

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*,¹ 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 correcting² 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.³ 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,⁴ 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 metaphysic that can adequately connect nature and culture (as does Neosocratic thought with its semiotic based in 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.

Form of Activity →
(Specifying the 'qualifications' of being, these function as necessities in any universe of interrelated energetic particulars)

Enaction

(derivatively: internalizing & externalizing, gathering & scattering, capturing & emitting, and other acts that work to set relative interiors and exteriors)

Proaction

(derivatively, subordinating & coordinating, minimizing & maximizing, dominating & submitting, and other acts that fix functions and set attractors)

Coaction

(via nesting & embedding, networking & fielding, basing, placing, and other field-constituting acts)

Faction

(sampling, parsing, filtering, rationing, and other acts that bias individuals and make interactions partial)

Transaction

(derivatively: give-take, push-pull, flow-stow, & other acts that make for economies of interchange)

→ Qualifications of moral power (Only power that is voluntary, purposive, situative, transformative & manifestive is morally relevant – these dimensions define the content of basic rights and virtues)

Voluntary (rights to basic liberties; virtues of deliberation; the apex is becoming an agent of agency, freely promoting moral freedom)

Purposive (rights to basic well-being; virtues of rational end-setting; apex occurs when the end and means share the same character – so that peace is the 'way' to peace, justice is the 'way' to justice, etc.)

Situative (rights to share in determining the character of shared contexts & institutions; virtues of grasping and transforming situations to harmonize self-and-others)

Manifestive and **mannered** (rights of speech & assembly, etc.; 'virtues of manifestation'; apex is the creation of a moral style that inspires others to be moral)

Transformative (rights to affect that which affects one; virtues are skillful means; apex is a moral change agent giving and receiving the relevant natural powers)

→ Fleshly functions, somatic schemata (Here the forms of act become experientible bodily functions, which form the base for perception & cognition shaped by cultural traditions. In their pure form, they make the dimensions of qualification available to whole-body intuition)

Centering

Orienting, aligning, finalizing

Grounding

(rooting in natural being), sinking

Opening, presencing

(tranquility not merely as attitude but as presence-of-being to somatic intuition)

Balancing of inflows and outflows, equipoise in self and in relation that permits easeful action and resilient responsiveness

→ Reflexive acts (The forms of activity become self-active and thereby define a singularity that can be numbered among the real articles of nature)

Acts of enclosing & internalizing and owning become reflexive in that which normalizes its borders and so exists in-itself and of-itself. An agent of moral power finds ways of action good at once for self & others.

Instrumentalizing acts that set goals and means 'for-a-purpose-P' reflexively finalize a self teleologically and define something that is a value for itself and exists for-its-own-sake.

Acts by which we relativize events and meanings to locales turn reflexively to define self as a context that situates all others. Being an agent of moral power requires turning to unreconstituted nature as primary context

The aspectualizing 'as' reflexively defines an entity as a perspective on all else; when stable, the active agent exists 'as-such'

Emerging in patterns of exchange, a self-transforming transaction becomes an ontological trader that translates information & energy in its own interest

→ Moral mien ← (This defines the 'self' and 'selflessness' of moral power by reference to the pertinent reflexive acts)

Rather than cling to one's established boundaries, one becomes an agent of recentering who helps all to renegotiate the personal center and its boundaries. Such a one identifies not with self but with the generative acts by which bounded and centered selves are made and remade.

Priorities & preferences that set a self are transcended as one becomes an promoter of moral power, which requires that one negotiate priorities and modify projects aptly and continuously

The self that sets a situation for others becomes adept at switching contexts, identifies with sheer context-making activity and becomes an agent of agency in the service of moral power.

The self defined by its unique perspective is surpassed as one learns to change aspects fluently; in service of moral power, one identifies with pure aspectualizing activity

An economic individual becomes a means of mediation, a vehicle of transformative exchange and hence of flexible moral engagement.

Wuwei ← (practical via negativa to the nameless Dao; as taiji emerges from wuji, dawei emerges from wuwei, unforcedly, tapping into the source)

Nonpossessiveness,

Selfless self-realization

nonattachment

gathering without attaching, bundling without tying

noninstrumentality

Purposing without purpose, intentionality without intent, disinterested interest; Desirelessness (19, 46) weakening the will (3) undaring (bugan 30, 64, 67, 69)

noncompetitive noncontentiousness (81); noncoercion, noncompulsion (no forcing), rejects the power of authority

Unbiased (no 'sides' to Dao that doesn't take sides); nonmanifestive (practical 'nothingness' or 'emptiness' opens to inclusive interplay)

Unimpeding interchange (removing impediments is derivative); Noninterference, nonresistance

Daoist moral ← positivities (Constant positive change requires alignment with the changeless principles of change)

Simplification,

Poverty (DDJ 22),

Giving all away (81),

Forgive debts (49, 79)

Knowing what is sufficient (33)

Knowing when to stop (zhizhi, 32, 44)

harmonization

Tong de (power sharing) Yin (Guanzi bk 36)

Releasement – let go by grounding it out

Emptiness, poverty ('empty the xin' DDJ 3)

Calm, serenity (DDJ 8)

Detachment (more emphasized in Zhuangzi)

Equanimity, fostering Blending and 'bending' flexibility in interplay; yielding (DDJ 22)

Doing good in response to the good and good in response to evil

Daoist reflexivities ← (As in neosocratic metaphysics, Daoist reflexivities produce natural singulars that are real relative individuals, avoiding extremes of unconditioned autonomy and radical no-self)

ziran (self-positing – DDJ 17, 23, 25, 51, 64)

ziyou (unclinging self-possession)

zifu (self-enriching, making own luck, 57)

zifa? (57)

ziheng (self-rectification in relation, 57)

'zihe' (self-harmonizing though harmonizing with social and natural contexts)

ziding (self-resolving, 37)

zibu (self-simplification 57)

zisheng (self-generating event, 3; cf. 7, 33)

'zihua' (self-transforming)

← Nature's way (Aspects of nature pertinent to practice and whole-body intuition - cf. 'master argument' and 'master strategy' of DDJ)

Nature's becoming-so-of-itself unforcedly, imitated by modeling what is so of itself

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

Consanguinity of all natural entities and events, mutually situating and situated, imitated by expanding one's identifications and place-takings in natural locales

de (power-integrity) as nature's inner charism - power tending coolly to its own balance and harmony, imitated in moral power: one simply is moral and morality is established throughout

Nature's efficient equilibrium in continuous exchange, imitated in effortless agency and interagency