MEDHURST'S NEW TRANSLATION OF THE TAO TEH KING.

BY THE EDITOR.

IT is always satisfactory to meet with aspirations which tend in the same direction as our own, and so it was a genuine satisfaction to me to find some one who was interested in the same literature and approached it in a kindred spirit. In this spirit I approach the new translation of the Tao-Teh-King which has been made by Rev. C. Spurgeon Medhurst,* a missionary of twenty years residence in China. Some of the readers of *The Open Court* are no doubt familiar with my translation of the same book which has been published in two editions, one containing together with the English version, the Chinese original and literal translation and enough notes to enable the reader to form his own opinion concerning doubtful passages; and another cheaper edition which consists simply of the English text.

Mr. Medhurst is perfectly familiar with the Chinese text of the Tao-Teh-King, and he has published an essay in the *Chinese Recorder* entitled "Tao-Teh-King:—An Appreciation and Analysis." For this reason I take an unusual interest in his translation, and I have compared a considerable part of it with my own, together with the original text.

I will not venture here to pronounce my opinion because I consider myself a partisan, and most naturally look upon my own work as more satisfactory, but I will submit the case with all impartiality to our readers.

As to the significance of Lao Tze, the venerable author of the Tao-Teh-King, there cannot be much difference of opinion. Mr. Medhurst says:

* The Tao Teh King. A Short Study in Comparative Religion. By C. Spurgeon Medhurst. Chicago: Theosophical Book Concern. 1905. Pp. xix, 134. For sale by Purdy Publishing Co., Chicago. Price, $2.00.

"Though Lao-tzu's accent is his own, it is easily seen to be but a dialect of the universal tongue. 'And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and the west, and shall recline with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.'"

In extenuation of his new translation, Mr. Medhurst says:

"Many are the editions of the Tao-teh-king, but has Lao-tzu ever really been translated? If I have in any measure succeeded where others have failed, it is because I have built on their labors. The Chinese is difficult, and mistakes are perhaps inevitable, but I have taken pains to reduce these to a minimum, and with the utmost care have consulted in detail the works of Legge, Balfour, Giles, Carus, Kingsmill, Maclagan, Old, and von Strauss during the whole of my preliminary labors. Although unable to agree with any of these gentlemen in their interpretations, to all I am indebted for guidance and suggestions while working my way through the terse obscurity of the Chinese. In the course of my researches I have consulted nearly an equal number of native commentaries, but my chief claim to having come nearer to Lao-tzu's meaning than my predecessors is the fact that it requires a mystic to understand a mystic, and although I dare not venture to number myself with the mystics, I may confess that long before I dreamed of being presumptuous enough to endeavor to translate Lao-tzu into my own tongue, I was accustomed to carry his writing with me on my itineraries as a sort of spiritual *vade mecum.* My present rendering of the ancient philosopher is not so much a specimen of scholarship as the humble offering of a disciple."

Every one, be he ever so little familiar with the original, will understand the difficulty of translating the Chinese text into English. Mr. Medhurst says:

"It only remains for me to add in this connection that I have made no attempt to accomplish the impossible and reproduce the measured rhythm of the original, but have contented myself with rendering the whole into as clear and concise English as I could command, without reference to the regulated cadences in which a large part of the Chinese has been written. Neither have I considered it worth while entering into any technical defense of my renderings. Such would only have been of interest to sinologues, and sinologues would have no use for such a work as the present little book."

Mr. Medhurst has not ventured to translate the term *tao,* which in its common application means "path, method, word, reason." He says:

"As for Lao-tzu's Tao, which is as untranslatable as the algebraic x, and which von Strauss, in the thirty-third section of his introduction to the Tao-teh-king, compares to the Sanskrit *Buddhi,* it may be said that it has much in common with the Primeval Fire or Aether of Heracleitus. The properties of mind and matter may be attributed to both; both become transformed into the elements; and in both the elements vanish into the primordial All, though Lao-tzu, of course, gives us nothing like the theologic-cosmogonical system of the Greek.

"Lao-tzu presents us with the Tao under two aspects—the undifferen-

tiated Nameless, and the differentiated Universal Life, in this agreeing with the Bhagavad Gita, in which we read: 'There are two Purushas in this world, the destructible and the indestructible; the destructible (is) all beings, the unchanging (is) called the indestructible.' (xv, 16.) Again, as in the Confucian cosmogony, the Absolute or the Unlimited is always behind The Great Extreme from whose vibrations everything sprang, so there lies behind the Tao, which is nameable, the Tao which cannot be named."

Concerning the ethics of the Tao-Teh-King, our author says:

"It must not, however, be supposed that Lao-tzu's system is non-ethical and impractical. On the contrary, in his doctrine of non-attachment, or non-action, the old mystic supplies us with the very essence of all morality. He holds that nature provides a perfect example in her inactive activity. The vegetable kingdom is Lao-tzu's ideal, and though it is not a point made in the Tao-teh-king, I may perhaps be pardoned a digression in order to show the appropriateness of sitting at the feet of Dame Nature, and learning from her as she works in her vast garden. Unless man's fussiness interferes with her plans, Nature mingles her plants and her shrubs in the wildest and most inextricable manner. Left to follow her own devices, as in the jungle, Nature so arranges her plantation that nothing is separate; each plant lives in the close embrace of its neighbor—a holy fraternity, a fitting symbol of the oneness in diversity which characterizes mankind when viewed from the highest planes. Only as the presence of man drives God further from his universe does this sacred fellowship between all sorts of plants and herbage come to an end. In the cultivated garden everything is in order, everything is separate. It is not this, however, which so much interests Lao-tzu as the quiet detachment of vegetable life. It plants without seeking the fruit; it never mars by its effort to accomplish; everything is left to develop according to its own nature. Here Lao-tzu has an echo in Emerson. In his essay on 'Spiritual Laws' the philosopher of Concord writes: 'Action and inaction are alike. One piece of the tree is cut for the weathercock, and one for the sleeper of a bridge; the virtue of the wood is apparent in both.' Well will it be for this restless, weary, discontented age if it comprehend this message of action in non-action and non-action in action which comes to it out of the dim past, from the great Loess plains of Northwest China."

Lao-Tze's views on government suggest the following comments:

"The weakest part of Lao-tzu's teachings may perhaps be thought to be his utopian conceptions of a model state. Spirituality rather than political economy is to be the basis of this strange kingdom. Its appeals are not made to men's hopes and fears, but to the calm passionlessness of their higher natures. Its controlling force is not militarism, but spiritual culture. Both rulers and people obtain all they require by the abstract contemplation of an abstract good. Everything is reduced to the purest simplicity, that nothing may interfere with the contemplation of the Tao. The never absent presence of this Perfect Ideal in the mind will be enough to keep the people from trespassing either in thought, speech or action. Such an accomplishment is better than all that the finest civilizations offer. Lao-tzu's only concern is that the

government shall give free development to the individual spiritual life of each citizen in the state.

"Lao-tzu loves paradox, and his sayings are frequently as paradoxical as the sayings in the Gospels. In his extreme assertions as to what constitutes a perfect State he is endeavoring to show that righteousness alone exalteth a nation, and whatever clouds the nation's conceptions of *this* is worse than valueless.

"Here again we may observe the difference between Lao-tzu and his contemporary, Confucius. Both were politicians, but while Confucius would regulate the State by extra rules of conduct, multiplied until they covered every department of life, Lao-tzu sought the same end by the purification of the inner being. Little wonder that when Confucius, whose field of vision was almost entirely objective, visited Lao-tzu, who was almost as much concerned with the subjective, he returned bewildered, and said to his disciples —I quote Dr. Carus's translation of the Chinese historian's record: "I know that the birds can fly; I know that the fishes can swim; I know that the wild animals can run. For the running, one could make nooses; for the swimming, one could make nets; for the flying, one could make arrows. As to the dragon, I cannot know how he can bestride wind and clouds when he heavenwards rises. To-day I saw Lao-Tze. Is he perhaps like the dragon?' Others, like Confucius, may be inclined to ask the same question, but 'he that hath ears to hear, let him hear.'"

Mr. Medhurst sums up his opinion in these words:

"This, then, is the word which this ancient writing has for the world—a life of sensation is a life of instability, a life of non-accomplishment. Until the 'final facts of consciousness' are understood, true peace is impossible, but when these are know, detachment from action for the sake of action will be the result. 'If any man love the world (is attached to the sensuous) the love of the Father is not in him.' So says the Christian mystic, John. He who has not attained to non-attachment or non-action is stranger to the power of the Tao; this is the cry of the Chinese mystic, Lao-tzu."

It is remarkable that the Chinese missionary should approve so fully of this book of pagan wisdom that he speaks of his translation as "the humble offering of a disciple," and we are glad to notice this spirit of catholicity. It is noteworthy that the Tao-Teh-King is least known among the Taoists themselves, who belong to the most ignorant classes of the Flowery Kingdom. They look upon Lao-Tze as their master and the founder of their religion, but in their practices they have degenerated into idolatry and the worst form of paganism and superstition. How much the Tao-Teh-King is recognized by the Buddhists of China, appears from the following story which we quote from Mr. Medhurst:

"It may be added that the Tao-teh-king is the only Taoist book which the Chinese Buddhists esteem. They relate a legend to the effect that one of the Buddhist emperors of China, in order to test the relative divinity of the two religions, ordered each sect to pile their books on an altar and burn them.

The Buddhist scriptures would not burn, but the Taoist writings quickly flamed up at the application of the torch. Much alarmed, the Taoist priests in attendance tried to snatch their precious manuscripts from the fire, but they only pulled out one, the Tao-teh-king."

The Taoist believes in alchemy, the elixir of life, and kindred superstitions, which according to Mr. Medhurst were born in China and traveled to Europe by Arabia. He adds in a footnote, "The Chinese doubtless brought the tradition from Atlantis," a statement which is somewhat perplexing in a book of serious scholarship, though other similar instances occur in some of the footnotes which accompany the translation.

The translation of Mr. Medhurst does not appear to be a faithful rendering of the spirit of the old philosopher, and the contents as well as the notes indicate how much he identifies different philosophical and theological views with aphorisms of his favorite Chinese author. I will quote a few instances. In the beginning of Chapter II, Mr. Medhurst says.

"When every one in the world became conscious of the beauty of the beautiful it turned to evil; they became conscious of the goodness of the good and ceased to be good."

While I grant that the sense of the passage is according to the traditional interpretation, I think that the rendering is awkward, and will fail to be as impressive as the original. Since I published my first version of the Tao-Teh-King, I have adopted another interpretation. The word *wei* does not mean to "become conscious," as Mr. Medhurst has it, but "to act." It is the same word which is used by Lao Tze in the negative, as no action, and means, "making a show of," "to pretend" or "to act with self-assertion." Accordingly, I translate the same passage as follows:

"In the world all understand that if beauty makes a show of beauty, then it is only ugliness. When all understand that goodness makes a show of goodness, then it is only badness."

I experienced a similar change of opinion as to the interpretation of Chapter III. It is translated by Mr. Medhurst as follows:

"When worth is not honored the people may be kept from strife.
"When rare articles are not valued the people are kept from theft."

The same passage should read according to my views as follows:

"Not priding oneself on one's worth forestalls the people's envy. Not prizing treasures that are difficult to obtain keeps people from committing theft."

In Chapter IV, Mr. Medhurst says, "The Tao is as emptiness, so are its operations. It resembles non-fullness." Here I fail to understand Mr. Medhurst. The original Chinese simply reads in literal translation, "Tao is empty, and use of which appears not exhausted." Accordingly I translate, "Reason is empty, but its use is inexhaustible." The same chapter contains the famous passage in which Lao Tze mentions the Lord in the sense of God. Mr. Medhurst translates, "I know not whose son it is. Its *noumenon* was before the Lord." My version runs as follows, "I know not whose son it is. Before the Lord, reason takes precedence," and I have to state that I followed the traditional interpretation of the passage which looks upon the word *siang* as a verb. I grant, however, that it may as well be interpreted as a noun, in which sense it means, "figure," "image," "likeness," and I confess, the notion that the likeness of the Tao in the sense of the Platonic idea stands before God, is indeed a philosophical thought worthy of Lao-Tze; but Mr. Medhurst's interpretation is not tenable for another philological reason, for the word *hsien* means "first, before, formerly, past, to go ahead, previous, ancient," etc., but never "before" in the local sense. Though Mr. Medhurst's translation naturally appeals to his theological and theosophical inclinations, we find it untenable, not only because it is linguistically wrong, but also because it contradicts the general character of Lao-Tze's philosophy, whose Tao is greater than God, or practically displaces him. In this very passage Lao-Tze says to the believers in Ti, the Lord, that Tao takes precedence even over God, but his statement is softened by the use of *siang*, which is here adverbial, and means "apparent—seemingly —likely."

The beginning of Chapter VII, is translated by Mr. Medhurst as follows: "Nature continues long. What is the reason that Nature continues long? Because it produces nothing for itself it is able to constantly produce." Mr. Medhurst explains that "nature" in Chinese means "heaven and earth," but the text does not read "heaven and earth" together, but reads as I have translated it, "Heaven endures and earth is lasting." As to the rest of the verse, I would insist that the word *shang* means "to produce," "to live," and should be interpreted in this connection in the sense of existence; whence the translation, "Because they do not live for themselves, on that account can they endure."

In Chapter IX, Mr. Medhurst translates, "Sharpness which results from filing, can not be preserved." The word *ch'wai*, however, does not mean "sharpness," but is rendered by Williams, "to

measure, to ascertain, to push away," and so I have translated the passage, "Handling and keeping sharp, can that wear long?"

The beginning of Chapter X reads in Mr. Medhurst's translation as follows: "By steadily disciplining the animal nature, until it becomes one pointed, it is possible to establish the Indivisible." The meaning of the passage is very doubtful and I have no fault to find with Mr. Medhurst's interpretation, which is my own, but I thing that the wording which I have given it, is not only more literal, but also more intelligible: "He who sustains and disciplines his soul and embraces unity can not be deranged."

In Chapter XI Mr. Medhurst seems to have misunderstood the meaning, and since he must have seen other and more correct translations, I would be glad to learn of his reasons for not accepting the obviously better version. Mr. Medhurst translates:

"Thirty spokes meet in one hub, but the need for the cart existed when as yet is was not. Clay is fashioned into vessels, but the need for the vessel existed when as yet it was not. Doors and windows are cut to make a house, but the need for the house existed when as yet it was not. Hence there is a profitableness in that which is and a need in that which is not."

My own version reads as follows:

"Thirty spokes unite in one nave and on that which is non-existent [on the hole in the nave] depends the wheel's utility. Clay is moulded into a vessel and on that which is non-existent [on its hollowness] depends the vessel's utility. By cutting out doors and windows we build a house and on that which is non-existent [on the empty space] depends the house's utility.

"Therefore, when the existence of things is profitable, it is the non-existent in them which renders them useful."

Mr. Medhurst adds the following explanation:

"The advantage does not lie in the nature of the thing itself, but in that which the user brings to it. A book may prove the salvation of one, the damnation of another. 'Cast not your pearls before swine.' 'Give not that which is holy unto the dogs.' 'For you therefore which believe is the preciousness; but for such as disbelieve....a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense."

It seems to me a mistake that Mr. Medhurst has not marked off in his version of the Tao-Teh-King, the many quotations that in the original are in verse. We believe that if anywhere, it is necessary here to render the version as verse; or at least to let the readers know that it is verse. As an instance of this we will quote the first paragraph of Chapter 28, which in Mr. Medhurst's translation reads thus:

"One conscious of virility, maintaining muliebrity, is a world-channel. From a world-channel the unchanging energy never departs. This is to re vert to the state of infancy."

We render the same passage as follows:

"He who his manhood shows
And his womanhood knows
Becomes the empire's river.
Is he the empire's river,
He will from virtue never deviate,
And home he turneth to a child's estate."

There is no need of further comparing the two translations. The same disagreement is noticeable throughout; but there is one version of Mr. Medhurst which pleases me on account of its terseness, and reproduces very well the meaning and ruggedness of the original. In Chapter XXIV, I translate, "A man on tiptoe can not stand. A man astride can not walk. A self-displaying man can not shine." The first two sentences in Mr. Medhurst's version are a decided improvement on mine, while the third one seems to fall flat. Mr. Medhurst says, "Who tiptoes, totters. Who straddles, stumbles. The self-regarding cannot cognize." (The word *ming* means "bright and shining," but not "cognize.")

Mr. Medhurst's translation is sufficiently characterized by our quotations. In style, interpretation and treatment it is similar throughout. There are a number of passages which, as Mr. Medhurst states himself in the Preface, will remain debatable, as there is no ultimate authority to decide the meaning of these aphorisms which are sometimes extremely terse.

An interesting passage which shows the difficulties of translating the originals, is the first sentence of Chapter L, which reads: "*ch'u shang ju sz',*" four words of well-established meaning which translated literally mean, "start, life, return, death." The words *ch'u* "start" and *ju* "return" are contrasts meaning "out" and "in" respectively. Mr. Medhurst translates the passage, "Birth is an exit, death an entrance." In my first edition I rendered it, "Going forth is life, coming home is death," but noticing the close connection between the two clauses, I thought better to replace it by "He who starts in life will end in death." The word *ju* "in," however, is also used in the sense of "home" in contrast to *ch'u* "abroad," and so I would now propose to translate in this way the mooted passage which seems to be like an exclamation full of suggestive meaning:

"Abroad in life, home in death!"