SELF-FULFILLMENT THROUGH SELFLESSNESS: THE MORAL TEACHINGS OF THE DAODE JING

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(WORK IN PROGRESS:NOT FOR CITATION)

This paper is an attempt to anwer the question, "What are the moral teachings of the Daode jing?"1

Since the Daode jingis one of the most well-known works of any civilization, it may seem surprising that

such a simple question has not already been satisfactorily addressed. But in fact there has been little

effort to address directly this clear and basic question. The reasons for this state of affairs are too complex

to pursue fully here, for they involve the unexamined biases, misconceptions, and conceptual omissions

heretofore inherent not only in the thought of Western interpreters but also in that of modern Chinese

interpreters.2It does, however, seem proper to sketch the current state of Western thought on the issue,

and to consider the most immediate and significant reasons for the deficiencies that afflict the field. Then,

through textual exegesis, I shall seek to demonstrate that the Daode jingdisplays a distinct and

comprehensible moral perspective.

Preliminary Considerations

1A version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the Society for Asian and Comparative

Philosophy, held in conjunction with the 1996 annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association,

Eastern Division.

2A preliminary exploration of these matters may be found in my article, "Person and Culture in the

Taoist Tradition," Journal of Chinese Religions20 (1992), 77-90. A different perspective stressing

philosophical issues is Chad Hansen, A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1-29. More generally, the inherited interpretive problems that

have resulted from orientalist approaches are explored in J. J.Clarke, Oriental Enlightenment: The En-

counter between Asian and Western Thought (London: Routledge, 1997).

As I will elaborate below, there was really no such thing as "Taoism" in classical China. Tthe con-

cept of "philosophical Taoism" is essentially a fiction, embraced by people of different ages and cultures

for specific and identifiable social, intellectual, and historical reasons.3This paper is concerned not with

the thoughts generally attributed to "philosophical Taoism," but rather with the thought-content discern-

ible in a single specific text -- the Daode jing. Hence, to the greatest extent possible, I shall write as

though the text existed in an intellectual vacuum. As far as possible, I shall ignore other texts, like the

Zhuangzi, for while such texts may share with ours certain themes and perspectives, there is no logical

basis for assuming that any given perspective in the Zhuangzi would necessarily be shared by the writers

of any part of the Daode jing. The same is true for the entire commentarial literature. My purpose here is

not to find a common "Taoist morality," but merely to extract from a single text such moral ideas as might be

present. I shall, for the most part, assume that the effort to do so is hampered rather than aided by com-

mon concepts concerning the supposed "general framework of Taoist thought."

Of course, I am also writing here as though we may legitimately discuss "the Daode jing" as though

it were a coherent text. Such an assumption sets aside several important issues, including that of textual

history. At present, there is actually no way to identity the "real" or "original" text of the Daode jing, so

there is essentially no such thing as "the Daode jing" except in some socially agreed sense. In what

follows, I do not necessarily claim to discern "the original meaning" of the text, in whole or in part. I shall

merely attempt to read the text as we currently have it in order to identify such moral ideas as it might

contain.4Secondly, I shall beware the common fallacy of assuming a general consistency within the text.

3See, e.g., "Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition"; and Steve Bradbury, "The American Con-

quest of Philosophical Taoism," in Translation East and West: A Cross-Cultural Approach, ed. by Cornelia

N. Moore and Lucy Lower (Honolulu:University of Hawaii College of Languages, Linguistics and

Literature and the East-West Center, 1992), 29-41. The social and intellectual history of the Western

concept of "Taoism" has yet to be written.

4I have found too few differences between the received text and the Mawangdui editions to justify

separating them for the purpose of this study. I shall note significant variations where circumstances

warrant. For the received text, I have followed the Zhuzi jichengedition of the Wang Bi text, as printed in

Kondordanz zum Lao-tzu(München:Seminar für Ostasiatische Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft der

Since it is apparently not the work of a single person, it would be illogical to assume that an idea found in

one passage necessarily bears implications for any other particular passage. Failure to beware such

fallacious assumptions have often led interpreters to construct vast and sometimes impressive thought-

systems for the Daode jing, though whether such systems were actually present in the minds of the actual

writer(s) of any given passage remains dubious. There has been a very common tendency to "import

ideas" from Zhuangzi, from the commentator Wang Bi, even from Neo-Confucian sources. My assumption

shall be that some passages of the Daode jingare probably more closely related than others, and that we

will find abundant "inconsistencies" unless we acknowledge the plurality of layers and voices embodied in

the text. So while I shall seek meaningful patterns of thought by comparing different passages, I shall

attempt to remain alert to the fact that passage A and passage B may share a given idea fully, incompletely,

or not at all.

"Morality" andthe Daode jing:The State of the Field

A decade ago, I noted that it had long been supposed that Taoist values were inherently ego-

centric, and that, among both Chinese and Western interpreters, Taoists "have been censured for

fostering a selfish disregard of the legitimate needs and concerns of human society."5Sadly, such

remains the general state of affairs. Blinded by the late-imperial Confucian conceit that Taoists are charac-

teristically apathetic if not antipathetic toward social concerns, Western interpreters have found little to say

about Taoist moral teachings. Considering the near-prehistoric nature of his efforts, we may excuse Max

Universität München, 1968). For the Mawangdui text, I have used the versions published by Robert G.

Henricks in his translation, Lao-tzu Te-tao ching(New York: Ballantine Books, 1989). For convenience, I

shall refer to sections of the text according to the numbering in the received text. The Mawangdui edi-

tions have the sections in a different sequence; Henricks, however, continues to number them as in the

received text, so that his translation begins with "chapter 38" and concludes with "chapter 37."On the

assumption that most readers will still think of the chapters in the traditional numbering, and will find that

numbering in most editions and translations, I shall continue to employ it here.

5"The Roots of Altruism in the Taoist Tradition," Journal of the American Academy of Religion54

(1986), 60.

Weber for finding little to say on the issue.6But my attempt to assess current thought regarding the issue

among sinologists and philosophers led to a finding that was both surprising and distressing:with few ex-

ceptions, such writers have continued to find little to say.7

In this connection, I must note that I was particularly interested in the analyses of people knowl-

edgeable in the Western field of philosophy:I assumed that the most likely place to find coherent as-

sessments of the moral teachings of the Daode jingwould be among those who have endeavored to write

as systematic thinkers, particularly since "ethics" is a principal concern among those who practice

"philosophy" in the Western academy. Of course, thoughtful consideration of Chinese texts and tradi-

tions is still fairly rare in Western philosophy. Among the few who combine sinological expertise with philo-

sophical competence, fewer still have addressed the issue in question. Occasionally, a non-sinologist will

enter the fray, as Herbert Fingarette did in his stimulating treatment of Confucius.8The most prominent

non-sinologist to address the issue of morality in a Taoist context seems to be Arthur C. Danto.9Since

Danto's views have been somewhat influential, it is with them that I shall begin.

In the 1988 edition of his work, Danto presents the following assertions:

...Taoism seems to dissolve any relations we may have to one another and to replace

them with the relationship we have to the universe at large. The question it poses is...

how to close the gap between the world and ourselves, how to 'lose' the self. Whereas it

is just that gap that is presupposed by the moral questions of classical China and perhaps

6Max Weber, The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism, translated by Hans H. Gerth (New

York:The Free Press, 1951), devotes one incoherent page (204-5) to the topic, "The Ethic of Taoism."

7It is notable that a recent collection of fine studies on Zhuangzi refers explicitly to ethics in its title:

Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi, edited by Paul Kjellberg and Philip J.

Ivanhoe (Albany:SUNY Press, 1996). Yet none of the contributors seem to findin Zhuangzianything

worth discussing as "ethics."

8Herbert Fingarette, Confucius: The Secular as Sacred(New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

9Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy, originally published in 1972 (New

York: Basic Books). The most recent edition (1988) is from Columbia University Press.

by the concept of morality itself. They suppose the gaps that need closing are those that

separate us from one another. However, these are not relevant in closing the gap

between the Way and ourselves, which is the source of the only kind of infelicitude

thinkers like Lao Tzu regard as worth healing....Exactly the space that Taoism intends to

collapse is what makes morality possible at all. By this, I mean the possibility of morality as

such, not this or that moral system.10

Danto concludes his book with the allegation that "Taoism's" failure to provide a space for morality

does...entail a kind of censure of the philosophies of Lao Tzu and the others we have dis-

cussed, Confucius being an exception, because in enjoining the collapse of the con-

ditions that made morality possible, they fall under a moral violation by our criterion. And

so they merit blame of a kind.11

There are doubtless those who would be more charitable, and would refrain from assigning "censure" or

"blame" for such a supposed failure. But the question remains of whether Danto is correct in his funda-

mental assessment.

For the moment, I shall pass over the common, but dubious, assumption that there was a person

named "Lao Tzu" whose "philosophy" is enshrined in the Daode jing.12My real concern is Danto's

contention that such "philosophies" as we find in the Daode jing preclude the very possibilityof "morality

10Danto, pp. 118-19. This argument by Danto has found its way into the broader literature, as seen,

e.g., in a publication by two British philosophers, Diané Collinson and Robert Wilkinson, Thirty-Five

Oriental Philosophers(London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 138.

11Danto, 119-20.

12On the subject of the "authorship" of the Daode jing, see my entry, "The Book of the Way," in Ian

McGreal, Great Literature of the Eastern World(New York:HarperCollins, in press). On the figure of "Lao-

tzu," an ever-changing cultural construct, see Judith M. Boltz, "Lao-tzu," in The Encyclopedia of Religion

(New York:Macmillan, 1987), 8:454-59; A. C. Graham, "The Origins of the Legend of Lao Tan," in his

Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature(Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 111-24; and

Livia Kohn, Lao-tzu in History and Myth(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies,

forthcoming).

as such."I shall not, in this connection, object to his fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of

"morality."Rather, I wish to question his assertion that "Taoism" per serenders "morality" per secon-

ceptually impossible.

In his chapter on Confucianism and Taoism, Danto writes as follows:

With Confucius one begins to get a glimpse of something that has been lacking in the

philosophies we have touched upon in this book [i.e., philosophies of India and China],

namely a genuine moral idea. Taoism pictures the person as a wanderer in the void, and

perceives his happiness to lie in drifting with the stream, unanchored by the network of

demands and responsibilities. The Confucian, by contrast, has endorsed and inter-

nalized these responsibilities and yields to them, sacrificing or postponing his own

happiness if need be, or merely identifying it with moral submission....[In Taoism, the]

happiness one is concerned with is one's own, logically independent of the happiness of

others....Moral education, to which Confucius devoted immense attention, consists less

in the inculcation of rules, which is only moral training and can be given to dogs, but in

getting men to assume attitudes towards themselves that are logically connected with the

attitudes others take toward themselves....[In Taoism, however, the] follower of the Way is

necessarily a loner....13

Within these remarks are some observations that are true and important, and others that are highly

debatable. Is it actually true that for "Taoists," "the happiness one is concerned with is one's own, logically

independent of the happiness of others"? As we shall see, the answer is decidedly negative.

One of the reasons for Danto's confusion -- which is, to be fair, a common confusion indeed -- is

that he has fallaciously conflated the thought of the Daode jingwith that of the Zhuangzi, succumbing to

the common but historically false reification of a philosophical "school" of "Taoism."The historical falsity of

13Danto, 114-17.

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such a reification was not well appreciated when Danto first wrote. But any philosopher should beware the

facile conflation of two entirely different thinkers or texts:Plotinus was not Plato, Luther was not Paul, and

Sankara did not write the Upanisads. By neglecting the real possibility (in fact, the near certainty) of

significant distinctions between the thoughts found in the Daode jingand that found in the Zhuangzi,

Danto, like so many others, has falsely accused the writers of the former as having accepted the as-

sumptions and conclusions of the latter. To argue, for instance, that "Taoism pictures the person as a

wanderer in the void, and perceives his happiness to lie in drifting with the stream..." is clearly to ignore all

the social and political teachings of the Daode jing, and to assume, quite falsely, as it turns out, that the

Zhuangziis not merely representative of "Taoism," but actually normative. 14

Recent research by A. C. Graham and others has made it abundantly clear that the term "Taoism"

refers to nothing that really existed in pre-Han intellectual history:neither Chuang Chou nor the

14The Taoist tradition of China -- generally still ignored by modern philosophers and intellectual

historians -- actually gives the Zhuangzi very limited importance. Though some Taoist intellectuals

continued to draw upon it for terms and ideas, the majority of Taoists gave it little attention, and were

seldom discernibly influenced by it. The idea that the Zhuangzi is a primary Taoist text is actually a non-

Taoist idea, specifically a Confucian and Western construct. On the historical origins of such constructs,

see Kirkland, "Hermeneutics and Pedagogy:Methodological Issues in Teaching the Tao te ching," in

Warren Frisina and Gary DeAngelis, ed., Essays in Teaching the Tao te ching (Atlanta: American Academy

of Religion / Scholars Press, in press); and Norman J. Girardot, "The Whole Duty of Man": James Legge

(1815-1897) and the Victorian Translation of China(Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

These facts have not prevented many modern interpreters from maintaining the fallacious catego-

ry of "Lao-Zhuang thought," and reifying it as "Taoism."This problem has afflicted works by otherwise

competent and thoughtful interpreters:see, e.g., Donald Munro, The Concept of Man in Early China

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969). Increasingly, as Western thinkers become more familiar with

(and admiring of) the Zhuangzi, they have virtually reversed the traditional Chinese reification to create a

new beast that seems to need the name "Zhuang-Lao thought."We see it, e.g., in Hansen's stimulating

book A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought. In his chapter on Laozi, Hansen goes so far as to write as

follows:"Laozi's position...remains a way station in Daoist development...We still have no final answer to

the question, 'What should we do?'Can we coherently see this book as giving the answer?...If there is

some advice, some point, Laozi could not state it. And so neither can I. But Zhuangzi can! Daoism must

still mature more" (202, 230). So not only was there such a thing as "Daoism" in ancient China, but it must

be defined in terms of "Zhuangzi," for "Laozi" was too inarticulate to be able to express it! The Hegelian

implication that "Daoism" inevitably marched upward to its shining peak in "Zhuangzi" (and then, of course,

"degenerated" into "superstition") is egregious enough without relegating the Daode jingto the back

porch as "immature Daoism."

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composers of the Daode jingseem to have been aware of each other's writings, and the term daojia did

not exist until early Han times. It remained no more than a bibliographic classification until about the 3rd

century C.E., i.e., several hundred years after the Daode jingtook its present form. As Harold Roth has

put it, "the 'Lao-Zhuang' tradition to which [most 20th-century Chinese and Western scholarship] refers is

actually a Wei-Jin literati reconstruction, albeit a powerful and enduring one."15Roth's present work

suggests that certain localized groups in pre-Han China may have shared certain meditative practices, and

in that sense it might seem legitimate to refer to such groups as having practiced "Taoism" in some mean-

ingful social sense.16There are even some little-known texts that seem to preserve some of their

teachings.17But there is so far no evidence that the writer(s) of the Daode jing(or of the Zhuangzi) were

members of such a group, much less of any "philosophical school."So it is fallacious to argue that "Taoism

pictures the person as a wanderer in the void":even if such a statement be an accurate expression of

some of the ideals found in the Zhuangzi, it is certainly notan accurate expression of the ideals embodied

in the Daode jing, as I shall demonstrate.18

15Harold Roth, "Some Issues in the Study of Chinese Mysticism:A Review Essay," China Review

International2 no. 1 (spring 1995), p. 157. The origins of the bibliographic concept of a dao-jiain Han

historiography is discussed inA. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient

China(LaSalle, Illinois:Open Court Publishing Co., 1989), pp. 170-71.

16See Harold D. Roth, "Redaction Criticism and the Early History of Taoism," Early China19 (1994),

1-46; and Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism, in progress.

17I refer primarily to a highly important 4th-century-BCE text called the Neiye(preserved in Kuanzi,

ch. 49). See especially Roth, "The Inner Cultivation Tradition of Early Daoism," in Donald S. Lopez, Jr.,

ed.,Religions of China in Practice(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 123-34; and Kirkland,

"Varieties of 'Taoism' in Ancient China:A Preliminary Comparison of Themes in the Nei yehand Other

'Taoist Classics'," Taoist Resources7.2 (1997), 73-86. Other ancient texts that preserve similar teachings

include passages of the Lüshi chunqiu; the "Jie-Lao" and "Yü-Lao" chapters of the Hanfei(ch. 20-21);

and the "Xinshu" sections of the Kuanzi(ch. 36-37).

18In "Varieties of 'Taoism' in Ancient China," I show that the Neiye lacks the moral or political teach-

ings found in the Daode jing. Yet its ideals are quite distinct from those of Zhuang Zhou, and do not fit

Danto's model. If one wished to find the overlap among Zhuangzi, the Neiye, and the Daode jingand reify

it as "Taoist thought," one is likely to find so little meaningful overlap that little of any specificity could be

said about it.

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Most importantly, I shall argue that, in terms of the teachings of the Daode jing, Danto is incorrect

when he maintains that within such teachings "[the] happiness one is concerned with is one's own,

logically independent of the happiness of others."In fact, I shall argue that Danto, like many other

interpreters, Western and Chinese alike, has issued his assessment (and in this case, his "censure") of

"Taoism" without having given the Daode jinga full and fair reading.19I shall demonstrate that the Daode

jingdoes not in fact enjoin "the collapse of the conditions that make morality possible."

The Presence of Moral Values in the Daode Jing

In the past, interpreters have often ignored or misconstrued the moral ideas present in the Daode

jing, for at least three reasons. First, as noted above, interpreters have often fallaciously conflated it with

other texts, such as the Zhuangzi, in which such ideas are far less apparent. Secondly, they have often

been hoodwinked by the tendentious claims of non-Taoists (particularly post-T'ang Confucians) that

"Taoists have no morality."Confucians easily drew the inference that "Taoists have no morality" simply be-

cause "Taoists," by definition, do not share Confucian moral beliefs. Just as "mainstream Confucians"

long ignored or censured Xunzi's teachings because his beliefs were no longer "mainstream," so Confu-

cians may have recognized elements of interest in the Daode jing, but would never read it sympathetically:

to them, it was unthinkable that a coherent and respectable moral philosophy could exist in a non-Confu-

cian text.

Thirdly, the moral teachings of the Daode jinghave often been overlooked because interpreters

have given improper weight to certain passages. For instance, Daode jing2 opens with lines that read

19Naturally, it goes without saying that he censures "Taoism" without having given any of the hun-

dreds of texts of later Taoism a fair reading. For a survey of the ethical dimensions of the Taoist tradition as

a whole, see my entry, "Taoism," in The Encyclopedia of Bioethics, 2nd edition (New York: Macmillan,

1995), 5: 2463-2469. For suggestions as to incorporating texts and thinkers of Later Taoism into our

coverage of Taoism, see my article, "Teaching Taoism in the 1990s,"Teaching Theology and Religion, in

press.

something like the following:

When everyone in the world knows the pleasantness of the pleasant, there is unpleasantness;

When everyone knows the goodness of the good (shan), there is not-goodness.20

Some interpreters have read these lines as showing that a fundamental principle of the Daode jingis "the

relativity of value judgments."21But such is not the case. Note that in this passage the quality of

"goodness" is contrasted not with a separate quality of "badness," but rather with "not-goodness," which

apparently just means a relative lack of "goodness."

Chapter 27 bears out that interpretation. Its opening lines use the term shanas an indicator of skill

or excellence at a given activity, such as speaking or counting. Then the following lines expand the

meaning of shan into what would seem to be a moral context:

The sage is constantly good at saving people, so that there is no one who is abandoned;

[He] is constantly good at saving things, so that that there is nothing that is abandoned.22

The precise meaning of these lines may be open to question, but they certainly suggest that the ideal per-

son takes steps to include others, in some meaningful and beneficial sense. They also suggest that such

inclusion is not only impartial, but universal, and that such universality is a significant ideal. Shan, "good-

ness," here, is thus not a quality in itself (contrasting, for instance, with "badness"), but rather a type of

ideal involvement with others. The subsequent lines (Henricks lines 9-12) explain that both the shan

20Because of textual variations, the precise sense of these lines remain in question. The term mei is

generally translated "beauty," and the term e as "ugliness"; but considering the use of the latter term else-

where (e.g., in Xunzi, where it means the general "foulness" of "human nature"), I take it to connote a

more general unpleasantness than what literally meets the eye. It should also be noted that common

interpretations of usage in Xunzi might lead one to expect e to be contrasted here with shan ("good-

ness"), but such is not the case.

21E.g., Chen Guying, Laozi jinzhu jinyi(Taibei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1970), translated as

Ch'en Ku-ying, Lao Tzu: Text, Notes, and Comments, translated by Rhett Y. W. Young and Roger T.

Ames (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1977), p. 59.

22Such is the reading in the received text; in the Mawangdui texts the first line is the same but the

second line differs slightly.

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person and the non-shanperson have value, and that each has, ideally at least, a meaningful relationship

to the other:the shan person should be the teacher or leader of the non-shanperson. The shan person

is therefore not a person who is morally "good" in the sense that he/she fulfills general social norms, nor

one who is good in the sense that he/she practices such Confucian virtues as "benevolence," but rather

in some other sense (to be discussed below).23And as such, the shan person warrants the reader's

approval and emulation, for, as chapter 79 indicates, even the "Way of Heaven" itself approves of and sup-

ports such a person:

The Way of Heaven has no favorites,

It's always with the good man (Henricks translation).

But the full meaning of the term shan-ren("good person") in this passage remains to be seen. The pre-

ceding lines concern the value of not exacting payment for debt, whether financial or moral, and the

"good" person is said to be one who creates harmony in such situations by forgiving others' debts.24Such

ideas may also be pertinent for understanding chapter 49, where the ideal person seems to be said to "be

good (shan)" toward all others impartially, both those who are shan and those who are not.25

Thus, we see that the Daode jingcommends "goodness," which an ideal person practices.

23In Law and Morality in Ancient China: The Silk Manuscripts of Huang-Lao(Albany: SUNY Press,

1993), R. P. Peerenboom agrees that "Lao Zi, like Confucius, rejects rule ethics," but he contends that

the Daode jingcontains a situational ethics and regards social consensus as the highest ideal (187-89).

Such an interpretation seems to project a late-20th-century Western morality upon a text from ancient

China. Such interpretations may persuade modern (or postmodern) people that "Daoism" is a wise

philosophy for today, but I will contend that no one in ancient China was constructing philosophies to be

applied in an alien culture, and we must beware interpreting the Daode jingas a tract for our time.

24Graham shows how easy it is to overinterpret a passage. In discussing this line, he states, "The

good man is the one who by adapting himself to the Way has learned both to survive and (a theme

however of Chuang-tzu rather than Lao-tzu) reconcile himself to misfortune and death; it is because alone

among men he is on the side of the Way that the Way works in his favour."Graham, p. 231. But in point of

fact, there is nothing in chapter 79 of the Daode jingabout "survival"; nothing about reconciling oneself to

misfortune; nothing about "adapting oneself to the Way"; and nothing to suggest that the "good man" is

"on the side of the Way."

25Henricks lines 3-5. The Mawangdui texts here are too fragmentary to be very reliable.

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Furthermore, that practice involves extending oneself toward others impartially so as to benefit them, and

possibly even to engender "goodness" in them as well. It seems to me that these ideas at least closely ap-

proximate moral values, at least in Arthur Danto's terms. Furthermore, if traditional readings of Daode jing

27 are correct, it would seem to be a duty of the person of "goodness" to serve as instructor to persons

who lack such "goodness."Thus we would even seem to see here brief but suggestive indications of a

concept of moral education.

Implicit Moral Reasoning in the Daode Jing

I can endorse Danto's contention that "moral education" does not consist in "the inculcation of

rules, which is only moral training and can be given to dogs."26But Danto argued that Confucians display

"a genuine moral idea" because they recognize themselves as part of a human "network of demands and

responsibilities."It is this characteristic of "Confucianism" that Danto opposes to the characteristics of

"Taoism."But is that characterization accurate? Or is it possible that a "Taoist" could actually have a sense

of responsibility toward others, analogous to, albeit distinct from, that which Confucius expected of his

followers? If so, why have interpreters of the Daode jingfailed to notice it?

26It seems wrong to say that dogs can receive "moral training":one can train a dog to act "properly"

(e.g., not to relieve itself in certain places), but behavioral conditioning seems logically distinct from "moral"

training:we can also train a child not to relieve itself in certain places, but whether such training is "moral"

in quality seems quite dubious. Confucius (Analects 2:7) argues that filial piety is a sham if it consists of just

providing for parents' physical needs, for one does that even for animals. "Without reverence," he asks,

"what is the difference?"One might object that "reverence" is merely an emotion, but the true position of

Confucius, I think, is that one ought to feel the feelings that come from a full recognition of one's debt to

one's parents, and ought to behave so as to express (to parents, family members, and others) a sincere

willingness to make payment on that debt (whether or not it is ever fully payable). It is debatable whether

"filial piety" in this sense fits Danto's definition of moral education as "getting men to assume attitudes

towards themselves that are logically connected with the attitudes others take toward themselves."

Confucius, I believe, would maintain that the practice of filial piety is right in itself, irrespective of the

attitudes that parent or child might harbor:acting as a true human being involves wholehearted commit-

ment to following the transcendentally authoritative patterns of social interaction (li) that are ordained by

Heaven (Tian) and modelled by our exemplars (the "sage-kings"). One might argue that Confucius is sug-

gesting a "religious ethic," which we could distinguish from a "social ethic" (which would involve only

issues of whether people seek to contribute to others' happiness, without reference to any other value).

But such was not Danto's position.

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Several passages in the Daode jinghave been cited by both traditional Confucians and modern

interpreters as revealing antipathy toward moral values. One is the notorious opening of chapter 5:

Heaven and Earth are not "benevolent" (ren):

They take all things (lit., "the myriad things") to be [like] straw-dogs.

The Sage is not "benevolent":

He takes all people (lit., "the hundred clans") to be [like] straw-dogs.

Interpretations of this passage vary, but it is hard to miss the implication that one ought to live with no

regard for others, just as, for instance, nature's rains come regardless of whether any given living thing is

thereby given more abundant life or drowned. I would argue that it is necessary to take into account here

the intellectual history of ancient China, for "benevolence" is not just a term of ordinary discourse, but a

technical term in the vocabulary of the classical Confucians, particularly that of Mengzi (Mencius). One can

in fact read this passage as a direct argument against Mengzi's teachings that one ought to cultivate a set

of moral feelings (compassion, respect, shame, etc.) that he alleges to be intrinsic to human nature.27The

argument here, as I read it, is that while such feelings may be visible in some humans' lives, they are not

evident in the broader world, beyond human society:Heaven-and-Earth shows no compassion, respect,

or shame when it sends a typhoon toward human habitations. The lesson is thus that one should emulate

Heaven-and-Earth, notthose human individuals who have cultivated Mengzi's ideal feelings. One could

even ask:how could compassion, respect or shame be intrinsic to the human constitution (as Mengzi

claims) when they are clearly extrinsic to the constitution of the world as a whole? If one judges human

activity by how well it correlates to activity seen in "nature," then the Mencian "moral feelings," which are

absent in "nature," actually appear quite unnatural.

27For the teachings of Mengzi, see especially the pertinent sections of Philip J. Ivanhoe, Confucian

Moral Self Cultivation(New York:Peter Lang, 1993) and Ethics in the Confucian Tradition(Atlanta:

Scholars Press, 1990); and Lee H. Yearley, Mencius and Aquinas(Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

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Here we see a fundamental element of what one could call "Taoist moral reasoning."28Confucians

based their moral reasoning on specific assumptions, such as that humans are the world's principal (if not

only) agents of goodness:"nature," they reason, may indeed be amoral, but humans at times display

goodness, and ought to become more conscientious in practicing such goodness. But a critic might

retort:

"If what you call 'moral goodness' is seen nowhere in the world except in humans, then it is a

logical possibility (if not, indeed, an inevitability) that 'moral goodness' does not belong in the

world-- that humans have been engaging in practices that are contrary to life itself. So we are

logically required to examine critically the alleged benefits of such actions."

Whether such reasoning was actually conducted by the person(s) who penned the lines on "straw-dogs"

in Daode jing5, it is quite conceivable. Such reasoning could be considered an example of "Laoist moral

reasoning."29A person who lives in accord with such reasoning would seem to qualify as "a conscientious

moral agent," as defined by James Rachels:

The conscientious moral agent is someone who is concerned impartially with the interests

of everyone affected by what he or she does; who carefully sifts facts and examines their

implications; who accepts principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure

they are sound; who is willing to 'listen to reason' even when it means that his or her earlier

convictions may have to be revised; and who, finally, is willing to act on the results of this

deliberation.30

28Note the quotation marks here, indicating that it would be unwarranted to reify any particular ele-

ment of the Daode jingas representing a "Taoist" idea. Such ideas may or may not appear in any of the

other texts that one may label "Taoist."

29Elsewhere, I have used the term "Laoist" for the traditions of the oral community from which the

earliest layers of the Daode jingseem to have emerged. Here, however, I am expanding the term to serve

as a descriptor of the teachings of the extant Daode jingas a whole.

30James Rachels, The Elements of Moral Philosophy(New York:Random House, 1986), p. 11.

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In what follows, I shall attempt to demonstrate that, despite the general incoherence of the text we call the

Daode jing, it does include numerous passages that contain readily discernible moral teachings --

teachings that are based upon moral reasoning, expect moral reasoning of the reader, and enjoin moral

action (or, more accurately, "moral nonaction") based upon the true implications of the facts of life.

A Non-Humanistic Morality?

In certain regards, the assumptions of the Daode jingoverlap (but do not entirely coincide) with

those of the Zhuangzi. Both deny the validity of certain common Confucian assumptions. Most classical

Confucians (including Xunzi and Dong Zhongshu) held that humans play a crucial role in bringing order to

the world:though the ultimate source of life's proper order may be "Heaven" (Tian), "Heaven" cannot of

itself guarantee the fulfillment of its own designs, so it is ultimately within the human sphere that life is

given its true meaning and direction. Further, both the ruler and the properly cultivated individual have

crucial roles to play in that process:bringing order to life is thus a process that simultaneously comes

down from the top of society, the worthy ruler, and works upward from the basis of society, the moral

individual. This perspective might be styled a religious humanism, in that Confucians assume that human

society is the primary focus of life's meaning and value, though such goods are ultimately grounded in

"Heaven."31

Certainly by Han times, similar assumptions had come to dominate "Taoism," as seen most clearly

in the Huainanzi, where the primal "Tao" holds a position comparable in some ways to the Confucians'

"Heaven."Such concepts actually go back to the Daode jing, which even refers in several chapters to

31The religious dimension of classical Confucianism has often been overlooked, both in China and in

the West, because with the conspicuous exception of Dong Zhongshu, Confucian theorists rarely

attempted to provide an explicit analysis of the nature or activities of "Heaven," or of its relationship to hu-

manity. The humanistic thrust of Confucianism in its practice seems to have minimized theoretical interest

in the non-humanistic implications of what one might well call Confucian theology. See further Edward J.

Machle,Nature and Heaven in the Xunzi:A Study of the Tian Lun(Albany:SUNY Press, 1993), and my

entry, "Tung Chung-shu," in Ian McGreal, ed., Great Thinkers of the Eastern World(New York:

HarperCollins, 1995), 67-70.

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"the Tao of Heaven."32But though the Daode jingis here, as in other regards, closer to the Confucian

position than is the Zhuangzi, it nonetheless rejects the common Confucian assumption that the world

inherently tends toward chaos and requires the redemptive activity of human society.33The Daode jing

asserts that the natural reality it calls the Tao is a perfect and ineluctable force for the fulfillment of life. Far

from needing humans to complete its activity, that "Tao" is, despite appearances, the most powerful force

that exists, and it inevitably leads all situations (even human government) to a healthy fulfillment --

provided human beings not interfere with it.34It is this assumption of a benign and wholly trustworthy natu-

ral order -- seldom perceptible in the Zhuangzi -- that provides a potential basis for a non-humanistic

religious morality.35From this perspective, Confucians wrongly fear that life will end in chaos without the

redemptive activity of humanity:in truth, because of the beneficent activity of the natural force called the

Tao, we can rest assured that life will proceed harmoniously, except for the deleterious effects of

32See chapters 47, 73, 77, 79, and 81. It is interesting that such a meaningful term seldom appears

in the much longer text of Zhuangzi, and there is little trace of such ideas in the Neiye.

33Such is clearly Xunzi's position. Mengzi famously insisted that "human nature" tends inherently

toward moral behavior, but he admitted the frailty of that tendency:in all but the "gentleman," social

pressures lead the individual astray, and constant attention and effort are necessary for one to maintain a

moral course. Xunzi argued that "human nature" cannot be trusted, and that humanity is redeemed by the

"artificial activity" (wei) of the ancient sage-kings, who created and bequeathed to us the proper values

and patterns of behavior. Mengzi seems unable to explain why individuals are so susceptible to bad

influences, or how such influences first originated. As usual, it is difficult to discern how Confucius might

have addressed such issues:his concern was that society had derogated from the proper path, and that

exceptional individuals must work to restore society by means of moral activity.

34See further my entry, "Taoism," in Philosophy of Education:An Encyclopedia, edited by J. J.

Chambliss (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 633-36.

35Benjamin Schwartz writes of "the Lao-tzu's continuing overwhelming concern with human life and

hence the presence of a somewhat inconsistent 'moralism' and even 'humanism' which he seems to share

with his predecessors [i.e., Confucius, etc.]."Benjamin I. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient

China(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 204. But the rest of the passage is given

over to discussions of "mysticism" (a major theme for Schwartz) and "naturalism," and one searches in vain

for an elaboration upon theDaode jing's "moralism" or "humanism."In fact, his only other reference to the

text's "moralistic torque" seems to appear as an assertion of "a basic inconsistency [in] the entire vision of

the Lao-tzu" (p. 213). Apparently, Schwartz saw or felt something vaguely "humanistic" in the Daode jing,

but was never able to make sufficient sense of it to overcome the Confucian assumption that the

teachings of the Daode jingare antipathetic to moral and social concerns.

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misguided human activity. Human activity(wei) is thus not redemptive at all, but precisely the opposite.

And the moral responsibility of the individual is thus to refrain from such activity, to desist from misguided

interference in the inherent tendencies of the world.

Whereas a humanistic perspective assigns a generally positive value to what humans "contribute"

to life, the perspective of the Daode jing is non-humanistic (or even "anti-humanistic"), for it assigns a gen-

erally negative value to what humans add to the life process. So whereas Mengzi insists that one has a

moral responsibility to cultivate "benevolence," chapter 5 of the Daode jing argues that one has a moral

responsibility not to do so. According to such "Laoist moral reasoning," cultivating qualities that are

generally absent in other domains of life is introducing an unnatural and unhealthy element into the world.

In this light, a "Taoist" can quite certainly be "someone who is concerned impartially with the interests of

everyone affected by what he or she does," and is thus "a conscientious moral agent."

In fact, according to the moral reasoning perceptible in the Daode jing,such a person is eminently

more moral than a Confucian. The Mohists accused the Confucians of "partiality," because a Confucian,

as a devotee of "filial piety," is concerned with the interests of his parents, above -- and in extreme cases,

possibly to the exclusion of -- the interests of other persons to whom he is unrelated.36But "Laoists"

could accuse the Confucians on partiality on another level:Confucians are concerned with the interests

of human beings, above -- and in extreme cases, to the exclusion of -- the interests of other beings. For

instance, Analects 10:17 relates the following:

The stables caught fire. The Master [i.e., Confucius], on returning from court, asked, 'Was

anyone hurt?'He did not ask about the horses.37

36E.g., if one see two burning houses, one of which contains his own parents and the other of which

contains the parents of someone else, the Mohist would say that both sets of people are equally de-

serving of being saved. The Confucian would disagree, arguing that one has an extra moral obligation to

one's parents, because without them he would not have come into existence or lived to maturity.

37Translation from D. C. Lau, Confucius: The Analects, 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University

Press, 1992), p. 93.

To be fair, what we have here is a memory of an unknown disciple, from which a lesson has been

extracted; it is not clear whether that lesson reflects the thought of Confucius himself, or possibly the

dissonant values of some disciple. Certainly, Confucius is not recorded as having said, "Only humans de-

serve life, and if a stable catches fire, let it burn as long as no one dies but the horses."38But the lesson of

the passage is clear:the horses' lives were, to Confucius, of no moral concern. That "moral people" could

hold such a view is entirely credible, for it is still a common view among many modern people, who will, for

instance, readily sacrifice test-animals in seeking a cure for a human malady:the facts that such a cure may

never be applied to save the lives of non-humans, or that the happiness of the test-animals is disregarded,

are to many people not compelling moral concerns. The Laoist (like some modern animal-rights advo-

cates) might ask, If "the conscientious moral agent" is "someone who is concerned impartially with the

interests of everyone affected by what he or she does," does that "everyone" really mean everyone, or

just certain someones? Laoists, I propose, articulated an ethic that remains largely unrecognized because

it was a non-humanistic ethic, because their "impartial concern" reached beyond human society, and

asked about "respect for others" in a broader sense.39

But would it be correct to conclude that such a "non-humanistic ethic" was actually an anti-

humanisticethic? Such would seem to be Danto's assumption, when he asserts:

38To Mengzi, at least, compassion for non-human life is within the realm of Confucian values, as seen

in Mengzi 1A.7.

39Peerenboom, stretching the sense of Daode jing 27, argues that "Lao Zi's expansion of the sage's

domain of concern to nonhuman elements in one's environment differentiates his position from the

anthropocentric concerns of Confucius" (189). But one must once again be careful not to confuse the

non-anthropocentrism of the Daode jing with late-20th-century attitudes. I see no justification for Peer-

enboom's assertion that in Daode jing, "Each person and each thing possess an inviolability, an integrity,

that must be accounted for in the resulting sociopolitical and cosmic order" (ibid.). To the contrary, as I

have argued elsewhere, "Taoists lacked the notion that the individual -- or even the human species -- is

an independent locus of moral value. In fact, Lao-Chuang Taoism can easily be read as a concerted effort

to disabuse us of the absurd notions of self-importance that most people tacitly embrace as natural and

normal. Hence, the very concept of 'rights' -- for individual or groups, humans or animals -- makes no

sense whatever in Taoist terms.""Taoism," Encyclopedia of Bioethics, 2466.

{page * arabic}

the moral questions of classical China and perhaps by the concept of morality...suppose

the gaps that need closing are those that separate us from one another. However, these

are not relevant in closing the gap between the Way and ourselves, which is the source of

the only kind of infelicitude thinkers like Lao Tzu regard as worth healing...

Is that assertion true?

Let us consider the opening lines of Daode jing75:"The people are hungry:It is because those

in authority eat up too much in taxes / That the people are hungry."40Here we see a concern with

excessive taxation as an issue of social justice, which could be quoted by politicians of our own day. Clear-

ly here, and in several other passages, like Daode jing72, we see a moral condemnation of governmental

oppression, and it is quite evident that "Lao Tzu" regards such oppression as an "infelicitude" that is

indeed "worth healing."

The only remaining question would seem to be whether "the Taoist" is "a conscientious moral

agent" in the sense of someone "who, finally, is willing to act on the results of [moral] deliberation." Does

the Daode jing enjoin action to restore harmony to the world? Well, the answer seems to be a qualified

yes, but the Laoist view would once again challenge the propriety of the question. Why need morality in-

volve the willingness to "act"?Once again, "Laoist moral reasoning" argues (e.g., in chapter 29) that

because the world is inherently "good" to begin with, any extraneous action on the part of humans can

logically only cause disturbance. So the "conscientious moral agent" is someone who is ultimately willing

not to acton the results of moral deliberation. It is notthat one should act without moral deliberation, but

rather that one should deliberate appropriately, and then should bring one's behavior into accord with

reality by refrainingfrom action. Most specifically, one should refrain from acting on the basis of specious

40Translation from D. C. Lau, Lao-tzu Tao te ching(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 137. Later,

Lau translated the Ma-wang-tui texts, but the fact that it was published in Hong Kong (Hong Kong:

Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1989) meant that it received little attention in the West. It has now

been re-published in North America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), with a new introduction by Sarah

Allen. Readers who compare Lau's translations, however, will find some changes that owe nothing to

differences in the Chinese edition being translated.

{page * arabic}

moral reasoning, such as that of Confucians, who, from a Laoist perspective, could be said to be busy

trying to teach young men to develop un-natural feelings like "benevolence" while ignoring the horses

dying in the burning stables. So instead of advocating "benevolence" (or "impartial solicitude," jian'ai, like

the Mohists), some passages of the Daode jing advocate "compassion" (ci), which seems to mean some-

thing like "caring enough for others to refrain from interfering with them."

Wuwei

Some might wonder that I have so far not mentioned the world-famous concept of wuwei. It is that

concept, more than any other, that has become associated with the Daode jing. A surprising number of

interpreters (including many who have never read the text itself) find the concept easy to explain. Some

such explanations make sense. But the assumption that the term wuwei is a limpid term, the meaning of

which is easily explainable, is quite false. Indeed, a careful reading of the text shows that the term has a

variety of meanings, which are at times fairly difficult to reconcile.

The question here is whether the term wuweihas moral implications. For instance, while many

believe that it denotes a condition of "naturalness" or "spontaneity," a careful reading of the text indicates

that it does not, on the whole, promote such qualities.41Indeed, many passages give advice for ruling a

state, or even for waging war, and no "natural" creature ever "spontaneously" engineered a government

or armed for formal combat! The Daode jingis not a text that instructs the reader to withdraw from society,

or even to "rise above" it in some ineffable mystical state:to the contrary, it conveys concepts of healthy

and effective methods for engaging in society.

41Here, again, we must be careful not to read alien ideas into our text. While ziranis a conspicuous

ideal in Wei-Jin thought (e.g., in the Xiang/Guo commentary to the Zhuangzi), it is a minor element in the

Daode jing. The term appears only four times (chs. 17, 23, 25, and 64), and it is by no means clear that it

ever connotes "spontaneity."E.g., the end of ch. 64, translated below, says that the Sage can "enhance

the ziran of the myriad things," and it is hard to understand how a ruler or exemplary person could cause

others to be more "spontaneous."

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In the Daode jingthe term wuwei is one element in an intricate (and not always consistent)

complex of ideals and images. That complex includes analogies to the natural qualities of water as well as

analogies to "feminine" behaviors, such as those of a selfless mother. But it also includes shrewd

propositions (including a dissonant image of "feminine wiles") to be used in seeking success in a variety of

activities, including both statecraft and war.42While one or two chapters exhort the reader to wei wuwei

(i.e., to "act without acting"), several others acknowledge that "acting" (wei) is fully justified in certain

terms.43And one chapter (43) praises the "advantages" (yi) of practicing wuwei. Entranced by Wei-Jin

images of Taoist "spontaneity," some interpreters have been uncomfortable with the idea that wuwei

could ever have been a practice intended to lead to beneficial results, and have argued (at least before

the discovery of the Mawangdui texts) that the text of chapter 43 was defective.44But the idea that proper

behavior leads to "benefits" (li) is actually quite common in the text.45And indeed, much of it is written as

though its lessons are primarily principles for seeking and gaining personal, political, and military success.

Some people are displeased by such facts, because they have succumbed to the modern notion

that the ideas in the Daode jingare an expression of a sublime "wordless wisdom" (such as Zen is often

naively supposed to be). They construe such "wisdom" -- for reasons that involve historical issues within

their own tradition -- to be "other" than rational thought. To such readers, it is objectionable to suggest

42It seems certain that the term wuweioriginated in circles outside those from which the Daode jing

itself emerged. The term was not only used by Confucius, but was a component of the political philoso-

phy of the "Legalist" Shen Buhai (d. 337 BCE). See, e.g., H. G. Creel, Shen Pu-hai: A Chinese Political

Philosopher of the Fourth Century B.C.(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), esp. pp. 176-79.

43Chapters 2, 51 and 77 (and chapter 10 in the received text) seem to endorse "acting" in relation to

others, provided one's actions are not possessive or controlling. The phrase wei wuwei appears in the

received text in two chapters (3 and 63), but it is absent from the Mawangdui text of chapter 3.

44See Lau, 1963 translation, p. 189n.

45The term li appears in nine chapters of the received text. In chapter 19, where the "Confucian" vir-

tues are excoriated along with "sageliness" (elsewhere the human ideal of the Daode jing), "benefit" is dis-

paraged, in a context that suggests "selfish struggle for personal profit" (in just the way Mengzi criticized

the term). However, other chapters (e.g., 8, 73, and 81) clearly use the term li positively.

{page * arabic}

thatthe Daode jing teaches the reader how to figure outhow to live his life in such a way that he attains

worthy and sensible goals. 46Here, again, interpreters have too often read the Daode jingin terms of the

Zhuangzi. The Zhuangzioften seems to reject the idea that life is comprehensible or predictable. But the

Daode jing, like virtually all of the later Taoist tradition, holds firmly to the belief that life is indeed compre-

hensible, and in fact superlatively predictable, so long as one has learned the key lessons. It describes

and explains behaviors that the reader ought to embrace and practice; suggests reasons why these

behaviors are preferable to others; and gives examples of persons (and other forces, like "water" and "the

female") who have modeled a correct conduct of life. It further makes clear that such behaviors are con-

tinuous with the subtle operation of the primal force of life ("the Tao"), and that failure to adjust one's life to

accord with that force is both unwise and improper.

In so far as wuwei is key for the Daode jing, it thus

constitutes an element in a rational program to convert the reader into a "conscientious moral agent," into

someone who, in Rachels' words, "carefully sifts facts and examines their implications; who accepts

principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure they are sound":the Daode jingadmonish-

es the reader to emulate "the Way of Heaven," which is "good (shan) at planning" (chapter 73), and if

one's life is "planned" in accordance with wise principles, one will benefit, and others will benefit as well

(chapters 8, 81).

A "Golden Rule" in the Daode Jing? Self-Fulfillment vs. Self-Interest

As Danto illustrates, Taoism has traditionally been read in Confucian terms, i.e., in terms of a

supposed antagonism between laudable "concern for others" and contemptible "concern for self."His

charge that "Taoism seems to dissolve any relations we may have to one another and to replace them with

the relationship we have to the universe at large" is essentially the same charge leveled against

Buddhists, Taoists, and "heterodox" Confucians by Neo-Confucians since Zhu Xi (1130-1200). And Dan-

46I use the masculine pronoun here simply because as a matter of fact, if not intention, the ancient

reader of the Daode jing was male.

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to's charge that the issue in Taoism is "how to 'lose' the self" is an extension of the same charges.

If we now shed that tendentious stance, and simply read the Daode jingitself, the issue of "self"

takes on a very different cast. It is true that it asks the reader to understand life in terms of primordial

realities of which the writer of chapter 25 "does not yet know the name."47And some chapters do suggest

a process of biospiritual cultivation, i.e., a type of "meditation."Nonetheless, the text is clearly not

designed to be a manual for "Taoist meditation."In fact, we know just what such a manual would look like,

for we have it -- the Neiye. 48The Daode jing, though doubtless influenced by the Neiye in a variety of

ways, has a different set of concerns:rather than focussing upon a pursuit of spiritual states, the Daode

jingteaches practical lessons about the living of human life, and commends certain specific behavioral

patterns. Such patterns, it argues, will conduce to a long and natural life, a life in which one achieves self-

fulfillment asone is selflessly benefitting the lives of others.

The Daode jing'sparadoxical blend of "self-fulfillment" with "selflessness" has befuddled tradi-

tional Confucian readers and modern interpreters alike. Some modern efforts to interpret "Taoist thought"

have further muddled the issue by asserting an affiliation of the thought of the Daode jing(and brother

Zhuangzi) to the "egoism" of Yang Chu. Some have even labelled Yang's principles"proto-Daoism."49

But such characterizations make sense only within a Confucian frame of reference, and do not withstand

critical analysis.

The view that the Daode jinghas a Yangist substratum is based on a common misreading of the

closing lines of chapter 13. According to the received text, those lines are usually read as follows:

47Whereas the received text reads, wu bu zhi qi ming("I do not know its name"), the Mawangdui texts

both read, wu wei zhi qi ming("I have not yetcome to know its name"). The implication is that "it" is not

ultimately ineffable after all.

48One should note that when compared to the teachings of the Neiye, the suggestions for "medita-

tion" in the Daode jingare so vague as to seem unpracticeable.

49Hansen, p. 195.

Hence he who values his body more than dominion over the empire can be entrusted

with the empire. He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be

given the custody of the empire (Lau translation).

But there are several problems here. First of all, the parallelism in the received text is absent from the

Mawangdui texts:there, the first line is not gui i shen wei tian-xia, but rather gui wei shen yu tian-xia, which

Henricks renders as "one who values acting for himself over acting on behalf of the world."Interpreters

commonly assume that the issue here is an antagonism of interest:"acting for the world" is assumed to

stand in opposition to "acting for oneself."I question that assumption. The argument that the passage

commends acting to preserve one's own physical well-being is quite clearly refuted by the preceding

lines:there, one's "body/person/self" (shen) is valued negatively:not only is it a source of peril, but it is

the only conceivable source of peril. One's shenis not in any sense presented as a locus of positive

value. Indeed, far from arguing for valuing the "body/person/self," the chapter asks the reader to ponder

whether one would not be better off without it. Read in that context, the chapter's concluding lines would

logically suggest that the ruler ought to subordinate self-interest to the public interest, just as does Daode

jing78 (Henricks lines 9-10).

This is not the place for a full discussion of the political ideals of the Daode jing, but there is

abundant evidence that the text exhibits a coherent set of values relating to "self" and "other," and that it

commends a personal morality as well as a political theory. That morality is not the Christian Golden Rule of

"love others as you love yourself," nor is it the Confucian Golden Rule of "do not do unto others what you

yourself do not desire" (Analects 12:2, 15:24). Rather, it is, if you will, a "Laoist" Golden Rule:"proper

behavior will bring benefit to oneself as it brings benefit to others."The core issue here is not that of

facing a dilemma (do I love myself more, or do I love others more?) and making a choice. Perhaps Yang

Chu posed such a dilemma, but Yang did not write the Daode jing. 50

50Henricks (p. 212-13) interprets the passage in a Yangist sense, since it is quoted in a late chapter

of the Zhuangzi where the sense seems to be Yangist. But the fact remains that the person who wrote

I believe that Arthur Waley and Michael LaFargue are on the right track when they read chapter 13

as consisting of quotations from a "Yangist" source, with which the present writer is taking issue. 51Hence,

it would actually mean something like the following:

[You have heard it said that --]

"To one whose value (gui) is acting for self over acting for the world,

One may hand over the world";

[But verily, verilyI say unto you --]

To one whose (social) concern (ai) is using himself (in acting -- or non-acting) for the world,

One may entrust the world.52

This reading accords with the point of the rest of the chapter -- that thinking primarily of oneself is a disas-

trous and foolish course -- and with much of the rest of the text. For instance, chapter 72, employing the

same verbs found in the present lines, states that the Sage zi ai er bu zi gui, "is concerned about himself

but does not value himself."

One of the clearest, but most neglected, teachings of the Daode jingis that the reader should

behave like "the Sage" and like "the Dao," each of which acts (or non-acts) to benefit others with no

thought of self-benefit. The opening of chapter 8, for instance, reads:

the Zhuangzi passage is other than the person who wrote the Daode jingpassage, and there is no reason

to assume that what one person thought is the same as what the other person thought.

51See Michael LaFargue, The Tao of the Tao Te Ching(Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 40, 182;

and Arthur Waley, The Way and its Power(London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), p. 157. Waley and

LaFargue are apparently correct that the term ruo was originally a second-person pronoun, for the

Mawangdui B-text uses the pronoun ru in the second line. That fact, and the completely different gram-

matical structure of the two lines in the Mawangdui edition, lead one to believe that the first line is notan

expression of the writer's ownthought, but rather a quotation ("Yangist," if you like) which the writer is

attempting to use to re-direct the reader's perspective in a completely different direction.

52The yi/wei construction in the second line denotes "to use X in doing Y, or to use X for Y," and the

verb ai is used in the general sense of "concern or solicitude," as in Mohist discourse (though the overall

lesson here is decidedly non-Mohist).

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Superior goodness (shan) is like water:

Water is good (shan) at benefitting (li) the myriad things, and yet retains (its) tranquility.53

The reason that water is an apt image here is that it suggests a behavior that provides benefits for others

with no loss to oneself. The same connotation seems to be present in passages that liken "the Sage" or

"the Tao" to a selfless parentwho "gives birth to [the myriad things], nourishes them, matures them,

completes them, rests them, rears them, supports them, and protects them" (ch. 51, Henricks translation).

In such passages, it seems impossible to find Yangist sentiments. Rather, what we see here is a moral

idea, or rather a complex of moral ideas, at the core of which is the premise that living so as to benefit

others is in no way incompatible with one's own true fulfillment.

Here the idea of wuwei becomes pertinent, for the Daode jingis replete with passages that argue

along the following lines:

People constantly assume that they ought to act in their own self-interest, putting themselves

first, taking instead of giving, living or ruling or fighting with deliberate self-interest. Such assump-

tions are disastrously wrong. Fighters with such assumptions are killed (and kill others need-

lessly); rulers with such assumptions fall from power (and impoverish and oppress the people);

and anyone with such assumptions will actually undermine his own real interests, not only by hav-

ing his plans fail, but ultimately by dying a premature death (cf. chap. 50).

In regard to the Daode jing, at least, Arthur Danto is one-hundred-eighty degrees from the truth when he

says that in "Taoism...[the] happiness one is concerned with is one's own, logically independent of the

happiness of others."The Daode jingactually teaches the exact opposite:one who believes that he may

53The received text reads, er bu-zheng, "and does not compete."The Mawangdui A-text reads er

you jing, "and has tranquility," while the B-text read er you zheng, "and has competition."Henricks sug-

gests (272 n. 117) that the you in the B-text "is copy error for fu ('does not competewith them')."His sug-

gestion is plausible, but leaves other questions unanswered, such as whether the you in the A-text is also

a copy error (in which case its jing must also be an error). I shall assume that both texts are correct because

zheng is the phonetic element in jing, and can simply be read as the base character, the proper

denotation of which was more clearly indicated by the addition of a radicalin text A.

{page * arabic}

act as though his own self-interest matters and others' do not will suffer and fail. Paradoxically, true self-

fulfillment rests in overcoming the assumption that it is in one's best interest to act with self-interest; in fact,

it is in one's best interest to act without regard to self-interest.

Danto argued that "the Confucian," in contrast to "the Taoist," endorses and internalizes a "net-

work of demands and responsibilities...and yields to them, sacrificing or postponing his own happiness if

need be...."He is partly correct, for the Daode jingnever teaches that moral action means acting to bene-

fit others in such a way that one's own happiness is compromised. Rather, it insists that only by acting to

benefit otherscan one expect to achieve happiness. In fact, in the Daode jing, the two goals are logically

intertwined. "The Dao" and the "Sage" never think of themselves, they think only of others. And yet, by

so doing, they place themselves beyond the context in which others resent or compete with them, and

thereby win respect and honor (e.g., chap. 51). One's real fulfillment thus lies not in sacrificing one's own

happiness, any more than in blindly pursuing such happiness. Rather, one should act (or non-act) self-

lessly for the sake of others, and the results will include those rewards that are truly meaningful for oneself.

The editor of the received text may have sensed the importance of this lesson when he took the

present chapters 80-81 out from between chapters 66 and 67 (in the earlier Mawangdui edition), and

made the concluding lines of the Daode jingto read as follows:

The sage does not hoard.

Having bestowed all he has on others, he has yet more;

Having given all he has to others, he is richer still.

The Way of Heaven benefits and does not harm;

The Way of the Sage is bountiful and does not contend.54

54Lau translation, capitalizations added. Peerenboom seems to arrive at a similar insight when he

states that the sage "seeks his own fulfillment in and through that of others...[because] in interpersonal

transactions the gain of one need not entail the loss of another" (186-87). But much of the rest of his

An Apophatic Morality? Self-Restraint on Behalf of the World

Clearly, the reader of the Daode jingis expected to recognize, and learn from, a key paradox:

To yield is to be preserved whole.

To be bent is to become straight.

To be empty is to be full.

To be worn out is to be renewed.

To have little is to possess (chap. 22; Chan translation).

In sum, to forego one's apparent self-interest leads to true self-fulfillment.

Some may ask how such an ideal may have evolved among those who composed the Daode jing.

The answer depends on one's idea of who those people were. One view (Confucio-centric to the core)

holds that "the Taoists" were simply people who found reason to criticize the Confucians:they were

merely individuals who, like Mozi, heard the Confucian gospel and found fault with it. At present, howev-

er, the most serious research notes the profound correlations between the Daode jingand earlier texts

like the Neiye, which seem to have originated in a community that shared specific practices of biospiritual

cultivation.55To read the Daode jingas "a philosophical text" in the sense of an exposition of speculative

ideas divorced from the living of one's actual life is to misunderstand it (as, indeed, it would be to read

Confucius or Mozi or Mengzi in that manner). So if the Daode jingis to be read as a product of parties who

emerged from a community like that which produced the Neiye, one must ask whether and how its moral

ideals correlate with the cultivational practices characteristic of such a community.

I contend that the moral teachings of the Daode jingcan indeed be explained, to some extent, in

terms of the cultivational practices outlined in texts like the Neiye. However, I shall not contend that such

interpretation seems excessively idealized and communitarian.

55See above, note *15*.

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an explanation is either necessary or sufficient for making sense of the Daode jing. In other words, I

believe that the morality of the Daode jingcan be meaningfully understood as "an apophatic morality," but

that it must ultimately be understood in a different context as well.

The thematic continuities linking apophatic cultivation and the ideals of the Daode jingare fairly

clear. The general teaching of the apophatic tradition is that the practitioner should empty her/himself of

excessive internal activity:it "involves the progressive emptying out of the usual contents of conscious-

ness -- thoughts, feelings, desires -- through an inner contemplative process..."56The composer of the

Daode jing, I propose, considered its moral teachings to be harmonious with such practices, and may even

have considered them a natural extension of those practices, though the evidence to support the latter

conclusion is scanty.

The common link between apophatic self-cultivation and proper moral behavior would seem to be

the ideal of learning to practice what we might call "enlightened self-restraint."In apophatic meditation,

one learns to quiet the heart/mind, because its "usual contents" hamper one's efforts to attract and assimi-

late the forces that conduce to a full and healthy life. Thus, the wise practitioner pursues his true

fulfillment by exercising enlightened restraint regarding the "thoughts, feelings, desires" that people

generally mistake to be indicators of what they should have or do (i.e, as indicators of how to achieve their

self-interest).

The moral teachings -- and indeed the political teachings -- of the Daode jingcan readily be inter-

preted as an extension of such a pursuit. For instance, the concluding lines of chapter 64 read:

Therefore the sage desires not to desire, and does not value products that are hard to obtain;

He learns not to learn, and returns to what the multitudes have passed by;

He is able to enhance the myriad things' being as they are (ziran), and does not dare to act.57

56Harold D. Roth, "Evidence for Meditative Stages in Early Taoism," Bulletin of the School of Oriental

and African Studies60 (1997), 295-314.

57The texts hardly differ at all here. Henricks argues (p. 150) that in the final line of the Mawangdui

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Here, "the sage" can be read as an ideal for the wise individual. But a passage in chapter 3, similar in both

thought and construction, indicates that these ideals are appropriate for a person who governs:

Therefore the governing of the sage is to empty his/her/their heart/mind, fill his/her/their belly,

weaken his/her/their will, and strengthen his/her/their bones. He is constant in causing the

people to be without thought and without desire. He causes those who have thought not to dare

to act, and that is all. In this manner, there is nothing not governed.58

Here, the political ideal is a ruler who figuratively extends the processes involved in apophatic cultivation.

This is clearly not self-cultivation, but rather "other-cultivation."And yet, the contents of the process are

strikingly similar, beginning with the goal of "emptying the heart/mind" (xu xin) and continuing through the

goals of minimizing thought and desire.59

text the negative fu ("not X it"), instead of pu ("not X"), means that it should read, "He could help all things

to be natural, yet he dare not do it."Even if we accept the Mawangdui reading (which I am inclined to do), I

am not convinced that Henricks' interpretation is correct. For one thing, it requires the conjunctive er to

carry a reversive sense in the last line (he...and yet...) that it clearly does not carry in the first two lines,

even as Henricks reads them. Secondly, I am unconvinced that wei should be read as shorthand for the

action (or non-action) indicated in the first clause. Since many passages explain how the sage "acts

without action," it seems quite possible to infer precisely such non-active behavior on the part of the sage

in the first clause. Hence both the grammar and the general teachings of the text seem to suggest that

the final words should be read as meaning the same as the words bugan weifound in the received text.

Indeed, Henricks himself reads fugan weiin precisely this sense in a parallel construction in chapter 3 (p.

192).

58In the first line, the pronominal qi is generally read as meaning "the people's...," as in the following

lines, but such an assumption may not be justified. The line can also be logically read as meaning that the

sage "empties his heart/mind...," and that such apophatic therapy provides appropriate preparation for

achieving the goals laid out in the following lines. The chapter's opening lines, however, do not seem to

support such an interpretation.

59If we read zhi as "thought," not "knowledge," the entire passage loses its notorious "Legalist over-

tones."But it remains unclear how one could cause other people to "be without thought and without

desire."Prima facie, such an extension of apophatic ideals into the political sphere seems out of accord

with the assumptions behind the Neiye's practice of self-cultivation, i.e., that each person must cultivate

him/herself, in an "inner" process. Clearly, there were different concepts of self-cultivation among its

proponents in ancient China. Even Mencius began with many of the same assumptions, and added

others (e.g., the importance of acts of moral rightness), so that the cultivation of one's personal ch'i made

sense (at least to him) in terms of the inherited Confucian moral scheme (see Mengzi 2A.2).

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Much of the Daode jing commends self-restraintas the keybehavioral ideal (as in the final lines of

chapter 64, discussed above). Numerous chapters suggest that one should practice self-restraint, in

seeking satisfaction of personal desires as well as in seeking credit or praise from others. Various terms,

from different sections of the text, all seem to suggest "self-restraint."One is the phrase zhizu, "knowing

when things are sufficient," found in chapter 44 as well as in chapter 46, where we read something like the

following:

Among misdeeds, there is none greater than having things that one desires (to have or do);

Among excesses, there is none greater than not knowing when things are sufficient;

Among misfortunes, there is none greater than desiring to obtain.

So the sufficiency of knowing when things are sufficient (zhizu) is a lasting sufficiency.60

Chapter 33 adds, "one who knows when things are sufficient (zhizu) is rich."A related phrase is zhizhi,

"knowing when to stop," which seems to connote not just knowing when things are truly well as they are,

but knowing when not to go forward with a personal desire or intention (chapters 32 and 44).

An even clearer expression of these ideas is the phrase bugan, "not daring or venturing (to do

X)."It appears in two passages (chapters 30 and 69) that explain how to conduct warfare with proper

restraint. But it is more generally used in a broader context, as seen above in relation to chapter 64 (in

which the sage "does not dare to act") and chapter 3 (in which he "causes those who have thought not to

dare to act"). A somewhat ambiguous usage appears in chapter 73:"If one is courageous in dar-

ing/venturing, there will be killing; If one is courageous in notdaring/venturing, there will be life." 61But the

60The text here is slightly uncertain, because the first line is not present in the received text, and

significant portions of the the subsequent lines are missing in the fragmentary Mawangdui texts.

61Interpreters since Wang Bi have read the final verbs as passive:"one who is brave in daring will be

killed; one who is brave in not daring will stay alive."But there is nothing in the passage that leads logically

to such a reading, and several facts suggest otherwise. First of all, reading the verbs in the active voice is

the most natural reading. Secondly, if the first verb really meant suffering death (rather than inflicting it),

one would expect the verb si, "to die," not sha, "to kill."Thirdly, there is nothing else in the present

chapter (or, for that matter, in the chapters preceding or following it) suggesting a goal of "staying alive."

But the subsequent chapter does warn against inflicting death upon others. I have therefore rendered

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clearest indication of the meaning of bugan may be seen in chapter 67:

I constantly have three treasures:

Hold onto them and treasure them.

The first is called "compassion" (zi).

The second is called "restraint."62

The third is "not daring to be at the forefront of the world."

Now being compassionate, one can be courageous.

Being restrained, one can be expansive.

Not daring to be at the forefront of the world, one can be the leader of the things that are com

pleted.63

Each of the "three treasures" is a behavioral ideal. It is noteworthy that the second and third both enjoin

the person to hold himself back, to practice self-restraint. But it is also noteworthy that the first is an

attitude of positive concern for others. 64While the precise sense of the passage is open to argument, one

plausible interpretation would be as follows:"having the courage to hold back in regard to one's

ideas/feelings concerning one's own self-interest makes it possible for one to be courageous in expand-

ing oneself in compassionate regard for others."Such a reading would be consistent with the sense of

the lines as grammar and context suggest, and left the meaning ambiguous.

62Apparently based on Wang Bi's comment, virtually all translators render jian here as "frugality,"

which makes little sense: it is hard to think of other passages that commend any behavior in economic

terms, or of a sensible explanation of such a commendation. According to Karlgren (Grammata Serica

Recensa#613e), jian carried the original meaning of "restrict" or "restricted," and in this passage such a

usage can be readily explained. It seems intriguing that the term appears nowhere else in the text.

63For the final line, I follow the Mawangdui texts, which have a wei before cheng, indicating that

cheng is not a verb ("to become"), but rather a modifier of qi. Most translators insist on reading a political

reference into this line, for no good reason that I can surmise, save that traditional commentators liked to

find such references. We must remember that such commentators were from a tradition that could not

read early Zhou folk songs without interpreting them as advice for the ruler.

64On this teaching, and its endurance in later Taoism, see further "The Roots of Altruism in the Taoist

Tradition."

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most of the passages discussed above.

It should also be noted that the ideal of "enlightened self-restraint" in the Daode jingis far from any

notion of "losing the self":it is not a teaching of self-abasement or self-sacrifice. In Taoism generally,

there is seldom any notion that it is proper to relinquish what is good or necessary for one's own well-be-

ing.65In the Daode jing, there is no ascetic ideal, and no implication that one's personal reality is in any

sense unreal or unworthy. Rather, the Daode jingseeks to alert the reader to the benefits that both self

and otherswill enjoy if one is perceptive enough and humble enough to forego short-sighted pursuit of

self-interest. It urges one to neglect neither self nor others, to pursue an enlightened life-orientation

wherein

Having bestowed all he has on others, he has yet more;

Having given all he has to others, he is richer still.

The Way of Heaven benefits and does not harm;

The Way of the Sage is bountiful and does not contend (ch. 81).

In practicing apophatic "inner cultivation," one empties oneself of what is unhealthy (viz., what is

individually produced) in order to fill oneself with what is healthy and fulfilling (viz., what one shares with all

of life). In a figurative sense, the Daode jingcommends a morality that consists of a similar process. But is

65Readers of the late-imperial "Taoist novel," Qizhen zhuan(translated by Eva Wong as Seven Taoist

Masters; Boston: Shambhala, 1991) might retort that self-sacrifice is a theme of that novel:in one episode

a character even sacrifices her beauty by disfiguring her face. But readers must bear in mind that the novel

is fiction:there is actually no good reason to believe that any Taoist woman ever really maimed herself for

religious purposes. That idea evidently arose in the mind of the anonymous novelist, and cannot be

shown to reflect the beliefs or values of anyone other than himself. For the realities of women in Taoism,

see my entry in Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion(New York: Macmillan, in press). In real life,

Taoism, in all its forms, characteristically commends self-cultivation, not self-sacrifice. What could be said is

that many forms require self-disciplineas a prerequisite to self-fulfillment. See, e.g, the materials analyzed

in Kirkland, "The Making of an Immortal: The Exaltation of Ho Chih-chang," Numen 38 (1991-92),

201-214. And such expectations of self-discipline were quite consistent with what we find here in the

Daode jing.

this the most complete and satisfying explanation of the Daode jing's moral ideals?

I believe that other factors should also be considered.66Elsewhere I have published a recon-

struction of the process by which I believe the Daode jingmay have come into existence. In brief, I believe

that it was composed/redacted by an immigrant from a rural community (possibly in Chu), who found that

the teachings of the elders ("laozi") of his native community could be turned into arguments in the socio-

political debates that were raging in the political centers of north China when he arrived there.67To me,

this interpretation seems to allow for a more natural explanation of elements of the Daode jing'sthought

than do the more traditional interpretations.

For instance, the Daode jingenjoins foregoing reputation in favor of anonymity. While one could

posit some unknown thinker who held such a view, it seems much more easily explained in terms of the

values of a traditional small-scale community, in which wisdom is dispensed orally without claims of

authorship. In such a community -- found in nonliterate societies and in rural components of literate

societies, even today -- assertive people are generally regarded as troublemakers, and individualism is

generally discouraged. In such a community, "the good" lies in acquiescence to traditional social and

cultural patterns, never in individual assertion or innovation. Such societies strive to preserve their

inherited patterns because those patterns have withstood the test of time. Rather than being driven by

notions of "progress," they are generally informed by mythic traditions, in terms of which people in each

generation are taught to understand their lives. Those models are often presented as being grounded in

profound divine realities, so they are held to be not merely authoritative, but actually socially binding, for it

is assumed that any conscious attempt to follow a different course constitutes a deviance that is

dangerous, not only to the initiator of the innovation, but actually to the entire society. In fact, it is in such a

66The ideas presented in this section were first presented at a meeting of the Society for Asian and

Comparative Philosophy, held in conjunction with the 1994 annual meeting of the American Philosophical

Association, Central Region.

67See "Book of the Way."It seems likely that several hands were actually involved, but in the present

context I will, for simplicity's sake, conflate them into a single "composer."

society's interest to persuade those in each generation to forego individual desires and ambitions, to

eschew assertive behavior, and to seek personal fulfillment in the deeper realities in which the society's

traditions are conceived to be grounded.

Within such a context, the moral values of the Daode jingseem entirely at home. Its ideal is

someone who forgoes the temptation to seek individual advancement, and the temptation to fiddle with

things. And the moral ideal in the Daode jingis someone who practices self-restraint, sublimating self-

interest for the good of the whole, thereby achieving real fulfillment. The composer even shows how

such ideals could be applied to the political problems that occupied most other thinkers of his day.

But what, one might ask, of the apophatic practices to which the Daode jingalludes? Clearly, as

least some of the people involved in compiling the text were familiar with such practices, and regarded

them as useful. But, to judge from texts like the Neiye, the apophatic tradition did not reify the force called

daoas a cosmic reality that is characterized by "motherly" behavior, i.e., living selflessly for the benefit of

others. And certainly, such imagery was alien to the use of the term dao as it was employed by the other

schools of classical China. So I propose that the Daode jing'sideal of moral goodness arose not, in the

first instance, from a critique of Confucian or Mohist ideals, nor from practices of apophatic self-cultivation.

Rather, I propose that those ideals represent a vestige of the community values taught by the laozi "back

home," and that the text's final redactor found those "motherly" ideals to be harmonious both with his

interest in apophatic self-cultivation and with his interest in articulating an alternative to the arguments of

the Confucians and the other contending schools of classical China.

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