



I

Key Concepts of Confucianism and Daoism

Ancient Confucianism and Daoism are distinct streams of thought, their differences stark at times. But they emerge from and flow through a shared cultural context and historical time. Certain common assumptions are to be found in each, and distinguish both from Western ways of thinking. Thus, before we consider the particulars of these two ancient Chinese perspectives, and the ways in which they differ from one another, we should take a moment to note some similarities.



An ancient Chinese sensibility

Historically, the time of the greatest creativity in Chinese philosophy was also a time of political disintegration and strife.¹ From about 770 BCE onward, the feudal Zhou dynasty, which had begun around 1045 BCE, was falling apart. Recognition of the Zhou king was giving way to the emergence of a variety of smaller sovereign states, each vying to strengthen its army, expand its territory, and heighten its power. As individual sovereigns searched for political and military advantage, they looked to employ the best and brightest men as advisors and strategists, undermining older hereditary practices of office-holding. The venerable privileged families were being challenged by clever and, in some cases, ruthless newcomers. In addition, agricultural and commercial transformations were creating the rudiments of a market economy, opening up new avenues of social

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Dao: Ancient Chinese Thought in Modern American Life,
First Edition. Sam Crane.

© 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2013 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



advancement. Everything – the politics, the culture, the economics – was changing, and the changes were accompanied by more and more warfare. The period from 481–221 BCE is referred to by historians as the Warring States period.

This dynamic and competitive context placed a premium on practicality. It is not surprising then that commentators have noted the “this-worldly” quality of much of ancient Chinese thought.² Many Chinese writers focused on questions of the here-and-now and offered prescriptive suggestions for the best human action or non-action. Chinese thought thus has a certain concrete and experiential quality about it, lingering on issues of political order, social etiquette, and ethics. This is not to say there was no theoretical speculation but, rather, that pure abstract theory did not hold as high a place in most ancient Chinese minds as more specific ideas for how to live a good life. Even though Daoism was more expansive in its musings than Confucianism, it did not produce the kind of rarefied metaphysics we find in Western thought.³

To take one key point of contrast with classical Western thought, and the various writers who look there for wisdom, ancient Chinese thinkers did not concern themselves with the very large question of the origins of the universe. They did not accentuate a creation myth; they had no story of how Order emerged from Chaos, of how the stuff of the cosmos, and ultimately humankind, was made from Nothing.⁴ They simply took the universe as given, a continuous, self-generating totality with no beginning and no end. It was, for them, vast and unfathomable, beyond the descriptive capacities of human language.

A certain humility thus infused many ancient Chinese thinkers. They did not search for singular principles that might bring some sort of ultimate and comprehensive order to the natural world, recognizing, instead, that nature was marvelously complex. The natural world, for them, was not structured around immutable laws, but was a more open-ended and fluid process of movement and change, with each particular thing having its own experience unto itself. The whole, referred to as *Dao* – Way – encompasses everything, both being and nonbeing, from cosmos to photon, and heaven, earth, and the “ten thousand things.” A kind of unity was to be found in *Dao*, an organic and interactive coincidence of all things, but it was a unison that could not be reduced to abstract principles. The current fascination among physicists with a “super string theory” that might provide an “explanation of everything” would seem absurd for many ancient Chinese. Why would

you want to try to find a supposedly solitary explanation of everything, when each thing has a particular quality and place in the organic totality of nature?

Confucians and Daoists alike thus understood things and persons in context. Socially and politically, individual persons were not presumed to have the kind of autonomy and independence that liberal Western theories assert. We are all embedded in social relationships and political structures and natural environments. While some Daoists might have wanted to withdraw from human society, with all of its distractions and diversions, they would still recognize an individual's interdependence with nature. In ancient Chinese thought generally, no man is an island, entire of itself.

When comparing Western philosophy and ancient Chinese thought, we will also notice a marked difference in writing style, especially for the earliest Chinese texts.

When you open the oldest classics of Chinese philosophy, what you often find is a collection, sometimes untidy, of short anecdotes and aphorisms. The long, rigorous exposition of an argument or theory is not the predominant style of the earliest Confucian and Daoist texts.⁵ Poetry, as opposed to analysis, is the inspiration for key Chinese thinkers. Confucius repeatedly tells us to return to the *Book of Songs* (*Shi Jing*), a compilation of verse, and his book *Analects* relies on analogy and allusion. The *Daodejing* can be viewed as a series of poems. The suggestive and allusive quality of these and other important works makes them appear, to our modern senses, hardly to be philosophy at all. Some Western critics argue that there is no philosophy to be found in ancient China; it is just a bunch of sketchy thoughts, not worthy of the august title *philosophy*.⁶

I do not want to get bogged down in academic controversies about the meaning of the term "philosophy." Suffice it to say that enough scholarship has been produced in the past several decades to demonstrate the historical significance and sophistication of ancient Chinese thought. We can safely call it philosophy.⁷

And there were great philosophical debates that occurred among various philosophical perspectives. The two, out of many, we will focus on in this book, Confucianism and Daoism, differ with one another on fundamental issues of how we should relate to one another and to the world around us. To get at these differences, and to see what both might be able to tell us about modern issues and problems, we need to examine some basic concepts of each.

**Confucianism**

Confucius is often associated with the idea of filial piety, the expectation that children will faithfully respect and follow the dictates of their parents and grandparents and elders. That is certainly a part of the Confucian legacy, but it is far from the whole story. Three other concepts are even more essential to Confucian thinking: humanity, duty, and ritual.

Humanity – ren (仁)

For Confucius and Mencius the highest moral goal for any person – man or woman, adult or child – is humanity.⁸ In Chinese, the term is *ren* (or *jen*, under a different transliteration) and it has a number of connotations: “benevolence,” “humanity,” “humaneness,” “altruism,” “compassion,” “goodness.” I like the term “humanity” because it suggests many of the other possible translations but crystallizes them around a core aspiration of human character and achievement. While it is an individual moral state that is aspired to, it simultaneously suggests what each individual might realize and what all people collectively can become. This is not a biological concept, but a moral one.

The Chinese character for *ren* tells us something about what Confucius and his followers were striving for when they put forth the idea of humanity:



It has two parts. On the left hand side the sloping line and the vertical line are a signifier of “person,” and on the right the two horizontal lines are the Chinese symbol for “two.” Thus, the character suggests that personhood is relational, a process involving at least two, and perhaps more, persons. It’s that simple. Humanity, the highest form of benevolence and moral goodness, is to be found in relationships among persons. An individual, alone, cannot achieve it. It is a social, reciprocal, dynamic exercise of finding the best we can be in relation to others. Confucius himself is quite clear about this:

As for humanity: if you want to make a stand, help others make a stand, and if you want to reach your goal, help others reach their goal. Consider yourself and treat others accordingly: this is the method of humanity. (Hinton, *Analects*, 6.29)





Think about the first part of that passage: you can realize your personal goals – and by this Confucius means moral goals, the plans we have for achieving something good in this world – only through others. To improve ourselves, to make our own lives better, we must offer a helping hand to people around us. He then adds a classic statement of ethical reciprocity: treat others as you would have them treat you. First time readers of Confucius are often surprised to find this reference to the “golden rule,” but it is central to his teachings. He is quite direct in other passages:

Zigong asked, Is there a single word that can guide a person’s conduct throughout life?

The Master said, That would be reciprocity, wouldn’t it? What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others? (Watson, *Analects*, 15.24)

This is not a matter of selfishness. We help others not simply to secure our own personal interests, which is a secondary outcome of ethical reciprocity. Confucius would have us do good unto others because it has a higher intrinsic value in and of itself, regardless of whether we materially profit from it or not. Indeed, if we face a choice between humanity and personal profit, humanity clearly wins out, because it is, as Confucius says, “. . . more vital to the common people than even fire and water” (Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 15.35).

Ethical reciprocity is impossible in isolation, and Confucius very much emphasizes the social and communal requirements of humanity. Doing right for others is, for him, a positive obligation: we must do it, if we are to live up to our innate moral potential. If we do not do it, we are denying something essential in our human nature.

Confucius is, thus, an optimist. He believes that everyone, at least initially, is born with a capacity for humanity. This notion is expressed only fleetingly in the aphoristic *Analects*:

The Master said: “We’re all the same by nature. It’s living that makes us so different.” (Hinton, 17.2)

What is the same about us – a benevolent human nature – is more prominently developed by Mencius:

Suddenly seeing a baby about to fall into a well, anyone would be heart-stricken with pity: heart-stricken not because they wanted to curry favor with the baby’s parents, not because they wanted praise of neighbors and friends, and not





because they hated the baby's cries. This is why I say everyone has a heart that can't bear to see others suffer.

And from this we can see that without a heart of compassion we aren't human, without a heart of conscience we aren't human, without a heart of courtesy we aren't human, and without a heart of right and wrong we aren't human. A heart of conscience is the seed of humanity. A heart of conscience is the seed of duty. A heart of courtesy is the seed of ritual. And a heart of right and wrong is the seed of wisdom.

These four seeds are as much a part of us as our four limbs. To possess them and deny their potential – that is to wound yourself . . . (Hinton, 3.6)⁹

There's a lot in that passage. First, it reiterates the social context of the cultivation of humanness within each individual. In this case it is our interaction with the endangered baby that incites our inherent benevolence, and humanity is thereby generated by the connection between two persons. Second, Mencius also rejects the notion that altruism is inspired by the expectation of profit. We want to help the baby not because it will benefit us personally, but because our natural, innate humanity impels us. That inherent human benevolence is embedded in both our emotions and our rationality. The "heart" that Mencius invokes suggests, in Chinese (*xin*, 心), both heart and mind, a "heart-mind" of sorts. Third, human nature is universally good: *everyone* has a heart that cannot bear to see others suffer; *anyone* would want to save the baby.

Mencius and Confucius may be optimistic about the potential goodness of all persons, but they are not foolishly idealistic. They recognize that some people will either choose or be drawn to immoral actions. That is the "living" that can make us so different. People must be taught and encouraged to do the right thing in order to understand and realize their natural propensity for goodness. Volition, an idea that is not often associated with Confucianism, can lead us astray, but it can also become a powerful motor of morality. As Mencius says:

There's only one way to know if people are good or evil: look at the choices they make. We each contain precious and worthless, great and small. Never injure what is great for the sake of the small, or the precious for the sake of the worthless. Small people nurture what is small in them, great people nurture what is great in them. (Hinton, 11.14)

We must choose to do the right thing; we must willfully assume that responsibility. But what precisely is the right thing? Humanity is a general





goal of ethical reciprocity. Duty (*yi*) is the more concrete definition of our moral obligations.

Duty – yi (义 (義))

This term has been translated as “rightness,” “appropriateness,” “righteousness,” and “meaning” as well as “duty.” Its range of associations overlaps with the previous concept – *ren*, humanity – as well as the next idea – *li*, ritual. Indeed, it is difficult to linguistically isolate these key Confucian tenets, forming as they do an interlinked foundation for the central imperative to do the right thing. My preferred approach is to view “humanity” as the most general understanding of achieved moral goodness. “Duty” (*yi*), by contrast, can be taken as somewhat more specific, the particular obligations that attach to an individual within a certain social context. It is *what* should be done. And “ritual” (*li*), which itself presumes “duty” (*yi*), calls our attention to action. It is the actual *doing* of what should be done in the best manner possible. This distinction between “duty” and “ritual” is suggested in a couple of passages in the *Analects*:

The Master said: “The noble-minded make Duty their very nature. They put it into practice through Ritual; they make it shine through humility; and standing by their words, they perfect it. Then they are noble-minded indeed.” (Hinton, 15.18)

The notion here that our social and familial obligations are rooted in our very nature is echoed in Chapter 6A (or Chapter 11 in some editions) of Mencius. There, Mencius famously argues that “duty is internal” (義內也) (Hinton, 11.5) and suggests that our propensity to fulfill our obligations is something like an appetite: we have a natural craving to do the right thing. Of course, we still have to actually go out and do it, which is sometimes obstructed by other human inclinations. In the *Analects*, a disciple of Confucius encounters a hermit, perhaps a Daoist, who by his actions seeks enlightenment in social isolation. The Confucian is not convinced:

“To refuse office is to ignore Duty,” pronounced Adept Lu. “The obligations of youth and age cannot be abandoned. And the Duty of rulers and officials – what would happen if that were abandoned? In such devotion to self-purification, the great bonds of human community are thrown into confusion. The noble-minded put Duty into practice: they serve in office, though they know full well this world will never put the Way into practice.” (Hinton, 18.7)



We have certain duties by dint of our social locations. The young and old have particular sorts of obligations pertaining to their stations in life. The noble-minded, those who have conscientiously progressed toward humaneness, have a duty to take public office in order to facilitate others in their pursuit of doing the right thing. To abandon duty, as the hermit does, is immoral. Yet moral abandonment is possible: people can and do choose to ignore their obligations. That is what distinguishes the noble-minded person: he or she “puts Duty into practice” (行其義也). Exemplary individuals sate the inner moral appetite, duty, through carefully considered ethical action. They do their duty.

For Confucius, the best place to start doing good unto others is with those who are closest to you. Our primary duties, in Confucianism, are familial. Our most pressing obligations are those we owe to our immediate family members. The instruction most often mentioned in the *Analects* is “respect your elders,” especially your parents. This is a tangible expression of humanity. One of Confucius’s followers is quoted as saying:

Master, You said, A man filial to his parents, a good brother, yet apt to go against his superiors – few are like that! The man who doesn’t like to go against his superiors but likes to plot rebellion – no such kind exists! The gentleman operates at the root. When the root is firm, then the Way may proceed. Filial and brotherly conduct – these are the root of humaneness, are they not? (Watson, *Analects*, 1.2)

We will encounter the term “Way” (*Dao*), when we consider Daoism. For Confucians the term means an organic social order in which each person is fulfilling his or her particular duties. When families are sound in this fashion, a harmonious community and stable political system arises. If we attend to our immediate familial obligation to honor our elders and parents, and if everyone does the same, the world will be a better place. If we take care of those closest to us, larger, seemingly more remote, moral goals will ultimately be secured. It is in this manner that Confucianism creates a hierarchy of duties: our family obligations come first, followed by our responsibilities to friends and colleagues, acquaintances and neighbors. The closer the social relationship, the greater the duty.

Elders may have pride of place in Confucian ethics, but they are not alone. When asked what he most wants to do, Confucius replies: “. . . to bring peace and contentment to the aged, to share relationships of trust and confidence with my friends, and to love and protect the young” (Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 5.26).



It is important to note the Confucian duty that parents have toward children, if only because we hear most often about the deference children owe parents.¹⁰ In building a moral community from the inside out, from one's closest family relationships outward to an ever-broadening social network, caring for children is essential. Here it is given equal ethical significance as respecting elders by Mencius:

By treating the elders in one's family as elders should be treated and extending this to the elders of other families, and by treating the young of one's own family as the young ought to be treated and extending this to the young of other people's families, the empire can be turned around in the palm of one's hand. (Bloom, 1A7)

In caring for their children, fathers must live up to their duties as fathers, or they may not be worthy of the title "father."¹¹ Mencius recounts the story of super-filial Shun, a legendary sage-king of antiquity. Shun's father was depraved, so much so that he tried on at least two occasions to kill his son. Clearly, the man was no father. Shun, however, was so good that he continued to be respectful of his father, even when the father did not deserve that respect. Mencius uses this tale to show how Shun, through infinite patience and wisdom, was, in the words of one translator (Hinton), "a son to no father," a truly extraordinary accomplishment. For the rest of us mortals, Mencius understands that we can be justifiably resentful toward a failing parent:

If you don't resent a parent's fault when it's serious, you're treating parents like strangers. And if you resent a parent's fault when it's slight, you're treating parents with abandon. Treating them like strangers, treating them with abandon – either is no way for a child to honor parents. (Hinton, 12.3)

This puts a great deal of responsibility on children: they have to be respectful of their parents even when they can see that the parents are at fault. But there is another message here as well. If parents fail in their duties to children, they risk sowing resentment, dissention, and, ultimately, they contribute to social disorder – people may, as Confucius warns in *Analects* 2.20, forget how to be loyal and reverent. There is a high price to pay for not cherishing the young.

Duties toward friends, too, are important. A disciple of Confucius puts it this way:

Master Tseng said: "The noble-minded use cultivation to assemble friends, and friends to sustain their humanity." (Hinton, *Analects*, 12.24)





A collection of friends becomes another forum in which ethical reciprocity, humanity, is enacted. We make promises to friends, we do things for them, and they do things for us, not for reasons of personal profit, but because of the imperative to do right by those closest to us. We find our own humanity there.

Duties, then, are socially determined and constructed. Sometimes Confucian obligations are summarized by the “five relationships,” which Mencius enumerates as:

. . . between parents and children there is affection; between ruler and minister, rightness; between husband and wife, separate functions; between older and younger, proper order; and between friends, faithfulness. (Bloom, 3A4)

Of course, the particular demands and limits of these relationships change with social and historical development. We do not today accept male domination of women; we reject parental abuse of children; and we expect a certain openness from political leaders. These modern norms do not render Confucian duties meaningless, however. What a contemporary Confucianism can do is raise particular ethical questions: Are you attending to your family obligations? Should you think more about how your friends and acquaintances might react to what you are about to do? Are you limiting your selfish desires in recognition of the social context of your humanity?

One last thing to consider here is our duty toward strangers. Does Confucianism recognize any such obligation? Other moral philosophies and religions that emphasize universal equality would tell us that we must afford strangers the same respect and, under certain circumstances, the same treatment that we give to our family members. On the face of it, the ethical particularism of Confucianism, and its imperative that we attend to our family obligations first, suggests that we do not really have much in the way of duties to strangers. But a closer reading leads to a different conclusion.

Confucius himself was kind to strangers. When he encountered a person in mourning, made obvious by clothing and demeanor, “the Master would stand or humbly step aside” (Hinton, *Analects*, 9.10). He paid respect when respect was due, even to someone he did not know. Although he famously approved of fathers and sons shielding each other from the law when one





stole a sheep (*Analects*, 13.18), suggesting a relativistic ethics, his followers discerned a universal aspect to his notion of humanity:

Sima Niu lamented, “Everyone has brothers except for me.”

Zixia said to him, “I have heard it said:

Life and death are a matter of one’s lot;

Wealth and honor lie with tian [heaven].

Since exemplary persons are respectful and impeccable in their conduct, are deferential to others and observe ritual propriety, everyone in the world is their brother. Why would exemplary persons worry over having no brothers?”

(Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 12.5)

When the noble-minded exemplary person is doing the right thing, and that means, first and foremost, carrying out their family responsibilities, then he or she will naturally be kind toward others as well. All men are brothers: no strangers there, especially when ritual (*li*) is working smoothly.

Ritual – li (禮)

This may be the Confucian principle that is most difficult to transport into a modern context. It is translated as “rites,” “etiquette,” “propriety,” and “worship,” as well as “ritual.” I would like to emphasize here the sense of action or performance included in this field of meaning. In English, the word “ritual” often has a negative connotation, an image of mindlessly going through the motions of some formal obligation. In an era that values self-expression and creativity, “ritual” can seem an outmoded attachment to past practices. Although much of our modern life has a ritualistic quality to it – the way we participate in politics or follow sports or watch television – many of us would want to deny that our lives are shaped by ritual, or, perhaps, wish that those rituals that we do practice were more meaningful.

Confucius, too, rejects the idea of ritual as thoughtless imitation of supposedly authoritative action. He teaches us to perform our morality, live our duties, through our daily behavior. Words are insufficient in and of themselves to secure good outcomes; we must continually strive to cultivate our humanity. For this, commitment is essential. If you are



not whole-heartedly engaged in what you have to do, your actions are literally meaningless. Intention and dedication matter for Confucius. He scoffs at people who put on an act of doing the right thing without really meaning it:

The Master said: “What could I see in a person who in holding a position of influence is not tolerant, who in observing ritual propriety is not respectful, and who in overseeing the mourning rites does not grieve?” (Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 3.26)

And he castigates children who make light of their duties toward parents:

Ziyou asked about filial conduct. The Master replied: “Those today who are filial are considered so because they are able to provide for their parents. But even dogs and horses are given that much care. If you do not respect your parents, what is the difference?” (Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 2.7)

Ritual, for him, is the fully considered performance of our vital moral responsibilities. To do it right, you have to be totally absorbed in it all of the time. Conscientious ritual is not simply a matter of big, public occasions, such as weddings and births and funerals, though those are important. More immediately, ritual is the thoughtful enactment of our daily obligations, putting our hearts and minds into the mundane tasks that our family relationships, and other social connections, demand of us. Small things are as ritually important as large events. When his favorite student, Yen Hui, asked about ritual, Confucius spoke to its pervasiveness:

Yen Yuan [Hui] asked about humaneness. The Master said: To master the self and return to ritual is to be humane. For one day master the self and return to ritual, and the whole world will become humane. Being humane proceeds from you yourself. How could it proceed from others?

Yen Yuan said: May I ask how to go about this?

The Master said: If it is contrary to ritual, don't look at it. If it is contrary to ritual, don't listen to it. If it is contrary to ritual, don't utter it. If it is contrary to ritual, don't do it.

Yen Yuan said: Lacking in cleverness though I am, I would like, if I may, to honor these words. (Watson, *Analects*, 12.1)

Ritual, in other words, always demands our attention, wherever we are, whatever we are doing. Notice, too, how Confucius urges us to find the humane impetus for ritual first in our personal selves. The commitment



to thoughtful action must come from the inside out; it is not simply a response to external social demands, but an internal dedication to doing the right thing in the world.

But how do we know what the right action is? Once again, contrary to the idea of rote imitation, Confucius understands that specific definitions of proper action depend upon particular circumstances. The noble-minded person, one who is striving to achieve humanity by fulfilling duty through ritual, must carefully observe and discern the right course in each social context encountered. This requires a certain creativity and flexibility, a certain vision and panache. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, masterful interpreters of the *Analects*, show how, through his appreciation of music, especially in relation to ritual, Confucius was a virtuoso of sorts, ingeniously orchestrating his actions and his social setting.¹² This passage suggests as much:

The Master said: “The use of a hemp cap is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety. Nowadays, that a silk cap is used instead is a matter of frugality. I would follow accepted practice on this. A subject kowtowing on entering the hall is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety. Nowadays that one kowtows only after ascending the hall is a matter of hubris. Although it goes against accepted practice, I still kowtow on entering the hall.” (Ames and Rosemont, *Analects*, 9.3)

He knows what traditional ritual calls for, but he weighs this against the common contemporary practice and then makes a personal decision based upon the meaning he is trying to express. It is an art, not a science.

To be a bit more precise: in devising proper action at any given moment, we can start with reflection upon our duties. We know, generally, that we should honor our parents, cherish the young, and trust our friends. And we should continually return to these duties. But what they mean in any particular circumstance requires an inventive dedication. There is no universal formula, just a well-intentioned engagement:

The Master said, with regard to worldly affairs, the gentleman has no strong likes and no strong dislikes – he sides with what is right [*yi*]. (Watson, *Analects*, 4.10)

We should not go into a social situation with our minds already made up about what we need to do. Rather, we must attune ourselves to the surroundings, absorb the whole moment, think about our duties, and constantly try to see and do the right thing. That is ritual awareness and action.





These, then, are three key concepts of Confucianism: humanity, duty, ritual. The Confucian worldview, of course, includes many other ideas and principles but these offer a starting point. In the chapters that follow, we will apply these ideas, these aspirations, to modern ethical issues and, with the addition of other Confucian ideas added along the way, construct a modern American Confucian perspective. But before we do that, we must now turn to some key concepts of Daoism.

Daoism

It is famously difficult to describe the main ideas of Daoism.¹³ The first lines of the *Daodejing*, a foundational text, say that the *Dao*, or “Way,” that can be spoken or made manifest is not really the *Dao*. Since Way is a central concept of the philosophy, that makes my job a bit harder – but not impossible. Recognizing Daoism’s playful ambiguity, and thus the imprecision of our definitions, we can begin discussing three concepts as an introduction: Way (*Dao*), integrity (*de*), and non-action (*wuwei*).

Way – Dao (道)

In relation to Daoism, and to other schools of ancient Chinese thought, the term *Dao* (*Tao*) is most often translated as “Way.” The character implies both a thing – a road or path or way – and a process – moving along a road or path or way. It also has normative implications, suggesting what should be, or what should be done. Additional definitions include: “method,” “principle,” “to say or speak,” “to think or suppose.” Its broad field of meaning is the thing we should notice, if we are to understand its philosophical connotations.

For Daoists, Way suggests totality, the simultaneous existence and unfolding of all things now. It is vast, beyond human comprehension, and its unity cannot be captured by any singular image or idea. The Daoist Way is not God in a monotheistic sense, though theologians have projected God into Way.¹⁴ There is no one face of Way, only an infinite number of particular expressions. There is no one controlling principle or power, only a profusion of unique occurrences, each following their own Ways as they create a coincidentally complete Way. The term is used in both of these senses: the specific experience of a single thing or person and the entirety



of all such experiences. I have my own personal Way which exists within the totality of Way.

Totality, therefore, is to be found within each thing, as each thing is a part of totality. There is no outside of Way, no beginning, no end, no moment of creation, no prophecy of apocalypse. All of these are impossible because Way is everything, whatever happens. It encompasses both being and nonbeing and, thus, is timeless.

Passage 34 from the *Daodejing* speaks to the nature of Way:

Way is vast, a flood
so utterly vast it's flowing everywhere.

The ten thousand things depend on it:
giving them life and never leaving them
it performs wonders but remains nameless.

Feeding and clothing the ten thousand things
without ruling over them,
perennially that free of desire,
it's small in name.

And being what the ten thousand things return to
without ruling over them,
it's vast in name.

It never makes itself vast
And so becomes utterly vast.

(Hinton)

The “ten thousand things” refers to earthly material objects. They are, collectively, something less than Way – they do not include “Heaven,” which represents a realm of energy and time, fate and destiny. Passage 34, then, is a partial observation of Way, discerning only its worldly presence. Even from this limited perspective, however, Way is everywhere. It nurtures each and every material thing around us, yet it does not control or “rule over” anything. Both vast and small, Way reflects the totality of all things while it is expressed in each thing. It is both the provider of life – in the sense that context provides meaning – and the condition to which all things return, which suggests a lastingness beyond the limits of time. If everything, all the ten thousand things, disappeared tomorrow, there would still be Way.



But so what? What does it matter that various ancient Chinese thinkers put forth a vague and paradoxical notion of totality that they named “Way”? What use is it?

The idea of Way is invoked by Daoists to remind us of the limits of our presence in the cosmos, indeed the smallness of all things in comparison to the immensity of Way. Confucians have a more focused definition of Way: the network of organic interpersonal relations emanating from family ties and radiating outward to a harmonious social order that orients us toward our duties. Daoists have a grander vision, one that zooms out to the widest of all big pictures, in which social relationships are submerged in an endless field of things and events and possibilities. This is meant to have a humbling effect. We should not expect to have all that much of an impact on Way when we are such an infinitesimal part of it. Duties lose their urgency and ritual its necessity in the vastness of the Daoist Way. Even humanity seems less important since Way includes so many other things besides social relationships.

Daoism thus posits an ethics quite different from Confucianism, and that difference has much to do with the more expansive understanding of Way. Where Confucians counsel responsible action, Daoists urge cautious inaction, as will be discussed below.

The two philosophies also differ on questions of knowledge and behavior, what we can know of the world and what we can do in it. This passage from *Zhuangzi* suggests some of these differences:

The Dao [Way] has its own nature and its own reliability: it does nothing and it has no form. It can be passed on, but never received and held. You can master it, but you can't see it. Its own source, its own root – it was there before heaven and earth, firm and constant from ancient times. It makes gods and demons sacred, gives birth to heaven and earth. It's above the absolute pole, but is not high. It's below the six directions, but is not deep. It predates the birth of heaven and earth, but is not ancient. It precedes high antiquity, but is not old. (Hinton, 87)

Way cannot be known by conventional intellectual means because it is invisible and formless. A person can “master it,” orient one's life to Way and move along with it, but cannot hold it. From this follows a profound Daoist skepticism of human knowledge, so much of which is divorced from the subtleties of Way. As the *Daodejing* tells us: “the knowing are never learned, and the learned never knowing.” (Hinton, 81) – the “learned” being those who have filled themselves with humanly created ideas and



images. To know Way is to “give up learning” (Hinton, 20). To which Zhuangzi adds, “dwell in the ordinary” (Hinton, 23). Don’t search for comprehensive theoretical explanations of nature, all of which must fail to capture the enormity and complexity of Way. It cannot be “received and held.” Just absorb what is around you, for in each microsecond of experience, the whole is present. It is not high nor deep nor ancient. It’s right here.

Integrity – de (德)

The relationship between the totality of Way and each of its innumerable parts is captured in the concept of integrity, the “*de*” of the *Daodejing*. This character is variously translated as “virtue,” “integrity,” “potency” “power,” “efficacy,” and “excellence.” To my understanding, however, these are all effects of a thing being complete unto itself and integrated into Way; that’s why I prefer “integrity.”

Integrity defines the individual nature or quality of each particular thing in Way. It is something like potential, a person’s inborn disposition and possibility. All persons have a unique *de* to fulfill, as do all animals and minerals and vegetables. When we act in accordance with our *de*, we are following our particular *Dao*. And that gives us a certain virtue and potency: we are living in accordance with Way, realizing our inherent capacities, attaining our personal integrity.

Zhuangzi speaks to this idea here without directly invoking *de*:

... the real is originally there in things, and the sufficient is originally there in things. There’s nothing that is not real, and nothing that is not sufficient.

Hence, the blade of grass and the pillar, the leper and the ravishing Xi Shi, the noble, the sniveling, the disingenuous, the strange – in Dao they all move as one and the same. In difference is the whole, in wholeness is the broken. Once they are neither whole nor broken, all things move freely as one and the same again. (Hinton, 23)

All things are real and complete unto themselves; and, in this regard, all things are essentially equal. Each element of Way, however grand or small, has its place, its integrity, and accordingly all are the same. There is a radical egalitarianism here. No person can claim to be superior to any other because each is simply living out his or her own integrity. And no one can be marked as inferior. Since each is unfolding according to its own particular character, no thing can be regarded as better or worse. Daoism, therefore, accepts a kind of moral relativism. If each thing has



its own specific integrity, then we cannot use the circumstances of one to judge another. No universal law of nature or morality can be applied to all things.

This may seem paradoxical – all things are essentially the same but each thing is unique unto itself – but Daoism revels in paradox. How else can we understand this excerpt from passage 38 of the *Daodejing*?

High Integrity never has Integrity
and so is indeed Integrity.
Low Integrity never loses Integrity
and so is not at all Integrity.
(Hinton)

This is a slap at Confucianism, which puts forth a set of general social practices and conventions that everyone should apply to their own individual circumstances. For Confucius, “integrity” is associated with duty and ritual and humanity, all of which the *Daodejing* is here rejecting as “low integrity.” The Daoist message is: if you strive for integrity by following someone else’s standards, you will ultimately undermine your own character and efficacy. It is in that sense that “high integrity,” that which is quietly true to itself and does not aspire to an ersatz Confucian “integrity,” is more genuinely integrity.

Daoists, then, would accept the Shakespearean dictum: “To thine ownself be true.” And they would embrace the biblical teaching, “judge not, lest ye be judged,” without further reference to a higher divine law.

Yet this raises a disturbing possibility: what happens if someone is naturally bad, if his or her inherent character produces a hurtful and evil “integrity”? How can we respond to injustice and harm if there is no universal standard of morality to call upon?

Daoism does not deny the existence of evil; nor does it hold out the hope of a perfectly good world. Instead, it recognizes a human tendency to do wrong willfully. Some of this is inescapable:

The way of tian [heaven] is also to let some go where there is excess
And to augment where there is not enough.

The way of human beings on the other hand is not like this at all.
It is instead to take away from those who do not have enough
In order to give more to those who already have too much.
(Ames and Hall)



This excerpt from passage 77 of the *Daodejing* suggests that people can naturally tend toward greed and callousness, the roots of violence and injury. This is not to say that everyone will always be bad. Unlike Mencius, Daoism does not put forth a notion of “human nature” in general. “Way,” when applied to “human beings” here, is more indefinite and open ended. It implies that humans can and will act selfishly and harm others, but they are not inevitably destined to do so. Zhuangzi goes so far as to contend that a person can be “without the essentials of man”¹⁵ – can escape the entrapment of doing right or wrong – if he or she simply abides in the natural unfolding of Way.

Indeed, the physical existence of the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* texts, lovingly written and reproduced, can be seen as active appeals to the better angels of our nature. The authors are saying, in the very act of writing, that we may have something bad in us, but we are also capable of cooperation and moderation, as the continuation of passage 77 of the *Daodejing* indicates:

Only a master of the Way
 can give abundance to all beneath heaven.
 Such a sage acts without presumption
 and never dwells on success:
 great worth has no need to be seen.

(Hinton)

A “sage” can master Way, which means follow Way, and conform to the natural unfolding of things. He or she can thus provide abundance to all. This requires a refusal to be distracted by the temptations of wealth and power and fame, all of which prey upon the ignoble aspect of our character. We are not captives of an essentially bad human nature. The ideal of sageliness holds out the possibility of a liberating integrity:

You have the audacity to take on human form and you are delighted. But the human form has ten thousand changes that never come to an end. Your joys, then, must be uncountable. Therefore, the sage wanders in the realm where things cannot get away from him, and all are preserved. He delights in early death; he delights in old age; he delights in the beginning; he delights in the end. If he can serve as a model for men, how much more so that which the ten thousand things are tied to and all changes alike wait upon! (Watson, *Zhuangzi*, 81)





And that something that all wait upon is, of course, Way, where all of us live out our integrity.

Non-actions – wuwei (无为 (無爲))

To follow Way, and express our integrity, we should, Daoism tells us, *wuwei* – “do nothing.” The term *wuwei* is among the most cryptic in the Daoist lexicon. It can mean “not doing,” or, to reverse the order of the characters, “doing nothing.” But the “nothing” – *wu* – comes before the “doing” – *wei* – so the compound suggests “nothing doing.” That implies a certain productivity in nothingness. “Nothing” is active and creative; it is doing. That’s the key. My favorite translation, therefore, is David Hinton’s: “nothing’s own doing.”

To clarify: if Way is beyond our control, if it unfolds as it will, regardless of our efforts, in all of its complexity, then our attempts to affect it, to take meaningful action in the world, are bound to fall short of our expectations and desires. Better to do nothing than try to do something and have it blow up in our faces:

Longing to take hold of all under heaven and improve it . . .
I’ve seen such dreams invariably fail.
All beneath heaven is a sacred vessel, something beyond all improvement.
Try to improve it and you ruin it.
Try to hold it and you lose it.

For things sometimes lead and sometimes follow,
sometimes sigh and sometimes storm,
sometimes strengthen and sometimes weaken,
sometimes kill and sometimes die.

And so the sage steers clear of extremes,
clear of extravagance,
clear of exaltation.

(Hinton, 29)

There is a certain fatalism here, and that is central to Daoism. But fate, in this instance, is not predetermined; it is spontaneous and flowing – things will move and strengthen and weaken of their own accord. It is Way unfolding. The sensibility of “nothing’s own doing,” therefore, is not so much submissive obedience as it is liberated acceptance. Way is boundless and uncontrollable, and, as the passage above tells us, it has a perfection





all of its own, regardless of our wishes or plans. If we embrace that understanding and marvel at its fullness and beauty, relinquishing our desire to channel and dominate it, we will find peace and joy:

Life, death, preservation, loss, failure, success, poverty, riches, worthiness, unworthiness, slander, fame, hunger, thirst, cold, hot – these are the alterations of the world, the workings of fate. Day and night they change place before us and wisdom cannot spy out their source. Therefore, they should not be enough to destroy your harmony; they should not be allowed to enter the Spirit Storehouse [mind]. If you can harmonize and delight in them, master them and never be at a loss for joy, if you can do this day and night without break and make it Spring with everything, mingling with all and creating the moment within your own mind – this is what I call being whole in power. (Watson, *Zhuangzi*, 73–74)

Not forcing ourselves on Way brings liberation: even in the face of death we will not lose our joy.

“Nothing’s own doing” does not, then, have to be taken as a strict command to take no action at all. The image of the Daoist hermit, isolating himself from the world in an extreme form of inaction, is an enduring one in history. Some people fervently believe that the texts tell them to remove themselves from the world as much as possible. It is a reasonable interpretation, but not a necessary one. Some level of activity is obviously required for human life: food has to be grown and prepared, shelter secured, children raised. Daoism does not tell us to return to some primitive animal state. It urges, rather, that we do not get caught up in the human creations, both material and intellectual, that might distract us from the natural unfolding of Way.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know what exactly is natural and what is not, especially when talking about human passions and personalities. Daoism, however, does not demand absolute precision. Instead of an unbending moral standard, it offers a supple appreciation of restraint and humility.

In yielding is completion.
In bent is straight.
In hollow is full.
In exhaustion is renewal.
In little is contentment.
In much is confusion.
(Hinton, *Daodejing*, 22)



The trick is to perceive how to do nothing, sensing when some action is in keeping with Way and when something else might be too much. We have to find how nothing and doing fit together. There is no absolute formula, no guidebook, only intuition and instinct. Intellect cannot tell us because Way is beyond our logical capacities. We have to open ourselves to our surroundings, let go of our preconceptions, and feel what can and should be done.

These three concepts – Way, integrity, and doing nothing – get us started on Daoism. We will expand upon these ideas, and add others, as we consider how Daoism might speak to modern issues.

One final point of contrast between Daoism and Confucianism needs to be made, however. The more radical particularism of Daoism – its notion that each thing, while embedded in Way, is unique unto itself – makes it more difficult to use as a basis for ethical judgment. If we cannot refer to the experience of one thing to understand and assess the experience of another, then we do not have a general set of expectations and standards that might function as moral principles. Confucians would agree that particular circumstances might require that guidelines be modified in practice. But Daoism goes further. It denies the possibility of any general statement, such as “respect your elders,” as relevant for regulating the behavior of most individuals.

Is it impossible, then, to apply Daoism to modern social and ethical questions? I think we can use it, if we remember that Daoist prescriptions are particular and personal. They are suggestions to individuals, not public doctrines that might be anticipated to suit most people, most of the time. In a sense, Daoism is not playing the same moral game as Confucianism. It is not striving for regulation of society; rather, it seeks something like the liberation of individuals. And that is a project that is certainly pertinent to modern debates.

Notes

1. For a general historical overview of early China, see Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds, *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
2. Frederick W. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), Chapter 2; David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames “Chinese philosophy,” in E. Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

3. Joseph Needham mentions Daoism's "characteristic distaste for metaphysics" in *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 40.
4. Derk Bodde, "Myths of Ancient China," in Samuel N. Kramer, ed., *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Garden City, NY: Quadrangle Books, 1961). For a fuller philosophical discussion of the contrast of Greek and Chinese thinking, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Cultures* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).
5. Among the earliest writers, *Mozi*, is a notable stylistic exception, with longer and more analytic chapters. And that textual form becomes more influential into the third century BCE, as seen most prominently in *Xunzi*.
6. Hegel argued, to significant historical effect, that ancient Chinese thought was not "philosophy": Young Kun Kim, "Hegel's Criticism of Chinese Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West*, 28 (2) (April 1978), pp. 173–180. See also Amy Olberding, ed., *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies*, 8 (1) (Fall 2008).
7. Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011); A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Dao* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishers, 1989); Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Manoa, HA: Belknap Press, 1985).
8. Tu Wei-ming, "The Creative Tension Between *Jen* [*Ren*] and *Li*," in Tu Wei-ming, ed., *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 5–16; Shirong Luo, "Is *Yi* more basic than *Ren* in the teachings of Confucius?" *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 38 (3) (September 2011), pp. 427–443.
9. Hinton uses a different numbering system than Bloom in organizing the *Mencius* text. I use the system particular to each translator in citations of his or her work.
10. Karyn Lai makes note of parental duties toward children in *Learning from Chinese Philosophies: Ethics of Interdependent and Contextualized Self* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 25–26.
11. The notion that "names," whether they connote social roles or political offices, bring with them certain moral imperatives is famously expressed in the "rectification of names" reference in *Analects* 13.3. This idea is returned to in Chapter 5.
12. My understanding of Confucius is influenced by their key text, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987). Their discussion of the sage as virtuoso can be found there on pp. 275–283.
13. Good starting points are: Hall and Ames's "Philosophical Introduction," in Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*



(New York: Ballantine Books, 2003); Burton Watson's "Introduction," in his translation, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

14. Thomas Merton, the contemplative Trappist monk who was drawn to Zhuangzi, resists this temptation, noting that he did not write a book: ". . . in which Christian rabbits will suddenly appear by magic out of a Daoist hat." Thomas Merton, *The Way of Zhuangzi* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 10.
15. A.C. Graham, trans., *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), p. 82.

