Qing Dynasty, as seen in the requirements for "precepts, meditation, and wisdom" in the Bixuan Altar Sutra of the Dragon Gate sect, indicating the cognitive differences between the Southern and Northern branches of Taoism regarding the perfection of "form and spirit."

Of course, the mainstream Taoism after the Song and Yuan dynasties did not abandon the fundamental pursuit of immortality but shifted towards the eternal existence of the soul. The achievement of "Immortals with high energy" in Taoist Inner Alchemy is not equivalent to the commonly understood religious concept of an immortal "soul." Despite their apparent similarity, the "Immortals with high energy" in Taoist Inner Alchemy and the traditional concept of a "soul" have fundamental differences. These are entirely distinct concepts; in other words, "Immortals with high energy" ≠ "soul." The key distinction lies in the fact that "Immortals with high energy" are refined through the involvement of Qi, which separates the two.<sup>61</sup> This means that "Immortals with high energy" reach a higher level of life form, whereas the "soul" purely functions as an "Immortal with no energy."

Returning to the present, interdisciplinary and cross-regional studies of religion have become increasingly important due to the influence of political, economic, cultural, and other environmental factors. This is especially true when combined with research from various fields such as philosophy, medicine, psychology, and natural sciences, rather than tending towards singular, one-sided, or absolutist perspectives. As Herbert Marcuse pointed out, "Religion is inevitably moving towards one-dimensionality. The formalization and mechanization of religious beliefs no longer represent the free choices of individuals but rather become imposed social

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58 Mao Liya, "On the Views of Life in Taoism and Christianity," *Journal of Sichuan University*, Issue 4, (2008), 70.

59 Huang Baoluo, "The Significance of Religious Beliefs for Social Order," *Journal of Northwest University for Nationalities*, Issue 5, (2012), 19.

60 Bai Ruxiang, *Collected Works of Tan Chuduan, Liu Chuxuan, Wang Chuyi, Hao Datong, and Sun Bu'er*, (Jinan: Qilu Press, 2005).

61 Wang Ti, *On the Philosophical Thought of 'Harmony of Form and Spirit' in Taoist Internal Alchemy*, (Qilu Academic Journal, Issue 2,(2009), 32.

norms, serving as symbols of authority, tools of political power, maintainers of social order, and pursuers of economic interests.”<sup>62</sup>

### III. Conclusion

The founder of religious studies, Max Müller (F.M. Müller, 1832-1900), once said, “Those who only understand one religion, in fact, understand no religion at all.”<sup>63</sup> The significance of Taoist theory on form-spirit, as described by Dilthey, falls within the realm of “philosophy of life,” and according to Qian Xuesen, it belongs to “human body science.”<sup>64</sup> Herbert Marcuse is even more explicit in stating that the solution to the problem of one-dimensionality is “not only to restore people’s freedom and creativity but also to enable them to truly choose their own way of life and values, rather than being limited by one-dimensional thinking and behavior.”<sup>65</sup>

The world of life is extremely complex, and therefore, it cannot be confined by existing theories. It requires more exploration through practical experiences, especially the integration of Eastern and Western philosophy, medicine, Taoist studies, and practical application. In summary:

1. From the perspective of the human body, there are commonalities in the mainstream theories of both Eastern and Western cultures: the belief in existence, the existence of the soul, especially in ancient Eastern and Western theories. Taoism’s theory of the dualism of form and spirit, with the divine as the essence, has generated a spiritual world based on physical exercise, giving rise to concepts such as vitality, body and mind, and spiritual energy.

2. From a practical standpoint, Eastern Taoism is a religion that emerged from practice and has ventured even further. Taoism “integrates traditional Chinese medicine” and, through the method of “calming the mind to purify the soul,” conducts introspection and experience internally. After repetitive experiments throughout history, it has concluded the existence of “different states of life” and aspires to achieve “harmony of form and spirit, inner sage and outer king.” Western religions also include moments of quiet contemplation, but they are not as profound. In comparison, ancient Western philosophy is primarily based on belief and logical reasoning, combined with religious philosophy, natural science, and empiricism. It continuously extends outward, leading to modern philosophy of life and material civilization.

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62 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2008), 12.

63 M. Müller, Preface to the Translation of *The Origin and Development of Religion*, translated by Jin Ze, edited by Chen Guansheng, (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1989), 2.

64 Qian Xuesen, *Dui Renti Kexue Yanjiu de Jidian Renshi (Some Ideas on the Scientific Research of Human Body)*, *Ziranazhi*, Vol. 14, No. 1(1991), 3.

65 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2008), 16.



3. Life in the world is inherently a unified composition of mind and matter. With the elevation of material levels, people increasingly value the worth of life. Therefore, the practical research of life philosophy will undoubtedly continue for a long time, especially in interdisciplinary and cross-regional aspects, including research on Eastern-Western dialogues, religious philosophy, Taoist medicine, and even natural sciences.

汉语题目：

## 生命哲学：西学本体论与道教形神二元论研究

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**提要：**该文从生命哲学的角度出发，结合历史文献，以本体论和二元论为基点，融合心理学、中医学、现象学等多个领域的特点，对比研究了西方本体论与道教形神二元论的异同。文章阐明了“向外延伸的物质世界与向内净化的精神世界”如何统一于“人身”的结合原理，并提供了东西方发现精神世界的具体方法及理论解释。

外在世界被定义为科学发现的物质世界，而内在世界则是在心灵净化后展现的精神世界。唯心论和唯物论都走向了两个方向的割裂极端。西方本体论和东方道教的形神二元论都发现了“精神可以通过‘静心冥想’等特定锻炼方式，实现在这个时空中单独存在”的现象。道教在“形”的研究上具有独特的医学基础，认识到形神的相互作用，并由此形成了各自的宗教、哲学与神学。

跨学科和跨区域的宗教研究，特别是在身心健康领域，势必成为未来的重要趋势。

**关键字：**生命哲学 本体论 二元论 道教医学 形神论 冥想