

A study on the ecological philosophy of Laozi

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The eco-environmental problems have become a hot topic of global concern today. Many scholars seek intellectual resources from traditional cultures to solve these problems. This article tries to extract the rich ecological thoughts from the text of *Laozi*. According to Laozi, Tao is 'the mother of all beneath Heaven', that is, the whole universe, including man and nature, evolve from Tao. This indicates the primary harmony of man and nature. However, man mistakenly regards himself as the lord of nature, and uses his force and methods of science and technology to enslave nature, causing the current ecological crisis. The way to resolve the crisis is pointed out in the following statement: 'Man should imitate Earth, Earth should imitate Heaven, Heaven should imitate Tao, and Tao is being what it is'. Laozi advocates man to imitate nature, leading a life of 'having no self', 'wu wei' or 'desiring no-desire'. This is the Tao-centred way of living, which brings about a transformation in human existence.

Contribution: This article argues that the current ecological crisis is caused by mankind's mistaken belief that they are the masters of nature. The philosophical ideas of Laozi provide a way to resolve the crisis, advocating that humans should imitate nature and adopt a Tao-centred way of living. This way of living brings about a transformation in human existence. The article provides a philosophical perspective on how to solve contemporary environmental problems.

Keywords: Laozi; ecological philosophy; Tao-centred; the way of living; Tao.

Introduction

We are living in an era with unprecedented highly developed material civilisation and deep crises and wide range of problems, of which eco-environmental problems are global issues. As a heavy price of western industrial civilisation, the destruction of ecological environment was started in the west, and later it expanded to various parts of the world. The industrial civilisation based on rationality-technology has constituted an autonomous paradigm and conquered the whole world with unstoppable force.

Because of historical reasons, the large-scale industrialisation movement in China was started in 1980s, with eco-environmental problems as its negative effect. In the 1990s, eco-environmental problems attracted worldwide attention, and various publications concerning with environmental problems appeared on the market continuously. This article tries to extract the ecological philosophy in the text of *Laozi* (also translated into *The Tao-Te Ching* [Lau 1963]) in order to benefit the world.

Tao as 'The mother of all beneath Heaven'

The author of this article has on other occasions argued that 'Tao' is the impersonal response to the Ultimate Reality. As we can see in *Laozi*, unlike Jahweh, Vishnu or Allah, Tao is not a personal God who gives message or instruction to humans directly or indirectly. As the impersonal origin of the universe, Tao is similar to Logos in ancient Greek philosophy and Brahman in Hindu philosophy. We find no hint in *Laozi* at a personal God.

As Tao is impersonal, it seems to be a concept of a strong philosophical flavour. However, it cannot be captured by philosophical rationality, for Laozi says: 'The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao' (*Laozi*, chapter 1). Although Tao is ineffable, Laozi has made his effort to describe it. What he has described is definitely not Tao itself, but the manifestation of Tao.

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Above all, Laozi confirms that Tao is constrained by nothing in the world. On the contrary, Tao is the origin of worldly appearances. He says:

There is a thing, formless yet complete. Before Heaven and Earth it existed. Without sound, without substance, it stands alone without changing. It is all pervading and unfailing. One may think of it as the mother of all beneath Heaven. We do not know its name, but we term it Tao. Forced to give an appellation to it, I should say it was Great. (chapter 25)

As we can see from this statement, the Tao as the Ultimate Reality is ineffable, and the Tao described by Laozi is what has manifested itself in human cognition and experience, and is therefore effable. It is the Tao behind its manifestation that is 'the mother of all beneath Heaven'. All beneath Heaven come from Tao, and they are the manifestation of Tao, as Laozi says: 'Tao produced Oneness. Oneness produced duality. Duality evolved into trinity, and trinity evolved into the ten thousand (i.e., infinite number of) things' (chapter 42).

In a natural sense, man is only one of 'the ten thousand things' evolved from Tao. But Laozi seems to view man differently as one of 'the four that are great'. He says: 'Tao is great; Heaven is great; Earth is great; and Man is great. In the universe there are four that are great, and Man is one of them' (chapter 25). This indicates man's position in the universe. As we all know, Heaven, Earth and Tao are unlimited, while Man is limited. Why is Man listed in 'the four that are great'? It is probably because of man's uniqueness, that is, man can think and has a free will, which make man the intelligent part of the universe.

As Tao is 'the mother of all beneath Heaven', all things exist for a reason: they come from Tao. In other words, they are the manifestation of Tao on a physical level, and so is man. The difference between man and other things is that man has spirituality; spirituality is considered to be the uniqueness of man.

Science does not admit the spirituality of everything in the universe, but it admits the spirituality of man. According to Laozi, Tao is the origin of everything, so man comes from Tao. Actually man also returns to Tao. A wise man might at least accept Tao to be his or her origin on a rational level. Philosophically speaking, Tao is the metaphysical basis of everything; and culturally speaking, Tao is the last home of everyone.

As man together with all other things is living in the same home of Tao, the relationship between man and nature should be harmonious. The initiative of man is granted by Tao with the purpose of avoiding adverse factors in natural survival. But in reality, with his rationality-technology instruments, man has within a short historical period greatly changed his primitive relationship with nature. Objectively speaking, man has assumed himself to be the lord of nature, and all other things objects of slavery. As a result, man has lost his love and sympathy to his 'brother'¹ (the nature), and

1.Chinese philosopher Zhang Zai (Zai & Lechang 2012) says in his *Qian Cheng Pian*: 'All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions'.

gone wild to enslave nature recklessly. However, because of man's constitutive status as a part of the universe, which is the manifestation of Tao, his acquisition on the material level is inadequate to bring him inner peace.² On the contrary, man has become homeless.

Living in an environment rich in material wealth, man often lacks deep metaphysical thinking, and is unwilling to take the trouble to understand the philosophical insights of past civilisation. The author does not know how many people could understand the truth of Tao as 'the mother of all beneath Heaven', and taste its sweetness in their deep hearts.

Man should imitate Earth, Earth should imitate Heaven, Heaven should imitate Tao and Tao is being what it is

As Tao evolves the universe, that is to say, everything including man is the manifestation of Tao. A glimpse of the working of Tao could be obtained by observing its manifestation. About 'the four that are great' mentioned before, Laozi gives us their sequence as follows: 'Tao is great; Heaven is great; Earth is great and Man is great'. He puts Tao at the first place, then Heaven and Earth and Man is placed last. Based on this sequence, the relationship between Man and Earth, Heaven and Tao should be 'Man should imitate Earth, Earth should imitate Heaven, Heaven should imitate Tao, and Tao is being what it is' (chapter 25).³ The word 'imitate' here is an enlightening word, indicating Man's constitutive status in 'the four that are great', that is, Man is great because he imitates Earth, Heaven and Tao.

Theoretically speaking, the relationship between Man, Earth, Heaven and Tao might take three forms: (1) Man governs Earth, Heave and Tao; (2) Man is equal to Earth, Heave and Tao and (3) Man imitates Earth, Heave and Tao. Of these three forms, the first is what man has taken in industrial civilisation. Man not only regards himself as the lord of all creatures, but puts himself above nature, using his will to change and enslave nature.

Heaven and Earth are selfless and extremely inclusive. However, deceived by the illusory energy of material benefits and sensory desire, man considers Heaven and Earth to be dead, and therefore could be arbitrarily enslaved. It is this concept, perspective or practice that is protested by the Green Peace Movement in western and eastern countries, for the serious consequences it has caused are known to all. People might join this Movement with different motives and under various cultural backgrounds, but they all agree that man is treating nature in a wrong

2.Also see *Mark* 8:36: 'What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?'

3.In *Laozi*, 'being what it is' is also called 'nature'. Obviously, the concept of nature in *Laozi* is quite different from the nature for modern man. Actually, in *Laozi* we cannot find nature or ecology in its modern sense.

way. It is considered to be a wrong way because it leads to the antagonism of man and nature, the result of which is the subsistence crisis and the distinction of humans in the end.

In this background, people of insight, who think man and nature are on an equal footing with mutual benefit, have proposed a new paradigm for the relationship between man and nature. This new paradigm is the coexistence of man and nature. Theoretically speaking, it is more preferable than the old paradigm of man governing nature. If this new paradigm becomes the guide to our practice, the coordination between man and nature would not be a dream. But the coexistence of man and nature is based on the premise that man is capable of controlling his desire. Its realisation requires a reevaluation of anthropocentrism: man not only seeks his own interests but also adopts a natural way of living. For individuals, it is possible to live in this new paradigm when their spiritual development allows them to. But for the whole society, it is difficult to take this paradigm. If this succeeded, every living being would be benefited.

However, Laozi around 2500 years ago had told us about the proper relationship between man and nature: man imitates nature. Why? Because man is in the lowest position of 'the four that are great', although man in his free will consider himself to be above nature. When man takes nature as the object to be utilised and enslaved, nature responds to man in a duality of good and evil, that is, man gets material benefits from nature, and at the same time endures its negative effects. This corresponds to the 'karma principle' in Indian philosophy.

Then what does 'imitate' mean? How could Man imitate Earth, Heaven and Tao? According to Laozi, the nature of imitation is 'being as it is', which means 'wu wei' (inaction).

'Wu wei' is the opposite of 'you wei'. Both of them are 'wei' (action), but 'you wei' is action based on egoism, which indicates action with personal intention and disturbing the natural flow of things. Therefore, 'you wei' is also called 'wang wei' (wild action) by Laozi (chapter 16). What should be noticed here is that Laozi does not negate 'you wei' completely. Rather, he divides 'you wei' into good action and evil action, and he believes that good action brings good result, and vice versa. For example, he says 'Heaven and Tao have no partial love, but they will always help good man' (chapter 79). However, 'you wei' is not the focus of his attention. What he advocates is 'wu wei'.

Laozi praises the merits of 'wu wei', claiming 'you take no action, and the people nurture each other' (chapter 57). 'Wu wei' is represented by 'making no laws' (chapter 57), 'owning no interest' (chapter 57), 'expressing no desire' (chapters 48, 57), 'tasting the flavourless' (chapter 63), 'having no attachment' (chapter 64), 'having no ranks' (chapter 69), 'not be known' (chapter 70) etc. For Laozi, 'wu wei' is action following the laws of Tao, and therefore it is the only way of living that conforms to Tao.

In my opinion, the 'you wei' (wild action) way of living equals 'to have', while the 'wu wei' way of living equals 'to be'. When one adopts the attitude of 'to have' towards life, he or she appears to be rajasic, while the attitude of 'to be' makes him or her appear sattvic.⁴

Most people today belong to the rajasic type, identifying themselves with their bodies, always desiring 'to have' and to enjoy. The sensate culture in the west is a typical rajastic (exciting and mobile) culture, in which people do not imitate nature, but chase materialistic desire. In such a culture, with the increase of population and technical force, nature is suffering more and more. What is worse is that eastern countries including China and India are stepping forward to this sensate culture. On this earth with limited resources, our destiny is doomed in such a culture. We have to change our orientation of survival.

All the flourishing things will return to their source

According to Laozi, all different things in this universe return to their source, and this 'return' is a part of 'the flow of nature', that is, 'an eternal decay and renewal'. Laozi says:

All the flourishing things will return to their source. This return is peaceful; it is the flow of nature, an eternal decay and renewal. Accepting this brings enlightenment. (chapter 16)

Here, Laozi draws a clear picture of the ecological cycle for us. From the change of four seasons, we observe the birth, growth, maturity and decay of things. All things return to their source in their particular manner, and are reborn in their next cycle of life.

Man is also in the flow of nature. Usually, we accept other things to be in the flow of nature, but man has a strong self-consciousness, so the return of man to his source has a deeper spiritual meaning. As Tao is 'the mother of all beneath heaven', man naturally returns to Tao, and this return should be accepted by man. Laozi warns us 'ignoring this brings misery' (chapter 16). The word 'misery' (xiong) used by him indicates not only the harm to life, but the destruction of life.

Laozi proceeds to the merit of accepting nature's flow:

Who accepts nature's flow becomes all-cherishing; being all-cherishing he becomes impartial; being impartial he becomes magnanimous; being magnanimous he becomes natural; being natural he comes one with Tao; being one with Tao he becomes immortal: though his body will decay, Tao will not. (chapter 16)

Nowadays, man regards himself as the master of nature, and is using his rational-technological methods to extract from nature unlimitedly. During specific historical periods, such as the Industrial Revolution, people focused solely on extracting from nature without considering the associated costs. Even if they think of the price, they would rather satisfy their desire than respect nature. Some of them even believe

⁴In the Indian classic *Bhagavad Gita* (Edgerton 1972), the rajasic person and the sattvic person are described in chapter 18.

man could avoid the revenge of nature with his power of science. It is true that some people may avoid this revenge by their privilege, but that means their evil consequences are shifted on to other people, just like some countries transfer environmental pollution to other countries and districts.

Indeed, man has demanded so much from nature that he has lost his Tao or Way. The earth is 'losing her patience', and the fresh air, bright sunshine and clean water she provides man are disappearing. Laozi makes his warning to us:

If heaven were not thus pure, it soon would rend. If earth were not thus sure, it would break and bend. Without these powers, the spirits soon would fail. If not so filled, the drought would parch each vale. Without that life, creatures would pass away. (chapter 39)

Because of losing our Tao and Te (moral), we, the children of mother earth, are making heaven no pure (such as air pollution and ozone depletion), earth no sure (such as unlimited mining of underground resources like petroleum, coal and water), spirits lose power (such as deforestation), vales disappear (such as rivers dammed randomly, damage of vegetation and soil erosion) and creatures pass away (such as artificial extermination, human disturbance of species and abuse of pesticides). We are doing harm to earth and heaven. The sage Laozi warns us again:

Truly if one uses Tao as one's instrument, the results will be like Tao; if one uses Te as one's instrument, the results will be like Te. If one uses what is the reverse of Tao and Te, the results will be the reverse of Tao and Te. For to those who have conformed themselves to Tao, Tao readily lends them power. To those who have conformed themselves to Te, Te readily lends them more power. While to those who have conformed themselves to inefficacy, inefficacy readily lends them ineffectiveness. (chapter 23)

People in our age identify their true self with their body, and therefore take their body as their source. Such people will not 'conform themselves to Tao', or 'conform themselves to Te', but 'conform themselves to inefficacy'. However, because 'nature is impartial' (chapter 79), and 'nature is not kind; it treats all things impartially', those 'who have conformed themselves to inefficacy' will definitely endure the evil consequence brought by inefficacy.

As a short text with five thousand Chinese characters, Laozi has surprisingly rich content concerning the relationship between man and nature, which deserves our deep reflection. 'The flow of nature' described by Laozi is a further explanation of 'Man should imitate Earth, Earth should imitate Heaven, Heaven should imitate Tao, and Tao is being what it is', and it is also the theoretical basis of this imitation.

We have mentioned that the reason of conforming oneself to inefficacy lies in identifying oneself to his or her body, which is also pointed out in *Laozi*. It says:

Both praise and blame cause concern, for they bring people hope and fear. The object of hope and fear is the self (body), for, without self, to whom may fortune and disaster occur ... I suffer

great calamity from praise and blame, because I have a self. With no self, there is no calamity. (chapter 13)

As we can see here, 'having a self' is opposite to 'having no self'. The former means to value one's life as the basis of his or her way of living, which is similar to the 'sat-kaya-drsti' in Buddhism; while the latter does not mean one has no body or life, for if one has no life, how could him or her declare 'there is no calamity'. Therefore, I consider 'having no self' to be a state of life. One who conforms himself to Tao no longer identifies himself with his body, and he takes Tao as the basis of his way of living. Such a person has realised he is Tao, and his 'self', which is identified with his body, has disappeared.⁵ According to Laozi, one who has forgotten his 'self' and is living in Tao is a sage.

'Having a self' and 'having no self' represent two different orientations of existence. 'Having a self' requires 'you wei' and appropriation ('to have'), which leads to the conflict between subject and object. In order to sustain the self, one must continuously demand from the external world. In the relationship between man and nature, 'having a self' requires one to grab resources from nature continuously, and at the same time transfer one's waste to nature unlimitedly. It is a rajasic orientation of existence.

'Having no self' represents the life of a sage, whose existence is conformed to Tao, because he or she imitates Earth, Heaven and Tao. Laozi says: 'Nature flourishes at the expense of no one, so the sage benefits all men and contends with no one' (chapter 81).

'Having no self', 'wu wei' or 'to be' corresponds to 'all the flourishing things will return to their source', and it brings the result of 'the flow of nature', 'eternal decay and renewal' or 'though you die, you shall not perish'. On the contrary, 'you wei', 'having a self' or 'to have' is contradicted to 'all the flourishing things will return to their source', and it brings the result of 'misery'. The civilisation evolves from the axis of 'sensitivity-rationality-science and technology' and is orientated to 'having a self', 'you wei' or 'to have', therefore it is incapable of ending man's enslavement of nature and nature's revenge to man, although man may think of a way to solve a local crisis or disaster. Within more than a half century, directed by this orientation, in our development of material civilisation, what a price we have paid!

Desiring no-desire

We have discussed in the second part the three types of relationship between man and nature, that is, Man governs Earth, Heaven and Tao Man is equal to Earth, Heaven and Tao and Man imitates Earth, Heaven and Tao. Historically speaking, the first type only exists in a short period. For most time in history, man is awed by nature, probably because of nature's unfathomable force. But today most

⁵In theistic classics, this disappearance of one's self takes the form of God replacing the self, as Saint Paul says: 'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me'. (ss 2:20)

people adopt the first type, and those holding the third type are very few. Because man is used to identifying himself with his body, and viewing his relationship with nature from the perspective of subject-object dichotomy. In other words, man is used to the rajasic state of living.

Before the 20th century, the whole population was within the bearing capacity of the earth. But in the 20th century, there has been a major change in two factors, one is the population explosion, and the other is the rapid development of science and technology. With the great power of science and technology, man is capable of extracting more resources from nature and enjoying more fruits of material civilisation. Thus, 'science' is regarded as the true productive force, a magic power that increases material wealth rapidly. When these two factors are joined together, that is, the population explosion is joined with the rapid development of science and technology, the limited resources man extracting from nature could be exhausted quickly. While man is extracting from nature and enjoying material wealth, the earth is carrying an increasing burden, which by now is already out of her bearing capacity, making our environment worse and worse.

Especially in the second half of the 20th century, the depression of bearing capacity of the earth is obviously demonstrated. Do you not hear the alarm ringing? Man should realise his 'you wei' has caused a serious crisis. If things go on like this, the earth will not be a suitable home for man, and man will be extinct. Of course, man could take measures to protect himself from extinction, but if man does not change his orientation of existence, his extinction would be his destiny.

People of insight are concerned with the eco-environmental problems from various perspectives. For example, the Green Peace Movement in the west has developed into an influential force, and played a significant role, and green food is gaining popularity. But on the whole, man's orientation of existence has not changed.

It is clear from the aforesaid statement that we shall resort to including Man in 'the four that are great' to change the relationship between man and nature. It means we should reevaluate our way of living. In my point of view, there could be three ways of living. The first way is the absolute anthropocentric one, the second the mild anthropocentric way and the third the Tao-centred way. The absolute anthropocentric way of living is the one criticised by Laozi, for it demonstrates itself as wild action (you wei). The mild anthropocentric way knows man's survival to be closely bound up to his natural environment, and in my opinion, the paradigm of the coexistence of man and nature belongs to this way of living. As we mentioned before, the paradigm shift from man governing nature to man coordinating with nature is difficult, but it is possible under pressure of ecological crises and through media and government decision-making. As a matter of fact, different countries and areas have started to shift to the paradigm of coexistence of

man and nature. In my opinion, it is necessary and possible to propagate this paradigm of coexistence and make it into social consensus.

But the paradigm of the coexistence of man and nature is not our best way of living in a deeper sense, for it is not concerned with the transformation of human existence. Laozi has provided us the best way of living, that is to recover the primary relationship between Man and Earth, Heaven, and Tao. To achieve this goal, we have to replace anthropocentrism by Tao-centrism.

According to Laozi, the reason of Man being incapable of imitating Earth, Heaven and Tao lies in his 'forgetting contentment' and 'seeking attainment'. He says: 'There is no greater disaster than forgetting contentment; there is no greater sickness than seeking attainment' (chapter 64). 'Forgetting contentment' and 'seeking attainment' belong to the rajasic state, which should be transformed into the sattvic state. For me, the sage described in *Laozi* is the one 'having no attachment', 'taking no wild action' and 'desiring no-desire'. The sage not only has good relationship with other people, but also has appropriate relationship with Earth, Heaven and Tao. He has recovered his primary relationship with Tao, so he does not arrogantly desire to be the lord of nature, but follows the laws of Tao.

The way of living proposed by Laozi could help us solve ecological problems for good and all. The paradigm shift from man governing nature to man imitating nature is the Copernican Revolution in human existence.

But how could man 'desires no-desire'? Is it not some old-fashioned asceticism? Actually, it is impossible to understand the secret of 'desiring no-desire' without going deep into the text of *Laozi*. 'Desiring no-desire' does not mean the sage has no desire at all, for Laozi says:

[T]he sage puts 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. (chapter 7)

'The sage has no wild action and finds no failure' (chapter 64). Here we can see the desire of the sage conforms to Tao, so it is not based on occupation of material wealth or the rajasic state of living. In fact, to imitate Tao and recover the primary relationship between man and nature require man to shift from the rajasic state to the sattvic state, from 'you wei' to 'wu wei', or from the anthropocentric way of living to the Tao-centred way of living. This shift is also the transformation of human existence. In the sattvic state, 'you wei' or the Tao-centred way of living, man is in his right position in the structure of the universe, and the tension between man and nature is fundamentally eliminated. This shift may take a long time, during which we should try to use our knowledge to find more advanced scientific and technological methods to eliminate and

reduce noxious and polluting industries, such as replacing fossil energy by clean and reusable resources like fusion energy, wind power and marine energy. But our ultimate goal should be 'desiring no-desire'.

Perhaps this ecological philosophy I have extracted from Laozi will not be accepted and practiced by many, but it is not incomprehensible. It is hoped that more people of insight get to know this 'imitation' paradigm (man imitating nature) proposed by Laozi, and one day it would be appreciated and accepted by the public and the society. In the end, this article is concluded with the 41st chapter of *Laozi*, and it says:

When the great man learns Tao, he follows it with diligence.
When the common man learns Tao, he follows it on occasion.
When the mean man learns Tao, he laughs out loud. Those who do not laugh, do not learn at all. (Merel n.d.:1).

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Z.W. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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