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Taoist Leadership Ethics

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Executive Summary

This essay addresses ethical issues raised by the growing popularity of Taoist leadership concepts. Western leaders seeking the benefits of Taoism should first consider its assumptions and how these presuppositions impact ethical decision-making. In philosophical Taoism, principles revealed in creation, not laws or moral codes, guide ethical choices. Ideal leaders exert minimal influence and model their behavior after such metaphors as the uncarved block, the clay pot, the child, the valley, and water. Ethical implications of Taoist leadership include: 1) nature as the ultimate ethical standard; 2) evil as blindness and a belief in the goodness of natural humankind; 3) a focus on being rather than doing; 4) multiple ways of understanding and the importance of multiple perspectives; 5) an emphasis on soft tactics and service; and 6) the spiritual dimension of the leader-follower relationship.

Taoism addresses many of the ethical shortcomings of dominant Western culture but those who would follow Taoist teaching may need to abandon their belief in the traditional distinction between right and wrong, moral absolutes, the importance of moral reasoning, deism, punishment of evildoers, and active influence. At the very least, leaders need to recognize that Taoism is an integrated philosophical system with its own set of assumptions about the origins of the universe, human nature, ways of understanding, and spirituality.

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If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument.

Chuang Tzu

In contemporary leadership studies one of the newest trends is based on one of the world's oldest schools of thought. The ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism has attracted a significant following among managers, writers, trainers and teachers in the United States. Taoist scholars are often quoted in discussions of empowerment and those interested in exploring the relationship between Taoism and leadership can draw from such resources as *The Tao of Leadership* (Heider, 1985), *The Tao of Management* (Messing, 1992), *The Tao of Personal Leadership* (Dreher, 1995), *The Tao at Work* (Herman, 1994), and *Real Power: Business Lessons from the Tao Te Ching* (Autry & Mitchell, 1998).

Proponents claim that Taoism (pronounced Daoism) is the path to both professional and personal fulfillment. Following Taoist principles, advocates argue, makes leaders more collaborative, creative and flexible. These are highly desirable qualities in a decentralized, rapidly changing work environment. Taoist leaders also experience a sense of inner peace or balance often missing in corporate America:

The more you embody these [Taoist] teachings, the more the scattered parts of your life fall into place and become a seamless whole; work seems effortless; your heart opens by itself to all the people in your life; you have time for everything worthwhile; your mind becomes empty, transparent, serene; you embrace sorrow as much as joy, failure as much as success; you unthinkingly act with integrity and compassion; and you find that you have come to trust life completely. (Autry & Mitchell, 1998, p. xviii)

Based on claims like these, Taoism appears to be an attractive alternative to traditional Western leadership models. However, scholars and practitioners should be cautious about embracing this approach without first considering its moral complexities. North American writers generally present Taoist leadership principles in the form of a translation or translation/interpretation format. Either Taoist literature is translated with a leadership emphasis or it is presented with commentary and application to the contemporary workplace. Rarely do authors consider the ethical dimensions of this philosophy. Instead, they apparently assume that Taoism's emphasis on harmony and collaboration makes it ethically superior to hierarchical leadership models (Messing, 1992).

Encouraging readers to adopt Taoist concepts without analyzing their ethical implications short-circuits the process of moral reasoning essential to ethical decision making. Leaders may differ as to what course of action to take, but they should carefully consider the ethical consequences of their choices both for their followers as well as for themselves. The purpose of this article is to address the "ethics gap" which has come from overlooking the ethical dimension of Taoist leadership. The first half of the paper surveys Taoist thought and leadership principles. The second half discusses some of the ethical implications of this philosophy.¹

Foundations of Taoist Ethical Thought

Overview

Taoism is one of the "100 Schools of Thought" or philosophy that emerged during the Warring States period in ancient Chinese history (600-300 B. C.). As the Chou dynasty disintegrated, the empire divided into a series of competing city-states (Ching, 1993). During this turbulent time citizens suffered from the ravages of war, poverty, and disease. Each school offered advice, primarily to rulers, for restoring peace and order to society (Garrett, 1993).

Taoism's two major texts are the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang tzu*. The *Tao* (*The Classic of the Way and its Power and Virtue*) is better known and has been translated more often than any other book except the Bible (Hopfe, 1991). According to popular tradition, royal librarian Lao-tzu authored the *Tao* as he departed China in self-imposed exile. However, most commentators conclude that the text is a collection of the teachings of several sages (Schipper, 1993). The *Chuang tzu* is also named after its purported author but, like the *Tao*, is considered to be the product of several teachers (Watson, 1996).²

By A.D. 200, Taoism divided into philosophical and religious branches. Religious Taoists (drawing on passages from the *Chuang tzu* that describe the sage as someone who enjoys a long, happy life) sought to increase longevity and pleasure through exercise, diet and elixirs (Smart, 1989). They developed an elaborate cosmology along with a priesthood, temples and rituals. Religious Taoism and Buddhism intermingled. Taoism adopted such ideas as heaven, hells and judgment from the Buddhists who, in turn, drew from Taoism's emphasis on spontaneity, reflection and nature to develop Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. While a number of Americans follow Taoist religious practices, leadership scholars generally draw from Taoism's philosophical roots.

Taoist ethics are rooted in an understanding of the Way or Tao. The Tao is the nameless, shapeless force or Non-Being which brings all things into existence or Being and then nurtures them (Ku-Ying, 1977). Once the Tao takes form, it manifests itself through natural principles. One such principle is the notion of complementary opposites (the yin and the yang) (Garrett, 1993). There is no mountain without the valley, no light without darkness, no prosperity without calamity, no life without death. The universe operates as it should when these forces are in equilibrium. A second principle is circular movement or reversion, which means that plants, animals, rocks and other forms of matter ultimately return to their natural state. Flowers spring from the ground only to return to earth; animals are born, live and then die; mountains rise up only to be worn down by erosion. The third principle is positive inaction or *wu-wei*. Wu-wei is letting events take their own course, of complying with the forces of nature (Ku-Ying, 1977). Practitioners of the marital arts model the principle of wu-wei. They do not attack but deflect the force of their opponents' blows back to them and wear them out by yielding (Hoff, 1982). Chuang tzu illustrates the power of working with the Tao by telling the story of an elderly man who fell into a great waterfall. By the time rescuers reached him, he had already climbed back up onto the bank. When asked how he survived his ordeal, the gentleman replied: "I go down with the swirls and come up with the

eddies, following along the way the water goes and never thinking about myself. That's how I can stay afloat." (Watson, 1996, p. 126).

The principles revealed in creation become the standards for ethical decision making. Ethical leaders and followers develop *te* or character by acting in harmony with the Tao, not by following commandments. Listing simplicity, patience and compassion as life's greatest treasures is the closest the Taoist masters come to outlining a moral code. Instead of encouraging right behavior, they believe that laws reflect a distrust of human nature and create a new class of citizens: lawbreakers. Efforts to reduce crime seem to increase it instead (Maurer, 1982).

Throw away holiness and wisdom,
and people will be a hundred times happier.
Throw away morality and justice,
and people will do the right thing.
Throw away industry and profit,
and there won't be any thieves.
(Mitchell, 1988, p. 19)

Ignoring or transcending morality put Taoists in conflict with the two most powerful philosophical schools of their day: the Confucianists and the Legalists (Smart, 1989). Confucians believed that harmony could be restored through rituals and fulfilling social obligations like duty to family and authority. Legalists (led by Han Fei-tzu) distrusted human nature and encouraged rulers to institute totalitarian regimes with written laws and harsh penalties.

Leadership Principles

The principles of the Tao described above apply equally to all individuals regardless of their place in society. However, the authors of the *Tao te Ching* and the *Chuang tzu* offer lots of advice to leaders in order to persuade the elite to adopt their ideas as a model for governance. The Taoist sages advocate a minimalist approach to leadership because government reflects a distrust of the working of the Tao and human nature (Johnson, 1997). When left alone, followers obey natural laws and society as a whole benefits. Therefore, she/he who governs best governs least. Leaders attempting to solve problems often create new ones because they don't recognize the interrelationship of objects and events (Watts, 1975). For example, city officials who want to attract new industry to solve economic problems often fail to anticipate the complications—pollution, higher demand for city services, crowding, increased traffic congestion—that prosperity brings.

The ideal Taoist leader maintains a low profile, leading mostly by example and allowing followers to take ownership:

When the Master governs, the people
are hardly aware that he [she] exists.
Next best is a leader who is loved.
Next, one who is feared.
The worst is one who is despised.

If you don't trust the people,
you make them untrustworthy.

The Master doesn't talk, he [she] acts.
When his [her] work is done,
the people say, "Amazing:
we did it, all by ourselves!"
(Mitchell, 1988, p. 17)

Some of the most pointed comments of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu highlight the excesses of the feudal lords of their day. Both authors criticize the use of violence. Chuang tzu, for example, describes a reckless king who is so careless about killing his own citizens that their corpses spread like "grasses and weeds, turning his kingdom into marshland" (Hinton, 1997, p. 47). Lao tzu treats force as an evil to be used only as a last resort:

Weapons are the tools of violence;
all decent men [and women] detest them.
Weapons are the tools of fear;
a decent man [woman] will avoid them
except in the direst necessity
and, if compelled, will use them
only with the utmost restraint.
(Mitchell, 1988, p. 31)

In addition to condemning violence, Lao tzu and Chuang tzu criticize corrupt rulers who live in splendor while their people suffer. These leaders oppress followers through threats and heavy taxation. As their subjects sink into poverty and starvation, they dress elegantly, hoard their treasure, and gorge themselves on food and drink (Mitchell, 1988, pp. 9, 53, 74, 75).

Taoists introduce an alternative approach to leadership based on a series of images or metaphors drawn from nature and everyday life. The first of these—the uncarved block—functions both as a reflection of the nature of the Tao and as a model of how leaders ought to act. An uncarved block of wood or stone is nameless and shapeless like the Tao itself. Leaders should also be block-like, avoiding such entanglements as wealth, status, cleverness and glory while not intruding in the lives of followers. They ought to calmly accept whatever life brings—victory or defeat, joy or tragedy.

Though the uncarved block is small,
It cannot be employed (used as a vessel) by anyone.
If kings and barons can keep (this unspoiled nature),
The whole world shall yield them lordship of their
own accord.
(Yutang, 1948, p. 172)

The second metaphor—the clay pot—demonstrates the importance of nothingness. Taoists celebrate emptiness by elevating nothing to higher status than something. The most useful part of a pot is the emptiness within (Mair, 1990, p. 70). Leaders and followers need to empty themselves by clearing away distractions or barriers like glib speech, technology, selfishness and superficial intellectualism which keep them from true knowledge of the Tao. "Do not be an embodier of fame; do not be a

storehouse of schemes; do not be an undertaker of projects; do not be a proprietor of wisdom Be empty, that is all." (Watson, 1996, p. 95)

The third metaphor—the child—encourages leaders to live simply and humbly: "Who is rich in character is like a child" (Yutang, 1948, p. 252). According to Hopfe (1991): "The early Taoists looked upon the innocence of the child as an idea toward which all human beings should strive. The infant knows no craft and has no ambitions but to live; yet the child is cared for, fed, and clothed." (p. 215)

The fourth image—the mountain valley—highlights the importance of the feminine force both in nature and in leadership. Leaders should be valleys rather than prominent peaks. "He who is familiar with honor and glory but keeps to obscurity becomes the valley of the world," according to the *Tao*. "Being the valley of the world, he [she] has an eternal power which always suffices. (Yutang, 1948, p. 160)

The fifth metaphor—water—provides insight into how leaders are to influence others by demonstrating that there is strength in weakness. Over time, water cuts through the hardest rock, forming valleys and canyons:

There is nothing softer and weaker than water,
And yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and
strong things.
For this reason there is no substitute for it.
All the world knows that the weak overcomes the strong and
the soft overcomes the hard.
(Chan, 1963, p. 236)

Flexibility or pliability is one reason weakness is so powerful. For humans and other animals, flexibility is a sign of life while stiffness signals death. Leaders need to recognize the dynamic nature of reality and the circular nature of change and flex or bend to meet the demands of each situation that arises.

When a man is born, he is tender and weak.
At death, he is stiff and hard.
All things, the grass as well as trees, are tender and supple while alive.
When dead, they are withered and dried.

Therefore the stiff and the hard are companions of death.
The tender and the weak are companions of life.
Therefore if the army is strong, it will not win.
If a tree is stiff, it will break.
The strong and the great are inferior, while the tender
and the weak are superior.
(Chan, 1963, p. 233)

Ethical Implications

Taoism, like Christianity or Islam, has been used to justify conflicting moral choices. Some adherents have chosen simplicity and austerity while others have pursued a hedonistic lifestyle. Lao tzu's condemnation of violence did not prevent later religious followers from engaging in armed rebellion against governments that

didn't follow the Tao (Thompson, 1988). However, there are a number of ethical threads that run throughout Taoist thought. These include the notion that nature is the ultimate ethical source; ethical relativism; evil is blindness; an emphasis on being, multiple ways of knowing and approaching ethical issues; and the use of soft tactics and service.

Nature as the Ultimate Ethical Standard

Ethical decision making in Taoism is based on conformity to principles manifested in the natural or phenomenological world rather than on the consequences of choices (teleological ethics) or on cultural standards or values (deontological ethics). Right actions are those that reflect the workings of the physical world: nonaction, assisting but not controlling, softness, weakness, dwelling below, genuineness (Ku-Ying, 1977). Placing nature first (or rather the Tao as manifested in nature) seems to put Taoism at odds with ethical systems that look to a Supreme Being for their ultimate authority. The Tao is **not** a personal God with distinctive attributes who created the universe and intervenes in the affairs of the human race. Instead, the Tao is the impartial, impersonal force which underlies existence (Giles, 1947).

Using nature as the ultimate guide for ethical decision making blurs the distinction between pragmatism and ethics. The ethical action is the one that blends with natural rhythms to produce the desired outcome. In other words, if a choice "works" (brings the desired outcomes in harmony with nature), it is "right" (Anderson & Ross, 1998; Cheng, 1987).

Ethical Relativism

To follow the Tao is to recognize that the universe is fluid. The seasons change, plants and animals follow the cycle of reversion and so on. The constancy of change means that what is right in one context may be wrong in another. Even judging the consequences of ethical choices is difficult because actors don't know how events will unfold. The following story, taken from the *Huai Nan Tzu*, makes this point:

A poor farmer's horse ran off into the country of the barbarians. All his neighbors offered their condolences, but his father said, 'How do you know that this isn't good fortune?' After a few months the horse returned with a barbarian horse of excellent stock. All his neighbors offered their congratulations, but his father said, 'How do you know that this isn't a disaster?' The two horses bred, and the family became rich in fine horses. The farmer's son spent much of his time riding them; one day he fell off and broke his hipbone. All his neighbors offered the farmer their condolences, but his father said, 'How do you know that this isn't good fortune?' Another year passed, and the barbarians invaded the frontier. All the able-bodied young men were conscripted, and nine-tenths of them died in the war. Thus good fortune can be disaster and vice versa. Who can tell how events will be transformed? (Mitchell, 1988, p. 109)

Evil as Blindness/Goodness of Humankind

According to philosophical Taoism, right and wrong are human distinctives; in the end what society labels as good or evil is absorbed into the one that is Tao. Wars and other forms of suffering come from violating the natural order (Dreher, 1990).

Viewed in this light, evil is the result of spiritual blindness and the evildoer is to be pitied:

The teaching of the Tao Te-Ching is moral in the deepest sense. Unencumbered by any concept of sin, the Master doesn't see evil as a force to resist, but simply as an opaqueness, a state of self-absorption which is in disharmony with the universal process, so that, as with a dirty window, the light can't shine through. This freedom from moral categories allows him [her] his [her] great compassion for the wicked and the selfish. (Mitchell, 1988, p. ix)

A corollary to Taoism's contention that evil is blindness to the Tao is a belief in the inherent goodness of uncorrupted humankind. People, in an uncomplicated, natural state, will follow the Tao and society as a whole will prosper (Smullyan, 1977).

Being Not Doing

By highlighting such characteristics as humility, simplicity and spontaneity, Taoism focuses on what a leader is instead of what a leader does (Biallis, 1991). Wise choices flow from character that is produced by understanding the Tao and acting on its principles, not from following moral codes and commandments.

Multiple Ways of Knowing/Multiple Perspectives

Logic and reasoned argument are the primary tools of the ethical decision-maker in the West. Not so for the Taoists. While thoughtful dialogue has its place, the workings of the Tao and its ethical principles are largely revealed through such means as silence, contemplation, observation, and ambiguity. Understanding is spontaneous and intuitive as the story of Cook Ting illustrates. When asked how he could cut up an ox without dulling his knife, he replied: "When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants." (Watson, 1996, pp. 46-47).

The importance of multiple perspectives flows out of Taoism's holistic focus. If every element of nature is equally important, then many points of view ought to be taken into consideration when making decisions (Cheng, 1987; Murakami, 1987). Recognizing that there are multiple, equally valid viewpoints should encourage leaders to be flexible and to seek consensus in conflict situations. On the other hand, when all viewpoints are valid, then no viewpoint can be singled out as wrong.

Soft Tactics and Service

Through their condemnation of the use of violence and their celebration of water, childlikeness and humility, Taoists argue for the use of "soft" influence strategies such as empowerment, modeling and teamwork. Their description of leaders as blocks, children and valleys highlights the feminine dimension of leadership often overlooked in the United States.

Spirituality

To be a Taoist is to acknowledge the deeper, spiritual dimension behind all things, to recognize the "penetration of physical creation by spiritual force" (Maurer, 1985, p. 9). The physical and spiritual are not separate realms but one. As a result, every encounter between leaders and followers, no matter how routine, has a spiritual dimension. Interaction ought to be approached with a sense of reverence and expectation because it may bind participants together and open the way to a greater understanding of the Tao (Crawford, 1996).

Conclusions

Taoism addresses many of the major shortcomings of dominant Western culture: violence and coercion, materialism, greed, frenetic activity, government and corporate intrusion into the private lives of citizens, status seeking, legalism, separation from the natural world, spiritual bankruptcy. Yet, the cost of following the Tao is high. True disciples, it would seem, need to put aside:

- distinctions between right and wrong
- exclusive reliance on reason
- faith in a divine being and any hope of an afterlife
- all formal guides to ethical conduct, ranging from organizational and professional codes to the Ten Commandments
- the belief that leaders should actively influence groups and organizations
- technological sophistication
- the desire to punish evildoers
- condemnation of other points of view
- moral absolutes
- separation of the spiritual and material worlds; any distinction between secular and spiritual leadership

Many Western leaders will likely try to integrate elements of Taoism into their existing ethical frameworks. In fact, contemporary writers suggest that interested readers can adopt Taoist principles on a piecemeal basis (Autry & Mitchell, 1998). There is precedence for mixing Taoism with other belief systems. Throughout Chinese history, individuals have often been both Confucian and Taoist, following Confucian thought in public life and Taoism in their private affairs (Chan, 1963). Yet, Taoist ethics cannot be divorced from the philosophy's underlying world view. Leaders may decide to adopt only certain Taoist practices. However, they should first wrestle with the fact that Taoism is a complex, comprehensive, integrated system of thought, not a set of unrelated concepts. Utilizing Taoist principles may well produce better results and more personal fulfillment as its advocates claim. Nevertheless, leaders seeking to follow the Tao must carefully consider the ways in which the philosophy's assumptions about the origins and workings of the universe, human nature, knowledge, and spirituality impact ethical choices.

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Notes

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Portions of this article were presented at the 1998 National Communication Association and 1999 International Leadership Association Conventions.

2

Both texts pose significant challenges to translators. In addition to being vague, fanciful and mysterious, they contain allusions that modern Western readers won't understand. Adding to the confusion is the fact that archaic Chinese is extremely difficult to decipher. Writers may choose to render an accurate literal translation or take more liberties and create a version that makes more sense to contemporary audiences (Bynner, 1944). As a result, the same passage is subject to a wide range of interpretations. Readers should consult several translations when determining what a particular chapter means.