

The Ethical Implications of the Sage's Way of Laozi

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Abstract

The Sage's way of Laozi contains opulent ethical thoughts, which takes "the ways of Tao by the Self-so" as a universal ethical principle, presenting a transcendental cosmological ethics, Laozi postulated an ideal moral personality of the Sage and proposed a method of cultivation to become a Sage, following the ethical principle of "natural inaction", keeping the cultivation work of "to the void and to the quiet", having the attitude of "act without striving", cultivating the spiritual state of "conscious ignorance", and performing the utilitarian act of "selflessness and altruism", the Sage's way of Laozi provides people with principles and methods for cultivating their moral character, and has certain inspirational significance for the study and development of ethics in realistic society.

Key words: Laozi; Morality; The Sage's way; Ethics

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Laozi is a famous philosopher and thinker in ancient China, and his book *Laozi*¹, also known as the *Tao Te Ching*, it is the core work of the Chinese school of Taoism. Many scholars have focused on cosmology, ontology,

¹ Original text and sentence breaks of *Laozi* quoted in this paper are mainly based on Bi Wang's version, and are supplemented by reference to the bamboo edition and silk manuscript. When quoting the original text of Laozi, only the chapter quoted is indicated.

epistemology, and dialectics, and have deliberately emphasized the word "Tao Te" in the "Tao Te Ching" is not the word "morality"² in ethics, thus neglecting Laozi's ethical thought.

It is undeniable that the word "Tao Te" in the *Tao Te Ching* is not the "morality" of traditional ethical thought, nor is it the "morality" of the western philosophical discourse. "Tao" and "Te" are two independent concepts in Laozi's philosophy, and they are also two core categories in Laozi's thought. Laozi used "Tao" to replace "Heaven" in the sense of "anthropomorphic God" and elevated it to a metaphysical concept. "Tao" is not only the "origin" of all things in the universe, but also the highest principle and law of all things. "Te" is the concrete manifestation of the "Tao" in the real world and social life, with the meaning of "to obtain, to become". Laozi's "Tao" is the Sage's way, which is the moral model set by Laozi. The Sage's way promoted by Laozi contains a wealth of ethical ideas.

1. "THE WAYS OF TAO BY THE SELF-SO" IS A UNIVERSAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLE

Laozi's proposition of "the ways of Tao by the Self-so" implies a universal ethical principle, and the ethical concept of Laozi reflected in it is a cosmic ethical concept.

Laozi believes that the behavior of all things in the universe follows an order of imitation, "Man → Earth → Heaven → Tao", a low to high level and order, "Tao" is the highest law of all things in the universe, Laozi said,

"The ways of men are conditioned by those of earth. The ways of earth, by those of heaven. The ways of heaven by those of Tao, and the ways of Tao by the Self-so." (Ch.25)

From the literal meaning of "the ways of Tao by the

² In the Chinese, the word "morality" in *Laozi* is exactly the same as the word "morality" in ethics.

Self-so”, it seems that there is a principle higher than “Tao” which is “Self-so”. Zhenhuan Yin believes, “The Ch. 25 of *Laozi*, the ‘Self-so’ of the way of the earth, the way of the sky, and the way of nature, it is nature - the sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, thunder, lightning, eclipse of the sun and moon, landslides, the birth and death of all things, etc. the various phenomena of nature (Yin, 1998, p. 342). “I think Mr. Yin’s statement is debatable. The “Self-so” of Laozi should not be what we usually call “nature” in biology and physics, but should be a unique philosophical concept of Laozi. Modern Chinese scholar Xiaogang Liu once said, “Nature as a philosophical concept was the first of its kind by Laozi, and is of equal importance to Laozi’s use of Tao as the origin and root of the universe.” (Liu, 2003, p.304) From Laozi’s proposition that “the ways of Tao by the Self-so”, the basis for the “existence” of the Tao, which is the most original and supreme of all things in the universe, and of all things arising from the Tao, is that “Self-so”, “that the ten thousand creatures may be resorted to their Self-so, this he dose; but dare not act.” (Ch.64). The “Tao” of Laozi creates all things, and at the same time does not hold after the birth of all things, and assists the development of all things according to their respective “Self-so” state, and all things in the universe should follow this “Self-so” principle, and this “Self-so” principle is the “Tao” itself, which is the quality of the original. Laozi believes that Tao not only produces all things, but also promotes and cultivates the growth of all things. In Laozi’s case, Tao, as the highest origin and principle of all things in the universe, acts in accordance with nature, and since Tao acts in accordance with nature, then all things in the universe should naturally be in line with Tao. “The ways of Tao by the Self-so” is the universal ethical principle that governs the behavior of all things in the universe.

Laozi’s ethical concept of “the ways of Tao by the Self-so” is both universal and transcendent, especially when compared with the ethical norms of traditional Chinese Confucianism, it has obvious transcendence and a priori nature. Laozi said,

Tao gave them birth;
The ‘power’ of Tao reared them,
Shaped them according to their kinds,
Perfected them, giving to each its strength.
Therefore of the ten thousand things there is not one that does not worship Tao and do homage to its ‘power’. No mandate ever went forth that accorded to Tao the right to be worshiped, nor to its ‘power’ the right to receive homage.
It was always and of itself so. (Ch.51)

The Tao in form is a universally applicable principle when it is applied to concrete objects, especially to social life. Laozi’s ethics is not about empirical ethical and moral norms, nor is it abstracted from contingent experience, which has an a priori nature. Laozi’s ethics is oriented to the whole cosmic world and can be said to be a cosmic ethics with certain rationalism.

2. THE SAGE IS THE MORAL MODEL OF LAOZI’S ETHICAL THOUGHT

In *Laozi*, there are many titles for human beings, such as man, people, civilian, disciples, infant, commoner, gentleman, superior scholar, middle scholar, inferior scholar, barons and princes, full-grown man, scholar, the Clasp, the get one, Taoist, and Sage, among which the most used is the Sage. The term the Sage is found in *Laozi* in 29 places, the characteristics and behaviors described are consistent with the “the way of heaven”, it can be said that the the Sage is the most perfect ideal personality in Laozi’s eyes.

Many scholars have interpreted the the Sage in *Laozi* as wise and virtuous king or ruler, and believe that Laozi’s words are addressed to king and ruler. As early as the Han Dynasty, Taoist thought was regarded as “political philosophy”.³ Considering that the Taoist thought pioneered by Laozi was directed at king in the art of state governance, and that the ethical and moral requirements taught by Laozi were addressed to ruler, and in modern times, there are also many of them believe that Laozi’s words were directed at the ruler. As Zhenhuan Yin argues, “This is illustrated by the fact that people crown *Tao Te Ching* with *Laozi*, but Laozi’s morality is not a general morality, first, it is mainly addressed to the ‘barons and princes’, the ‘lord of the land and society’, the ‘king of the country’, and the ‘Sage’, for the ruling class, and therefore we call it the political morality of the monarchs (Yin, 1987). Xiaogang Liu through the five counterpoints and analytical comments of *Laozi*, believes that the Sage mentioned by Laozi is not only not equal to the ruler in reality, but is also higher than the ruler in reality. According to Liu, “The Sage in *Laozi* is above the ruler, but not equal to the ruler. When it comes to the ruler, *Laozi* mostly uses ‘the king’, ‘barons and princes’, ‘the lord’, ‘the master’, and these are the real rulers. The character ‘King’ is used only ten times (Bi Wang text) or eleven times (silk manuscripts) (not including two times of the kingship). Obviously, ‘the Sage’ of *Laozi* is higher and more important than the ‘king’. A ‘Sage’ is not a ‘king’. A ‘Sage’ is not the same as a ruler of reality. (Liu, 2006, p.337)” It can be seen that Liu’s understanding of the Sage is higher than that of the ruler. Liu also said, “The Sage represents the ideal social figure, and the barons and princes are the rulers of the real society; the two should not be mixed together. (p.337)” I agree with this statement of Liu. Indeed, Laozi’s the Sage does not refer to a

³ Gu Ban writes in the *Art And Literature In Hanshu*, “The Taoism probably came out of the ancient historians. They continuously recorded successes and failures, survival and demise, calamities and happiness, ancient and modern truths. Then they knew to uphold the main points to grasp the fundamentals, to guard the quiet and inaction, and to maintain a modest and soft attitude; this is how the ruler governs the country.” It represents the general view of Laozi and Taoism in the Han Dynasty.

particular person or type of person in the real society, but is a general term for a hypothetical, ideal, perfect person. It can be said that the Sage's way is the model of moral behavior in Laozi's mind.

Therefore the Sage
Clasps the Primal Unity,
Testing by it everything under heaven. (Ch.22)

Here in the *Laozi*, Bi Wang's version, it is "the Clasp", while in the silk manuscript, it is "the execute". The word "the Clasp" means "clasp the Tao", and the word "the execute" means "execute the Tao". Whether it is "clasp the way" or "execute the Tao", it can be said that the Sage is the paradigm of the world according to the principle of the "Tao". From here it is clear that the Sage in Laozi's eyes is based on the "the Way of Heaven" as the standard of behavior. At the same time, in Laozi's mind, the Sage is different from ordinary people, and the character of the Sage is higher than that of ordinary people.

To them the Ten Thousand Things are but as straw dogs.
The Sage too is ruthless;
To him the people are but as straw dogs. (Ch.5)

From the description in Ch. 5 of *Laozi*, we can see that "Heaven and Earth" treats all things without partiality, and treats them all equally. The Sage is of the same character as the "heaven and earth" and treat the people equally without partiality, we see that the character of the Sage is higher than that of ordinary people. In addition, in Ch. 49 of *Laozi*, it is said that the Sage treats the common people without subjective prejudice,

The Sage has no heart of his own;
He uses the heart of people as his heart. (Ch.49)

According to Laozi, the Sage is not only not partial to the people, but also not partial to all things. In Ch. 27 of *Laozi*, it is said that the Sage is always good at saving people and things, so he will not abandon them.

Therefore the Sage
Is all the time in the most perfect way helping men,
He certainly does not turn his back on men;
Is all the time in the most perfect way helping creatures,
He certainly does not turn his back on creatures. (Ch.27)

In Laozi's mind, "the behavior of the Sage is completely consistent with the "Way of Heaven", and it is also obvious that the Sage mentioned by Laozi is different from ordinary people, and their character is superior to that of ordinary people. In Laozi's ethical thought, the Sage is a moral model.

3. CULTIVATION METHOD OF THE SAGE'S WAY OF LAOZI

In Laozi's view, although the character of the Sage is perfect and supreme, it is not unattainable, and ordinary people in reality can achieve the character of a saint through self-cultivation.

3.1 Following the Ethical Principle of "Natural Inaction"

According to Laozi, the Tao is the principle of "nature" and "inaction" that nurtures all things, and the Sage uses the Tao as the principle and standard of his behavior. Therefore, the Sage should also take "nature" and "inaction" as the fundamental principles. There are many references in the *Laozi* to the Sage's adherence to the principles of "nature" and "inaction",

Therefore the Sage relies on actionless activity,
Carries on wordless teaching. (Ch. 2)

Therefore the Sage rules
By emptying their hearts
And filling their bellies,
Weakening their intelligence
And toughening their sinews
Ever striving to make people knowledgeable and desireless.
Indeed he sees to it that if there be any who have knowledge,
they dare not interfere. Yet through his actionless activity all
things are duly regulated. (Ch. 3)

From the two Chapter cited above, it can be seen that the Sage himself is in the business of "inaction" and wordless teaching. Thus, they can achieve the effect ruling everything. Laozi also said that it is because the Sage practices the principle of "inaction" that they are able to stand in the land of "does not harm".

Therefore the Sage does not act, and so does not harm;
Does not grab, and does not let slip.
Whereas the people of the world, at their tasks,
Constantly spoil things when within an ace of competing them.
heed the end no less than the beginning,
And your work will not be spoiled.
Therefore the Sage wants only things that are unwanted,
Set no store by products difficult to get,
And so teach things untaught,
Turning all men back to the things they have left behind,
That the ten thousand creatures may be restored to their Self-so
This he does, but dare not act. (Ch. 64)

According to Laozi, ordinary people often fail halfway through their actions, while the Sage can consistently maintain the principle of "inaction", so they never fail. At the same time, the Sage is able to refrain from pursuing "unwanted things" and "products difficult to get", learn "Way of Heaven" behaviors that ordinary people do not want to learn, and use them to remedy the faults of all people, and assist ten thousand creatures to flourish according to the "natural" principles without interfering or acting presumptuously. It can be said that the Sage have always followed and practiced the principles of "natural" and "inaction" in their actions and treatment of things.

3.2 Keeping the Cultivation Work of "To the Void and to the Quiet"

According to Laozi, ordinary people always pursue the desire for food and sex, which is the nature of human beings, but when pursued excessively, greed is formed. It is easy for ordinary people to lose their minds in the pursuit of five colours, five sounds, five tastes; excess

of hunting and chasing makes minds go mad. and thus fall into a situation of blindness, deafness, mouth pleasure, madness of the mind, and Impede their owner's movements which they cannot extricate themselves, *Laozi* states,

The five colours confuse the eye,
The five sounds dull the ear,
The five tastes spoil the palate.
Excess of hunting and chasing
Make minds go mad.
Products that are hard to get
Impede their owner's movements.
Therefore the Sage
Consider the belly not the eye.
Truly, "he rejects that but takes this". (Ch. 12)

According to Laozi, "abstinence" can keep one's heart extremely quiet, and a quiet heart will enable one to keep one's nature, so that one will not lose one's mind and make mistakes. Laozi's "abstinence" can also be said "to the quiet", as he said in Ch. 37 of *Laozi*, "Desiring for nothing luxurious, people will be at ease and the world at peace". Therefore, Laozi's cultivation method to achieve the character of the Sage can be "abstinence" and "to the quiet", and the cultivation of "to the void and to the quiet" is a path to achieve the Sage. This effort and path is an inward pursuit.

3.3 Having the Attitude of "Act Without Striving"

In Laozi's thought, the attitude of "act without striving" is the expression of the inner cultivation of the Sage, *Laozi* states,

Therefore the Sage
Squares without cutting,
Shapes the corners without lopping,
Straightens without stretching,
Gives forth light without shining. (Ch. 58)

Therefore the Sage never has to deal with the great; and so achieves greatness. (Ch. 63)

The Sage "though he controls does not lean, and when he has achieved his aim does not linger" (Ch. 77)

And the Sage's way is to act without striving. (Ch. 81)

From the Chapter cited above, we can see that Laozi advocates "without cutting", "without lopping", "without shining", "never has to deal with the great", "does not lean", "does not linger" and "without striving". Laozi used the character of "water" as a metaphor for the attitude of "act without striving".

"The highest good is like that of water. The goodness of water is that it benefits the ten thousand creatures; yet itself does not scramble, but is content with the places that all men disdain. It is this that makes water so near to the Way." (Ch. 8)

Laozi summarized that water has three most significant behavioral characteristics: the first characteristic is "benefits the ten thousand creatures", water nourishes human beings and all animals and plants, and all things in the universe have been benefited by water. The second

characteristic is "does not scramble", water nourishes everything without competing with everything, and never asks for anything in return. And the third characteristic is "the places that all men disdain". The water always flows and is stored in the potholes, which are hated by everyone. With these three excellent characteristics, water is the closest to Tao, so Laozi uses the character of water as a metaphor for the character of the most virtuous person. Laozi used the phrase "The highest good is like that of water" as a metaphor for "the ways of Tao", advocating the noble spirit of being like water, which is good at selflessness, self-sacrifice, non-competition, endure humiliation and so on.

"How did the great rivers and seas get their kingship over the hundred lesser streams?
Through the merit of being lower than they; that was how they got their kingship." (Ch. 66)

According to Laozi, the reason why the river and the sea can become the gathering place for the confluence of the hundred rivers is that it is good at being in a lower position than the hundred rivers, so it can make the hundred rivers converge. In *Laozi*, the river and the sea are likened to the Tao, while the hundred rivers are likened to the "world", *Laozi* states,

"To Tao all under heaven will come
As streams and torrents flow into a great river or sea." (Ch. 32)

Laozi analogy of Tao to the world is like the river and sea to the valley. Laozi used the phenomenon of hundred of rivers as a metaphor for the humble attitude of "the ways of Tao". Because of its humility, Tao was able to gain the approval and support of the world; same as the river and sea was able to gain the approval of the hundred rivers and become the kingship. Therefore, if the "ruler" can be as humble as the river and the sea, then he will be loved and supported by the world.

3.4 Cultivating the Spiritual State of "Conscious Ignorance"

To know when the one does not know is best.

To think one knows when one does not know is a dire disease.

Only he who recognizes this disease as a disease
Can cure himself of the disease.
The Sage's way of curing disease
Also consists in making people recognize their diseases as diseases and thus ceasing to be diseased. (Ch. 71)

Laozi believed that the Sage should have the character of "self-recognition", which means knowing that one does not know something. If the Sage does not know but thinks he knows, this is a shortcoming, and the Sage does not have such a shortcoming because he takes this shortcoming of not knowing as a weakness, and because of self-recognition, that's why we can develop the habit of reflecting on what we don't know from time to time. This statement of Laozi seems to have an extremely

coincidental tacit understanding with the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates who said, "All I know is that I don't know". It is because of the habit of "conscious ignorance" that the Sage always seeks self-knowledge but does not show himself, seeks self-love but does not put himself on high, which is what they say: "knows himself but does not show himself. Knows his own value, but does not put himself on high." (Ch. 72)

3.5 Performing the Utilitarian Act of "Selflessness and Altruism"

Because Laozi's view is a unique cosmic ethical view, the value of behavior he promotes is also a selflessness and altruistic utilitarian view, *Laozi* states.

Heaven is eternal, the Earth everlasting.
How come they to be so? Is it because they do not foster their own lives;
That is why they live so long.
Therefore the Sage
Put himself in the background; but is always to the fore.
Remains outside; but is always there.
Is it not just because he does not strive for any personal end
That all his personal ends are fulfilled? (Ch. 7)

Laozi once asked, in response to people's pursuit of fame and fortune, which led to a split between mind and body: "Fame or one's own self, which matters to one most? One's own self or things bought, which should count most? In the getting or the losing, which is worse?" He gave the following clear answer,

Hence he who grudges expense pays dearest in the end; he who has hoarded most will suffer the heaviest loss. Be content with what you have and are, and no one can despoil you;
Who stops in time nothing can harm.
He is forever safe and secure. (Ch. 44)

The will of man is often enslaved by things, and the mind of man is often confused by desires, as it was in ancient times and as it is today. So, in face of the status of fame and fortune, how can we achieve the soul "not out of the box"? Laozi advocates that "you cannot rule men nor serve heaven unless you have laid up a store". emphasize the importance of nurturing and saving life energy with "laid up", so that we can "to grow old with unflinching eyes and ears" and be invincible. In Laozi's case, what he pursues is selflessness, which has some similarity with the Benthamite utilitarianism of "the greatest happiness of all".

There is much more about the self-cultivation of the ideal character of the Sage as Laozi said, for example, in Ch. 28 of *Laozi*, advocating "Uncarved Block", "now when a block is sawed up it is made into implements; But when the Sage uses it, it becomes Chief of all Ministers." There is also the sense of "moderation" or "keeping the middle" as advocated in Ch. 29, where it is said that "the

Sage discards the absolute, the all-inclusive, the extreme". These are *Laozi's* feasible ways to achieve Sage. In addition, Ch. 67 of *Laozi*, saying the "three treasures" of virtue is also the way of life advocated, "the first is pity; the second, frugality; the third, refusal to be 'foremost of all things under heaven'".

4. THE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SAGE'S WAY OF LAOZI

In modern society, science and technology have fundamentally changed people's lifestyles and ideologies, while at the same time, people's lifestyles of pursuing fame and fortune have shown a tendency to deviate more and more from nature because of the huge changes in society and the endless social conflicts. People should also revisit the Sage's way of Laozi and the art of dealing with the world, and reflect deeply on it, weigh the pros and cons, truly regard personal fame and status as something outside of themselves, and put them in an appropriate position to relieve the social pressure they are under, so that they can maintain a peaceful and calm state of mind through such cultivation methods as "to the quiet", "non-competition", "selflessness", "abstinence" and "know oneself", and make life more rational and peaceful, more simple and natural, and more relaxed and unrestrained.

Laozi's ideal moral model, the Sage, is not a fictional character, but a realistic and feasible conception of personality. He also proposed the above-mentioned cultivation methods and paths on how to achieve Sage's way. He also provides the principles and methods of cultivating one's moral character for ordinary people in the realistic society. Laozi advocates that, like the Sage, one should achieve natural inaction, achieve "to the void and to the quiet", act without striving, conscious ignorance, selflessness and altruism. In this way, we can not only improve our spiritual state, but also ease and resolve various social contradictions and conflicts. the Sage's way of Laozi has a certain reference and inspiration for the construction of ethics and morality in real society.

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