Better than Ethics? The Way of Moral Power

Abstract

Through its long history, Daoism has been called immoral, amoral, and – more recently – a paragon of ecological morality. In the Daodejing we are told to be better than benevolent but also to be as indifferent as storms and to treat people like ‘straw dogs.’ How are we to think these together? Are these mutually consistent ways of imitating nature? We are told to let our way be the way of nature, which is yin and yang, but we are also told to be decidedly yin – to be receptive pliant, yielding, nonresistant, relaxed, calm, and so on. This approach to life and ethics raises a host of problems. How can nature be normative? What is it to imitate nature? Why put nature first? Why the premium on effortlessness, nondeliberation, and so on? Why the emphasis on softness, formlessness, nonresistance and ‘the feminine’? Do such qualities make one automatically more ‘natural’? More moral? Is it true that the state extolled in the Daodejing is morally superior to virtue, benevolence, or rule-governed responsibility?

I address these questions as I set out the assets and liabilities of the master argument and master strategy of the Daodejing, drawing on Neosocratic metaphysics and its ethic of moral power. I claim that Neosocratic metaphysics and ethics provides a scheme useful for interpreting, clarifying, and correcting the central teaching of the Daodejing. In its imitation of nature’s way, Daoist practice uses and exhibits forms of agency and power that are uncommonly supple and responsive. I argue that such power is not automatically moral, nor intrinsically better than moral, but nevertheless is needed to make apex morality accessible. In so doing, I make a case for the importance of this ‘supersoft’ way of moving, acting, and living in human moral community and nature at large.

After a brief review of Neosocratic metaphysics and the ethic derived from it, I focus on the moral self in Daoist and Neosocratic thought. I set out a categorial articulation of Daoist natural functions and reflexivities (ziran, zifu, ziyou, zizheng, zibu, ziding, etc.), claiming that the Daoist view of the natural self and its powers is on track, but insufficiently clear and inadequately articulated. I argue that the strong critique of habits and customs and rules is useful within limits – since these can indeed impede us in ways typically unremarked in traditions that emphasize habits of virtue – but the critique is based on a misconstrual of the relation between nature and culture. That requires a metaphysics that can adequately connect nature and culture (as does Neosocratic thought with its semiotic based on ontological operators.) The prime task of the paper is to specify the relationship between supersoft power and moral power, with a focus on the natural self that is capable of such power. This helps us to see how nature can be normative, and how a person transcending self as an agent of moral interagency can function as an emissary of nature to humankind.

1 The master argument of the Daodejing is that nature has a ‘way,’ that we can imitate this, and that we ought to imitate it, since that is better for ourselves and political society and nature at large. (We can imitate it in practice even though we may lack adequate theoretical knowledge of it, and even though there is no method for the practice – “The way for which there is a method is not the way that flows on” DDJ 1.)

2 I have argued in reference deleted for review that Neosocratic metaphysics provides a useful complement to – and perhaps a necessary amplification and correction of – classical Chinese philosophy of nature. Here I shall argue that the ethic of moral power, derived directly from that metaphysics, is likewise useful and possibly corrective to the ethics of the Daodejing.

3 Apex morality is ethics at its peak. An example is ‘The way to peace is peace.’ Nonapex morality may use non-peaceful methods to achieve a sort of peace, non-just methods for attaining justice, etc. Apex morality is reflexive in structure and noninstrumental in character. I argue in references deleted for review that this not best conceived either as merely ideal or supererogatory. I have elsewhere defended a Platonic distinction between active power (which is the ability and exercise of the ability of affecting others and oneself) and passive power (which is the ability and exercise of the ability to be affected). Given the continuity between moral power and immoral forms of power, which continuity is a basis for the philosophy of moral power, that distinction implies a distinction between active and passive moral power. The special contribution of Daoist ethics to global moral thought concerns passive moral power, and how apex morality requires the cultivation of the habit of transcending habits of virtue and a suppleness so soft that desires dissolve, agendas melt, and personal boundaries blur.

4 See below, “Map of Correlations.” In Neosocratic philosophy, Being as the significance of nature is thought through its ‘qualifications,’ which qualify what exists for having its own significance and therefore qualifies it for signification. The forms of qualification define the means of signification (general semiotics), and – in more local application, the qualifications of morality, aesthetics, etc. Reflexive acts on these same forms define natural individuals. The metaphysical forms of qualification appear in nature as forms of activity. These define somatic schemata, and cognitive operations and so on. Read these left to right. Read Daoist thought right to left. The two converge on features of the moral self that make apex morality possible.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Form of Activity</th>
<th>Qualifications of moral power</th>
<th>Fleshy functions, somatic schemata</th>
<th>Reflexive acts</th>
<th>Moral mien</th>
<th>Daoist moral positivities</th>
<th>Daoist moral reflectivities</th>
<th>Nature's way</th>
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<tr>
<td>(Specifying the ‘qualifications’ of being, this function as necessary in any universe of interrelated energetic particulars)</td>
<td>(Only power that is voluntary, purposive, situation, transformative &amp; manifestive is morally relevant – these dimensions define the content of basic rights and virtues)</td>
<td>(Here the forms of act become experienced bodily functions, which form the base for perception &amp; cognition shaped by cultural traditions. In their pure form, they make the dimensions of qualification available to whole-body intuition)</td>
<td>(This defines the ‘self’ and ‘selflessness’ of moral power by reference to the pertinent reflexive acts)</td>
<td>(As in neosocratic metaphysics, Daoist reflectivities produce natural sinuals that are releating relative individuals, avoiding extremes of unconditioned autonomy and radical no-self)</td>
<td>(Constant positive change requires alignment with the changeless principles of change)</td>
<td>(As a vehicle of change, a self - transforming function is)</td>
<td>(Aspects of nature pertinent to practice and whole-body intuition - cf 'master argument' and 'master strategy' of DDJ)</td>
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<td>Enaction</td>
<td>(derivationally: internalizing &amp; externalizing, gathering &amp; scattering, capturing &amp; emitting, and other acts that work to set relative hierarchies and exteriors)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Nature's becoming-self unforcedly, imitated by modeling what is so of itself</td>
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<td>Projection</td>
<td>(derivatively: subordinating, coordinating, minimizing &amp; maximizing, dominating &amp; submitting, and other acts that fix functions and set attractors)</td>
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<td>Nature's having no goals other than its own accomplishment constantly realized, imitated by serenely realizing the flowing identity of the real and the ideal</td>
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<td>Coaction</td>
<td>(via nesting &amp; embedding, networking &amp; fielding, basing, placing, and other field-constituting acts)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consanguinity of all natural entities and events, mutually situating and situated, imitated by expanding one's identifications and place-making in natural locales</td>
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<td>Faction</td>
<td>(sampling, parsing, filtering, clustering, and other acts that bias individuals and make interactions partial)</td>
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<td>Nature's de (power-integrity) as nature's inner charisma - power bending cooly to its own balance and harmony, imitated in moral power: one simply is moral and morality is established throughout</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transaction</td>
<td>(derivatively: give-take, push-pull, flow-dow, &amp; other acts that make for economies of interchange)</td>
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<td>Nature's efficient equilibrium in continuous exchange, imitated in effortless agency and interagency</td>
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**Notes:**
- **push:** Transaction interactions partial)
- **Transaction**
- **Moral mien:** (This defines the ‘self’ and ‘selflessness’ of moral power by reference to the pertinent reflexive acts)
- **Wuwei:** (practical) via negative to the nameless Dao; as taiji emerges from wuji, dawen emerges from weiwu, unfurled, tapping into the source)
- **Nature’s way:** (Aspects of nature pertinent to practice and whole-body intuition - cf ‘master argument’ and ‘master strategy’ of DDJ)

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**Eventualities:**
- ‘Nonself’ as a perspective, 3; cf. 7, 33)
- ‘Selfless self-realization’
- ‘Selflessness’ of moral power: one becomes a means of one's own possession)
- ‘Zibu’ (making one's luck, 57)
- ‘Zifur’ (self-enriching, making one's luck, 57)
- ‘Zifal’ (transforming in relation, 57)
- ‘Zizheng’ (self-renunciation, self-acceptance)