

Discussion Note

A TAOIST ARGUMENT FOR LIBERTY

The ancient Chinese Taoists presented an argument for liberty¹ which differs radically from traditional arguments advanced by Western philosophers. In defense of liberty, Western philosophers have appealed to natural rights theories, utilitarianism in its various forms, and social contract theories. Proponents of these theories attempt to justify liberty by making a claim to moral knowledge. That is, these theories are claimed to be *true* (or correct) in some sense. In sharp contrast, the ancient Taoists made *no* claim to moral knowledge and, I believe, made the lack of such a claim a premise in their argument for liberty.

In the first part of this paper a Taoist claim to moral ignorance is presented. This is followed by evidence that the Taoists supported liberty—that is, a government that would not interfere with the actions of peaceful people. The paper concludes with a formulation of what I believe to be an implicit premise in the Taoist argument. This premise, when combined with the Taoist claim to moral ignorance, leads to the Taoist concept of minimal government, i.e., liberty.

The Taoists had little use for moral principles and theories (rules of benevolence and righteousness), not because they believed them to be false, but because they knew of no universally acceptable way of demonstrating a moral truth. Chang Wu-tzu said:

Suppose you and I have had an argument. If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of you beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right or are both of us wrong? If you and I don't know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark. Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, how can he decide? Obviously, then, neither you nor I nor anyone else can decide for each other. Shall we wait for still another person.²

The lack of any known objective method for demonstrating moral truths may lead to the admission of total moral ignorance.

Nieh Ch'üeh asked Wang Ni, "Do you know what all things agree in calling right?"

“How would I know that?” said Wang Ni.

“Do you know that you don’t know it?”

“How would I know that?”

“Then do things know nothing?”

“How would I know that? However, suppose I try saying something. What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don’t really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don’t know something I don’t really in fact know it? . . .”³

My interpretation of what Wang Ni is saying is this: *I do not know whether or not I know what is right*. I shall call this the *claim to moral ignorance*.⁴ It is my contention that this claim to moral ignorance is one of two premises used by the Taoists to support liberty. The word *right* in the Taoist claim to ignorance will be made more specific below.

There is ample textual evidence to support the claim that the Taoists believed that the best government is the least government.⁵ Lao Tzu speaks quite explicitly against the use of force:

He who assists the ruler with Tao does not dominate the world with force.

The use of force usually brings requital.⁶

How should a country be ruled? Lao Tzu says:

Ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish.⁷

In other words, disturb it as little as possible, since too much handling will spoil it. In less figurative language he states:

Administer the empire by engaging in no activity.⁸

The meaning of “no activity” (*wu wei*), according to Wing-Tsit Chan, is “taking no artificial action, noninterference, or letting things take their own course.”⁹ A Taoist government would not interfere with peaceful people. In short, it would allow each individual as much liberty as possible.

The claim to moral ignorance alone does not support the Taoist concept of government. Another premise is needed. This implicit premise, so basic to the Taoists that they did not explicitly formulate it, is: *Peaceful actions do not have to be morally justified, but coercive actions against peaceful people do need moral justification*.¹⁰

I do not believe that the Taoists would consider this claim to be a value judgment; rather, they would regard it as an empirical truth. It is simply a fact that a person does not demand of his peaceful neighbors that they justify their peaceful actions. On the other hand, the innocent victims of acts of aggression do want to know by what right, if any, their aggressor interferes with their liberty. Thus, the Taoists would not say that one has a *right* to live in peace any more than they would say that one has a right to breathe or a right to eat. If there is peace, then there is no need for rights or for moral theories. To practice peace is to practice Tao. Lao Tau says:

Therefore when Tao is lost, only then does the doctrine of virtue arise.
 When virtue is lost, only then does the doctrine of humanity arise.
 When humanity is lost, only then does the doctrine of righteousness arise.
 When righteousness is lost, only then does the doctrine of propriety arise.¹¹

The Taoist claim to moral ignorance can now be stated more specifically: I do not know whether or not I know of any way to justify coercion against peaceful people.¹²

The Taoist argument for liberty can now be presented:

Premise 1 A Taoist ruler does not know whether or not he knows of any way to justify coercive acts against peaceful people.

Premise 2 Peaceful acts do not have to be justified; coercive acts do have to be justified.

Conclusion A Taoist ruler will not use coercion against peaceful people.

I believe that the Taoists would allow premise 1, the claim to moral ignorance, to be generalized as: I do not know whether or not *anyone* knows of any way to justify coercive acts against peaceful people. From this generalization, along with premise 2, we now derive the conclusion: A Taoist ruler will not use coercion, or allow others to use it, against peaceful people.

Although the Taoists had little use for logic, the above argument is implicit in Taoist literature. The burden of proof is upon those who would infringe upon the liberty of others. Liberty does not have to be justified.

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1. I shall use the word *liberty* throughout this paper to mean *negative* liberty, that is, the absence of coercion.

2. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 48.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

4. A better characterization, perhaps, might be the *claim to moral meta-ignorance*, since Wang Ni is claiming that he is ignorant of whether or not he is ignorant of what is right.

5. Ch'u Chai and Winberg Chai write: "It is obvious that the only principle of government consistent with the teachings of Lao Tzu is that of *laissez faire*, the minimum of organization and of regulations." *The Story of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1961), p. 87.

6. *The Way of Lao Tzu*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1963), p. 152.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

10. There is textual evidence in the *Tao-te ching* by Lao Tzu that indicates that the Taoists were not pacifists, since Lao Tzu seems to have allowed for acts of self-defense.

11. *The Way of Lao Tzu*, p. 167.

12. I am here substituting an instance of a right (by what *right* are coercive actions against peaceful people justified?) for the term *right* in the Taoist claim to ignorance.

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