

Ethics Without Domination : A Taoist Framework

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Abstract

Eastern philosophy, with its deep-rooted and powerful tradition, awaits discovery. While we welcome the recent increase in studies on this subject, it should be noted that a significant gap remains. Especially regarding the relationship between nature and humanity, and the subject's self-positioning within this relationship, this tradition offers a very different perspective compared to Western philosophy. In this respect, Tao and Taoism aim to create an ontologically based ethical awareness through culturally and perspective-specific concepts. This article examines the fundamental concepts of Tao philosophy, addressing the effects of this thought system on nature awareness and moral attitudes through an interdisciplinary approach. Taoism is a deeply rooted Chinese thought tradition that evaluates the relationship between humanity and nature within an ontological and ethical framework. This study analyzes the theoretical framework offered by the Taoist worldview regarding environmental awareness, the limits of human action, and moral self-regulation, centering on the concepts of *wu wei* and *ziran* (naturalness). Ultimately, it argues that Taoist philosophy offers original and contemporary contributions to ongoing ethical and environmental debates, such as modern environmental ethics and coexistence.

Keywords: Taoism, *wu wei*, nature, environmental ethics, moral ontology.

Introduction

Eastern philosophy, with all its allure, is prominently displayed in the Western world. This situation, paradoxically, stems from the brilliance of its unpretentiousness. Eastern philosophy's aversion to ornate, ego-laden, and condescending pronouncements is somewhat at odds with the West's self-positioning as the cradle or founder of civilization. The West may rightfully take pride in its success in producing a strong tradition in this regard. However, the underlying reason for this attitude can be found in the fact that when wisdom or knowledge is discussed in ancient Indian and Chinese philosophy, this school of thought interrupts the relationship with knowledge at a certain point. Taoist thought, which is the focus of this study, is a particularly striking example in this sense. Even the statement "Tao is unknowable" implies that an explanation based on knowledge would lead to a kind of impasse in this teaching. Even trying to define Tao would be a futile endeavor. It would even be considered foolish. Lao Tse, in a traditional and ancient sense, advocates a kind of non-interference, non-disruption, or non-alteration. With his teachings defined as, he emphasized esoteric intuition more. This

understanding is not explicit enough to be transmitted to others, it is not highlighted, excessively valued, or placed above others as an absolute virtue (Chan, 2014). Expert opinions here suggest that Taoism is a sign of opposition to Confucianism. However, some discussions, such as Störig's, suggest that the two great thinkers clashed and spoke highly of each other. However, it can be argued that this conflict became more pronounced in later eras (Störig, 2013). However, it is also true that both views define humanity and nature from different perspectives. Confucius preferred to stand in the Golden Mean and was a thinker directly involved in politics. In this sense, he has a more subject-oriented structure and, according to Taoist philosophy, emphasizes a social principle that proposes to regulate nature relatively according to oneself. Tzu, a prominent thinker in Chinese philosophy, and Taoist philosophy indicates that this teaching preferred to remain secret even in practice. Even the unique book, *the Tao Te Ching*, is said to have been written at the request of a customs officer. Taoist philosophy is a system of thought with origins dating back to the 6th century BC, whose core texts are the *Tao Te Ching* (Laozi) and Zhuangzi. This philosophy interprets existence through the harmony of opposites and the principle of constant transformation. This contrast is emphasized so strongly in the texts that it almost contradicts the principle of identity, a principle of logic. As can be re-evaluated when directly referenced within the text, it contains expressions such as "darkness is light," "low is high," and "virtue is vice." However, this refers to the delicate nature of all concepts, including virtue, which are susceptible to transformation into their opposites (Blofeld, 1979). The crucial starting point for this study is the fragile nature of nature's spontaneous order. Accordingly, a mindset that 'desires to dominate nature' will be unable to comprehend it as it is and will necessarily transform it. Clearly, ethics here rests on an ontological foundation. Nature, possessing self-sufficiency, deserves to be treated as a living entity. While most Western-centric ethical theories position humanity as a subject that dominates or instrumentalizes nature, Taoism considers humanity an integral part of nature. This approach argues that moral attitudes are directly linked not only to social relations but also to the human-nature relationship. Indeed, it posits that the fundamental connection occurs through this unmediated and pure communication(Wang, 2023). The teleological explanation, centering the subject on itself and its society, suggests that those who are different can be used for this purpose. The ultimate understanding of human essence and the advantage of possessing reason creates destruction in nature.

The aim of this article is to systematically examine the Taoist understanding of nature consciousness and its reflections on moral attitudes. In this context, both the descriptive (ontological) and normative (ethical) dimensions of Taoist thought will be evaluated. A specific

methodology and various related concepts will be highlighted. The analysis will be structured around three main claims. Firstly, it will be shown that Taoist ontology conceives of the human-nature relationship as a non-hierarchical whole, adopting an animistic approach to nature. Secondly, it will be argued that the Taoist ethical understanding is based on the principle of contextual appropriateness rather than normative rule-following. Finally, it will be claimed that this approach offers a rationally defensible alternative in terms of environmental ethics and is viable for correcting the behavior of humans, the only living beings that are driving the world towards disaster.

The above claim is possible under several important concepts belonging to Taoist philosophy. The one that deserves more attention is *wu wei*. *Wu Wei*, often mistakenly interpreted as passivity, actually means non-coercive action that does not go against the flow of nature. From a Taoist ethical perspective, a moral stance is a form of behavior in which intentional interventions are minimized and spontaneity is preserved. *Ziran* means "spontaneous" or "natural state". In Taoist thought, both nature and humanity exist in a state of *ziran* in the ideal condition. Moral corruption arises when humanity deviates from its own natural state and turns to artificial norms and excessive interventions. Therefore, Taoist ethics views morality not as a set of external rules, but as a state of internal balance. In this context, the fundamental problem is: Are moral norms rules that human reason imposes externally on nature, or are they principles derived from humanity's correct understanding of its position within universal processes? This is clearly a fundamental distinction that reveals the difference between intervention and adaptation.

1. General Characteristics of Tao Philosophy

Taoist philosophy is a teaching with metaphysical origins in Chinese philosophy. It is claimed that there is an influence from Indian philosophy and a debate continues regarding the extent of this influence. However, it is common to find metaphysical and ontological views regarding nature and living beings, as observed in Indian philosophy, in Taoist philosophy. In this respect, Taoist philosophy, instead of being a practical and social interest seen in China, has formed a purely philosophical and esoteric thought or belief system. As is frequently encountered in texts on the history of philosophy, Confucius and Confucianism and Mo Tse and Mohism are practice-oriented. Indeed, the latter is pragmatic. This view, which advocates for the well-being of the people, considers abundance, peace, and the practical utility of things beyond their inherent nature. This perspective represents an exceptional enlightenment for the Chinese people, who were focused on practical social problems and not in a speculative intellectual climate. Indeed, Daitsez Teitaro Suzuki, unable to conceal his praise on this matter, points out

that the *Tao Te Ching* alone would be sufficient to expose the misconception that the Chinese people are not prone to speculation. He then argues that this idea is far superior to its counterparts in Western philosophy (Suzuki, 1908). However, the doctrine also experiences a serious contrast with the Western tradition. The Western intellectual tradition embraces epistemology and thereby brings moral judgment to a conclusion. However, Tao philosophy expects the individual to be rational, but insists that Tao also requires a mystical experience beyond the limits of reason. However, a great danger for teachings that lose their connection with truth and reality is to become mere rhetoric. Such teachings clearly become their opposite by advocating subjective experience and an ascetic life in opposition to ostentation and extravagance. However, it should be noted that, conversely, the belief in the afterlife is not prominent in Tao philosophy. It doesn't even portray an ideal of an ascetic dervish as in Indian philosophy. The easiest way to understand this view closely is to analyze its ontological understanding.

The *Tao Te Ching* offer insights into how an individual should be. According to these verses, a sensible or wise person- perhaps one might call a virtuous person- should possess abilities such as deep insight, clarity of intuition, or open-mindedness. This enables them to recognize and understand the Tao and determine how it governs or moves all things (Laozi, 2004). For Lao Tzu, deep insight is a form of meditation, but it excludes *zhi*, which in the Confucian practical tradition refers to intelligence, knowledge, and political acumen (Suzuki, 1908).

Lao Tse emphasizes naturalness as the most important attitude of wisdom within Taoism. Standing out, separating oneself, prepares one's own downfall. It is best not to feel that anything belongs to oneself. One who becomes attached to objects has taken a step towards loss. However, according to Taoist philosophy, a wise person realizes this, lives spontaneously, is natural, does not stand out, and does not become excessively attached to anything. Furthermore, because one does not cling tightly, according to this teaching, there is no loss (Laozi, 1988, lxiv). According to Taoist thought, everything has a nature. It is appropriate to live within this natural state. As Laozi states, "He who seeks to rectify what is corrupted will draw a cloud over his own virtue and will no longer spread it over everything. If he forces it to spread, then things will inevitably lose their original nature." (Laozi, 1988).

Lao Tse's early claims seem to be somewhat confusing. While his proposals for a cosmology, ontology, or even an ethic are not very clear, they are intuitively graspable. However, this ambiguity evolved into a view of evolution in his early years, in keeping with his cosmology. In later eras, this view also transformed into a kind of pantheism.

2. Wu Wei and the Ethical Limits of Action

The concept of wu wei is central to Taoist ethics and should be understood not as inaction in the classical sense, but as action free from coercive intervention. What is at stake here is an ethical limitation developed in opposition to the absolutization of the will. According to Taoist thought, the problem is not the action itself, but the performance of the action despite the flow of the Tao. The Tao is mysterious, yet it is a gateway to the essence of life. It is not clear, distinct, or fixed, but it is the law of all things. One must strive to enter this path naturally. This is expressed in the Tao text as follows: "Tao (The Way) that can be spoken of is not the Constant Tao'. The name that can be named is not a Constant Name. Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; The named is the mother of all things. Thus, the constant void enables what's that to observe the true essence. The constant being enables what's that to see the outward manifestations. These two come paired from the same origin . But when the essence is manifested, it has a different name. this same origin is called "The Profound Mystery." As profound the mystery as It can be, It is the Gate to the essence of all life." (Laozi, 1988).

In this context, wu wei means the withdrawal of the ethical subject. Instead of making the world the object of their own projects, the subject follows the inherent orientations of situationality. Thus, moral attitude arises not from obedience to an external command, but from sensitivity to the rhythm of existence. This expression and understanding is very clear in the Tao texts. The wise person is one who comprehends nature without taking action, without transforming, penetrating, or struggling with nature. They understand, create, and cultivate this mysterious nature without possessing it. The mystical path of Tao is expressed in the sacred texts as follows: "Can one gain the insight of nature and become a wise person without the effort of action? The mysterious nature creates and nurtures all things without the desire to possess them. It performs with all efforts without claiming for credit. It flourishes all beings without the intention to take control of Such is the "Mystic Te" or "Mystic Virtue." (Laozi, 1988).

The natural state of being is one that is not forced upon oneself, not shaped according to an external norm. In the case of humans, ziran refers to an ideal of simplicity and moderation beyond cultural excesses and artificial value systems. The paradox of Taoist ethics is this: one does not have to strive to be moral in order to be moral. Because conscious moralism is often a sign of deviation from the Tao. Therefore, Taoism considers virtue not as a calculable pattern of behavior, but as a byproduct of spontaneity.

Taoist ethics distances itself from the idea of universal commands found in most normative systems. Moral attitude is not the application of abstract principles, but a practice of balance

that considers context, relationship, and time. In this respect, Taoism grounds ethical thought around the concept of wisdom rather than rigid rules.

Humility, temperance, and avoidance of power stand out as the fundamental virtues of Taoist ethics. These virtues aim at existential harmony rather than a desire for individual perfection them, experiencing the holistic oneness of the universe and achieving peace in nature was seen as a far more meaningful pursuit than fighting and striving for superiority. Thus, the developing Taoist literature gradually became established and showed many generations the importance of peaceful inner peace. “The most important of these works is the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tse. This teaching can be called the "Effective Way", “teaching”, because Tao=Way and Te=Effective”.

Clearly, Taoism emphasizes tranquility beyond mere naturalness, naturalness in the face of society. The universe is older. Nature, therefore, gave rise to humanity. Although clearly a part of it, humanity has also engaged in a kind of struggle. Taoism, in its definition, reveals this ancient order of priority and the inner struggle of humanity: “Before the Formation of Heaven and earth, there was something formless yet indivisible unity. Extremely silent and still. A creative primordial power, alone yet full of infinite possibilities. I don't know its name, but if I had to Give it a name, I would Call it Tao. If I had to I would describe it. call it "the" Sublime.” Tao is so sublime that it continues endlessly and returns to itself .” (Laozi, 1988).

First, in Taoist philosophy, the possibility of ontological equality must be discussed in order to arrive at an ethical decision. This view is a strong opposition to metaphysics, which separates itself from nature and asserts its superiority by creating a kind of dilemma. This distinction between strong and weak, intelligent and unintelligent, or sentient and unsent, is a kind of delusion. This perspective undermines equality in the face of nature. Clearly, this view is also problematic from the perspective of environmental ethics. Ke argues the following on this subject: “The essence of Taoist thought is that all things are equal, that is, human values are the same as all things, and there is no distinction between advanced species and low-level species. Taoist usually Consider it as inaction, namely do nothing at will. only by standing on this perspective can we see the relationship between Man and nature more thoroughly The Taoist concept of harmony of the unity of man and nature, maintaining the harmony between Man and nature, and jointly building ecological balance are of reference significance for contemporary social development. It makes China adhere to scientific and sustainable development and provides scientific guidance for us to correctly handle the relationship between Man and Nature. Only when the ecology achieves balanced development, can human beings live in harmony, and only when looking forward to the future can ecological balance be maintained.” (Ke, 2023, p. 96).

An anxious approach to nature desires to transcend and conquer it. Because this perspective creates a powerful dualism. It is a place to be transcended, transformed, adapted, and purged of its wildness. But this is a kind of intellectual paralysis. It is a struggle between silence, harmony, and the necessary or desired nature. The concept that best explains this is *wu wei*'dir. For example, "Wu wei is the cultivation of the mental state in which our actions are quite effortless in alignment with the law of life. This is going with the law, although it may be greatly productive, is still characterized by great ease where we spontaneously act perfectly. These often-quoted words denoting the Taoist doctrine of *wu wei* should not be taken literally to mean inertia, laziness, *laissez-faire*, or mere passivity. *Wu wei* can be generally defined as the act of following the natural order following in the current of Tao, something that refers to as "refraining from activity contrary to nature." (Sankheangaew, 2023, p. 27) .

Wu Wei is not passivity and should not be understood as a completely ascetic life. Although at certain times in history this view has been understood as a kind of reclusiveness, a withdrawal from society, it is a kind of living immortality while alive. This clearly implies naturalness. It implies this not only in an individual sense but also in a political sense. Morally, one should follow nature and allow individuals to know themselves. The advice to rulers is to leave things alone. A kind of *laissez-faire* advice is prominent. Those who fight against their nature will not emerge victorious from this struggle. Therefore, humanity must see nature as a whole. Thus, this kind of attitude towards nature and peace will make people happy. As emphasized in Taoist philosophy, guiding individuals to live in accordance with their nature will make a painless old age and death a normal occurrence. Nature and everything are a whole. They nourish and sustain each other. Therefore, it is necessary to stay away from an interventionist attitude.

Humans don't necessarily have to interfere with nature to progress. They can grow alongside it. They don't have to dominate it. Even Lao Tzu uses the example of water here. Because water is in harmony with its nature. It appears below but is above. It seems weak but is strong. In fact, it lives in accordance with its nature. Humans should be aware of this. The virtuous are unpretentious, humble, flow downwards, are alongside the wicked but separate from them. Just as the Taoist philosophy illustrates with the example of water: "(...) A virtuous person is like water which adapts itself to the perfect place. His mind is like the deep water that is calm and Peaceful. His heart is kind. like water that benefits all. His words are sincere like the constant flow of water His governing is natural without desire which is like the softness of water that penetrates through hard rocks. His work is talent like the free flow of water His movement is right timing like water that flows smoothly. A virtuous person never forces his way and hence will not make faults." (Laozi, 1988).

A happy life is not, as in the Sisyphus myth, "constantly trying to move a rock against nature, preoccupied with one's own anxieties." Rather, it is being aware of what one is capable of. It is being aware of a higher law (Tao) and living in accordance with it. Therefore, growing by interfering too much with nature signifies the end of humanity and the hope of life. Clearly, Ke expressed this awareness as follows: "...It also guides people to achieve the goal of true self-worth and happy life. The training of virtues in virtue education needs to follow the natural growth of virtue life. As Lao Tzu said, although everything is in different states, the Environment can make them grow. Taoism is precious . because Taoism has achieved growth without interference. The result of the growth and development of all things and the result of protecting them are not occupied by themselves. These are all revealing the significance of the growth of all things." (Ke, 2023, p. 97) .

According to Taoist philosophy, who is wise? And in this context, who is happy or deserves to be happy? "One who knows other People are wise. One who knows He himself is enlightened. To overcome Others is strong. To overcome oneself is the will of power. One who is content is rich. What's that who is determined has the strength of will. Those who embrace their true nature shall long live. He who is enlightened with the original nature, although dies physically, is eternally United with the everlasting Tao." (Laozi, 1988).

This perspective should also be reflected in society and state governance. Leaders, if it is not an exaggeration to say so, should only be examples. They should strive for simplicity and abandon ostentation. They should understand nature. To do this, they must know the Tao and act accordingly. Because everything conforms to the Tao. As Lao Tzu emphatically stressed: "One who assists the ruler with the principle of Tao, Will not use the force of arms to conquer the world. For such affairs will result in cause and effect. Wherever the armies touch the land, it is turned into a wasteland of thorns and brambles. After a war is fought, bad years are sure to follow. Therefore, one who follows the true nature will understand the principle of cause and effect and shall not rely upon the strength of force. By knowing the effect, thus what's that will not brag. By knowing the effect, thus what's that will not boast. By knowing the effect, thus what's that will not become arrogant." (Laozi, 1988).

A leader should refrain from enacting too many laws. Too many laws create confusion. Too much knowledge increases confusion and suppresses harmony. Taoist philosophy highlights this confusion as follows: "If there are too many taboos and prohibitions in the world, people become rebellious. If the people possess sharp weapons, chaos increases in the state and families. If the people are too knowledgeable, oddities arise. If laws are too explicitly stated, thieves and bandits increase. That is why the wise Man says: I do not act, and the people change

on their own. I love stillness, and the people find the right path on their own. I do not pursue work and power, and the people succeed on their own. I am devoid of desire, and the people turn to simplicity on their "own." (Laozi, 1988). Consequently, Taoist philosophy can be considered not only a historical intellectual tradition but also a conceptual resource that can contribute to contemporary discussions in ethics and environmental philosophy.

In conclusion, it can be said that, "The wise man is calm, but not because he claims that calmness is good. Ten thousand things cannot disturb his peace of mind or tranquility; he is so calm. When water is calm, one can see the finest hairs on one's temples in its clarity. Its surface is smooth, and great artists derive their measurements from it. If water is so clear when calm, imagine how calm the human soul is. The wise man's calm soul is the crystal veil of heaven and earth and the mirror of ten thousand things" (xii, 1).

3. Taoism in the Context of Modern Ethics and Environmental Debates

For the modern human being, the moral world is based on utility. Accordingly, things have a kind of usefulness value. As James puts it, this view, which follows the results or fruits, has considered everything as adaptable or transformable around desires. This anti-ontology, which does not care about the nature of objects, only suggests possessing and using. Clearly, this view encourages humans to destroy the environment. Taoist philosophy is the complete opposite of this view. This perspective is opposed to the subject's effort toward ownership or acquisition. So much so that, "The greatest crime is to have too much desire. The greatest disaster is not to find contentment. The greatest mistake is to desire for endless possession. Hence, when one is gratified with self-contentment, True contentment can then long endure." (Laozi, 1988).

Today, problems such as climate change, biodiversity decline, and ecological destruction necessitate a rethinking of the ethical dimension of humanity's relationship with nature. Taoist philosophy offers a holistic framework for environmental ethics by replacing the paradigm of dominating nature with the principle of harmony and limitation. The Taoist approach treats the concept of sustainability not only as a technical problem but also as a moral and ontological issue. In this respect, Taoism provides an ethical foundation that complements, rather than contradicts, the data offered by modern science (Yang, 2012). Contemporary discussions of environmental ethics point to the unlimited power of the modern subject over nature. More precisely, they demand that this power be evaluated within limits and in a sustainable framework that serves its own benefit. Faced with the destructive actions of the subject -such as dwindling natural resources, a significant shortage of water, air pollution, and the destruction of green spaces- present day environmental ethics only highlight the chaotic situation due to the intensity of this exploitation. Accordingly, it is proposed that nature be left to its own

devices, as the threat to humanity's future has jumped from nature to itself. Too much intervention shortens the lifespan. However, Taoist philosophy approaches everything, living and non-living, with respect. It proposes a protective action towards every object that deserves ontological equality and moral treatment. Therefore, it does not need much and thus does not harbor deep ambitions. This perspective naturally offers an important experience for predicting the future of the earth and the universe and for a sustainable relationship.

The Taoist approach, Aldo Leopold's earth/land ethic, or Arne Naess's profound understanding of ecology. Leopold (1970) suggests that humans should treat nature with sensitivity, and even act in the same way they would expect to be treated themselves. Furthermore, the privileged relationship between humans and nature has not yet been terminated. Humans need an equal ethical contact not only with other living things, but also with the earth, the sky, the water, and ultimately, with the things that constitute their environment (Leopold, 1993, p. 173). Arne Naess's proposed "deep ecology," contrasted with the domineering "shallow ecology" he contrasts it with, approaches the relationship between humans and nature from very different perspectives. In contrast, his view defines it as an egalitarian, intricate, and classless relationship. This view can clearly be described as "living together" (Naess, 1986). In the human-environment relationship, starting from the subject itself leads to destruction. According to some contemporary ethicists, such as Hans Jonas, this relationship should be approached from a nature-based perspective. However, the distinguishing aspect of Taoism is its avoidance of basing ethical obligation on explicit normative commands. In this respect, Taoism offers a unique answer to the question frequently encountered in environmental ethics: "Why should we morally consider nature?" The Taoist answer argues that this question is wrongly framed; because considering nature is not an additional moral duty, but the result of a correct ontological positioning.

Conclusion

This article examines the Taoist perspective on humanity and nature. According to this view, the ethical relationship between humans and nature is based on the closing of the ontological gap. Tao is a mystical path. The understanding of nature consciousness and moral attitudes is analyzed through the fundamental concepts of this journey. Taoism positions humanity not as the master of nature, but as an element existing alongside it. Wu wei, which gives meaning to a kind of harmony or essential behavior and the related principles of naturalness or spontaneity, argue that moral action should be shaped by unity, moderation, and the lifeworld, rather than coercive interventions. Taoist ontology rejects the human-nature separation, placing ethical thought on a metaphysical foundation. This ethical structure, in part, rests on the foundations

of a transcendent ontology that respects everything, living and non-living. The concepts of wu wei and ziran offer consistent, rationally defensible principles from the perspective of action theory and normative ethics.

In conclusion, Taoist philosophy offers an alternative and profound intellectual resource for addressing modern ethical and environmental issues. This ancient intellectual tradition provides relevant conceptual tools for enabling humanity to establish a more balanced relationship with both nature and itself.

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