

Laozi, the life worth living

Laozi, la vida que vale la pena vivir

老子的人生观

manoloparreno@hotmail.com

*Manuel Parreño Piñol

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to show how, according to Laozi (the author) and based on the Laozi (the book), everyone has the ability to achieve an acceptable degree of goodness. Laozi lays out his understanding of goodness as a mystical ideal, which, for Laozi, this makes sense due to the close link he sees between goodness and Dao. Thus, the scope this paper covers is the population of the world, as it deals with mankind's potential for goodness. This study has not been designed to investigate the meaning of Laozi's concept of goodness. Instead, the focus is on the fact that, according to Laozi, we have come into existence because of Dao and have been given of Dao the means to know what decisions are naturally called for or good; According to Laozi's natural understanding of the world. Consequently, this paper seeks to answer questions such as: How is it that all can lead a life in line with goodness? Why is it that so many do not lead such a life? How does philosophy allow or help us to become our best self? The model was selected from particular chapters of Laozi teaching on the

* Manuel Parreño Piñol (M.A., Xiangtan University, China) is a lecturer, giving lectures on Chinese philosophy at UK universities since 2019.

** This article aims at showing why, according to Laozi, humankind can look at life as the time to become one's best self. Not so much because we have time, meaning because we are alive, but because our persona has inherent abilities; These inner powers are not hallucinations, rather they are as much a reality as our yearnings to do better and become spiritually fulfilled. This character formation is a matter of personal choice, while our nature is not. Thus, for Laozi, absolute truth exists and is represented by the concept of Dao, a force which, for Laozi, responds to how is it that the world came to be as well as why we can achieve a higher degree of goodness.

concept of goodness which, in Laozi, is equally represented in the behavior or manner of acting of Dao, Naturalness, the Sage and “water.” Dao as the fountain of all that is good; Naturalness as the law by which when acting spontaneously, innately, we know of Dao’s ways; The Sage as the example of the ideal man; “water” as the metaphor Laozi uses to speak of “the highest good”.

Key Words: Laozi; Dao; Goodness; Transcendental level of life.

Resumen: El propósito de este trabajo es mostrar cómo, según Laozi (el autor) y basándonos en Laozi (el libro), todo el mundo tiene la capacidad de alcanzar un grado aceptable de bondad. Laozi pone de manifiesto su comprensión de la bondad como un ideal místico, lo cual, para Laozi, tiene sentido debido al estrecho vínculo que ve entre la bondad y el Dao. Por lo tanto, el alcance que cubre este artículo es la población mundial, ya que trata la bondad como el potencial del ser humano. Este estudio no ha sido diseñado para investigar el significado que para Laozi tiene el concepto de bondad. La atención se centra en el hecho de que, según Laozi, existimos debido a Dao y hemos recibido de Dao los medios para saber qué decisiones son naturalmente necesarias o buenas; según la comprensión naturalista que Laozi tiene del mundo. En consecuencia, este artículo busca responder preguntas tales como: ¿Cómo es posible que todos puedan llevar una vida acorde con la bondad? ¿Por qué tantos no llevan una vida así? ¿Cómo me permite o ayuda la filosofía a convertirme en mi mejor yo? El modelo ha sido seleccionado de capítulos concretos del libro Laozi sobre el concepto de la bondad. Este concepto se representa por igual en el comportamiento o forma de actuar del Dao, la Naturalidad, el Sabio y el “agua”. Entendiendo Dao como la fuente de todo lo que es bueno; La Naturalidad como la ley por la cual cuando actuamos de manera espontánea, de manera innata, conocemos los caminos de Dao; El sabio como ejemplo del hombre ideal; “Agua” como la metáfora que Laozi utiliza para hablar de “el bien supremo”.

Palabras clave: Laozi; Dao; Bondad; Nivel de vida trascendental.

摘要: 老子认为“道”乃万物之源，而“善”与“道”有着千丝万缕的联系，具有神秘主义色彩。本文试图回答如以下问题：人们如何过上与“善”相随的生活？为什么大多数人没有过上这样的生活？哲学如何帮助人们成为最好的自己？在本文中，“道”“自然”“圣人”“水”等概念都与“善”密切相关。“道”作为一切美好事物的源泉；“自然”作为规律，当我们的行为遵循自然规律时，就能感知“道”的方式；“圣人”作为理想之人；“水”则是老子对最高善的形象比喻。

[**关键词**] 老子；道；善；至高精神境界

Introduction

Laozi’s naturalistic philosophy or view of the world order, sustains that all things that exist have come from Dao, and that therefore all things are able to naturally, of themselves, maintain order by following their nature. From *Laozi*, the only book ascribed to Laozi, we read that Dao is the source of all that exists; Referring to all things, we read that “Dao gave them birth” (Li et al., 1992)¹. Dao is shapeless and is best understood as a force.

¹ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 51.

Laozi explains the beginning of the Universe through Dao, from which the first and the second thing (yin and yang) came into being, then these, in turn, interacted leading to the coming into existence of the universe (Li et al., 1992)². In this process Dao conferred *De* upon all things, which *De* is what determines what things are. As Fung Yu-Lan explained, Dao is why things exist and *De* is what things are, that is the nature of things. Because of *De* (our Dao nature), mankind has a transcendental purpose in life. Because of our nature, we have the potential to a) choose goodness as a lifestyle and b) reach our best selves, even “the transcendental level of life” as Fung Yu-Lan put it (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997)³.

Life’s highest pursuit is the development of our potential (which comes) as we follow the highest good. For Laozi there is only one truth, Dao, consequently the pursuit of the highest good will always and naturally be the end of adhering to *De*, one’s inner nature, which all things have of Dao. Moreover, Laozi distinguishes between *De* (our spiritual nature) and *guang* (our inner light) (Li et al., 1992)⁴. Dao has also given human beings this inner “light,” the ability to follow Dao, to discern what is right and what is wrong; Speaking of this innate discernment Laozi taught that “all men know it” (Li et al., 1992)⁵. Quoting from *Laozi*, just as all things that exist “cannot turn their backs to the shade [yin] without having the sun [yang] on their bellies”⁶ -Which “symbolizes the fact that they are themselves a mixture of light and dark, hard and soft...” (Li et al., 1992)⁷ so people have a dual nature, yin and yang if you will. A part of us prone to worthy endeavors, like wanting to get up early to exercise, and its opposite nature, that part of us which would simply disregard our objective, inducing us to switch off the alarm and do it tomorrow, perhaps. Referring to the part of our nature that is evil, Laozi uses the term desire(s) (*yu*欲), to talk about the impulses of the part of us that, at best, invites us to procrastinate the dictates of our inner “light”(*guang*光)(Li et al., 1992)⁸.

In this paper the expressions, becoming a better person and a higher spiritual life, are synonyms and a product of personal agency. This end is

² Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 42.

³ Fung Yu-Lan. A New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics. Page 5.

⁴ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 52.

⁵ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 78.

⁶ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 42.

⁷ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 42. See also Waley’s footnote.

⁸ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 52.

obtained progressively as we align our actions to inner light, which leads to goodness. The usage of the term desire refers to Laozi's 欲 (*yu*), – acting contrary to or against (the light of) Dao; Which power to act is in us because of our inner nature (*De*) and inner light (*guang*).

So, who can obtain the “highest good”? To answer this question we shall consider on the nature of the human being; Reflect on divers levels of goodness, and look at what it might take to be in that circumstance where, spiritually speaking, we have reached the “transcendental level of life” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997)⁹. Having done all this, we conclude with a brief summary of the relation between the purpose of philosophy and Laozi's concept of goodness.

For Laozi Dao is truth. He further believes that humans have what he terms inner light, which is a Dao given ability to discern what the right thing to do is. Inasmuch as Dao has given human beings both their inner nature (*De*) as well as their inner light, these (concepts) and all that comes as a result of acting on them is good. The good or principal benefit that comes is the preservation of harmony, which is key to Laozi's understanding of the world order. Goodness, for Laozi, means using these means we all have of Dao to guide our choices. In so doing, because choosing goodness is already a part of our persona, Laozi sustains that good can only be done spontaneously as we act naturally.

Consequently, naturalness is to follow Dao, according to the dictates of inner light and following these dictates is only reasonable for Laozi because we are a product of Dao. Goodness, for Laozi, consists in conscientiously choosing Dao, as it focusses in values higher than moral ones. It is as though Laozi transcended the world of moral values wanting to reach the other world. One can see from the *Laozi* that he sees in mankind a power to elevate oneself well above the moral duties of this world and into the essence of Dao in order “to understand oneself” (Li et al., 1992)¹⁰; While at the same time recognizing the difficulty of talking of that Dao which has no name or shape.

1. Who can obtain the “highest good”?

The highest good is reaching one's full potential for goodness, which potential is established by the Dao within; Therefore Laozi taught us to use

⁹ Fung Yu-Lan. (1997). *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics*. Page 5.

¹⁰ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 33.

our inner light (Li et al., 1992)¹¹. Thus inviting us to return to who we are, that is to fulfill our inner nature (*De*); How so? By holding on to Dao and using our ability to reason. We can hold on to Dao as we obey our inner light which we can do because “all men know it” (Li et al., 1992)¹². Since we are agents, we can chose to use our capacity for reasoning to fulfill our Dao nature; As Laozi expressed it: “us[ing] the outer-light return to the inner light.” In this passage “outer light” is Dao’s innate light by which we know what the right thing to do is; “inner light” refers to our *De* (inner nature) (Li et al., 1992). This capacity to behave so as to most fully emulate Dao, represents the means towards achieving our full potential as human beings; Which potential Fung Yu-Lan called “the highest spiritual level of life” or the “transcendental level of life” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997)¹³. I believe that this “highest good” is in its sprout part of us. To answer why I think so, we shall consider on the nature of the human being as a foundation to show how, for Laozi, goodness is a matter of personal choice.

1.1 On The Nature Of The Human Being

Fung Yu-Lan speaks of the nature of man and things as follows:

“Principle is the moral nature of things. From one point of view, if the moral nature of things is perfectly good, then the physical nature of things is also good, for the physical nature of things is that by which things actually follow their principle. Their following may not be perfect, but since they are following the highest good, they should be good. They may be eighty percent good or seventy percent good or not very good, but we cannot say they are not good... If a thing can follow its principle perfectly, it can be said to have ‘investigated principle to the utmost,’” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1963)¹⁴.

When Fung Yu-Lan says “From one point of view, if the moral nature of things is perfectly good, then the physical nature of things is also good,” he does not explain what that one point of view is. Rather he

¹¹ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 52.

¹² Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 78.

¹³ Fung Yu-Lan. (1997). *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics*. Page 5.

¹⁴ Fung Yu-Lan. *A source book in Chinese philosophy*. Page 760

leaves the matter as something to be taken as self-evident. He also states that “the physical nature of things is that by which things actually follow their principle.” But, what are we to understand by “following”? Does he not mean men (and things) acting, at least the best they can, according to principle? But if so, what does it mean that “the physical nature of things is ... good,” or even “not very good.” I disagree with his understanding of the human nature, because I find two main problems. One is that nature is what it is, but not a bit of both, as in “not very good.” The other difficulty I find is with the idea that physical nature can possibly be perfectly good. Let’s look at them separately to help express how I see human nature and why I disagree with Fung Yu-Lan. This I would like to do taking into account how physical circumstances is one thing; Physical atmosphere another; Nature is also something else and choosing how to act is yet a different thing also.

Physical circumstances, such as suffering from depression, makes it so much more difficult to keep choosing what is right. Mental disorders may render it impossible altogether. Hence, some grownups are given authority and responsibility (custody) for the care of another grownup. Physical atmosphere, Mencius’ mom moved to a different location on various occasions, until she found a place to live where the children with whom his son mingled were a “good” influence for him. Nature, as it is used in philosophy, is something that is fixed; It is in this quality that its value rests. Now, some argue that human nature is good, like Mencius, others argue against it, like the Legalists; but one must pick a side. Otherwise, the term would not really describe anything and it would not be reliable. Just as a woman cannot be half pregnant, she either is pregnant or is not. Likewise we may not have it clear if human nature is good or not, but we cannot think that it is “not very good” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1963)¹⁵. If “we cannot say they are not good,” then, following this logic and definition, we need to believe that it is evil or bad. Here is how I understand it to be. What does it mean to say that physical nature is good? Is it referring to its physical appearance? Certainly not, we see all manners of physical deformities; Some are born deaf, some with an extra finger and so on. What then does it mean that physical nature is good? That we are prone to do good because of such nature? But this is not so. Otherwise we would not oversleep when we

¹⁵ Fung Yu-Lan. A source book in Chinese philosophy. Page 760

mean to get up and exercise, or yell when we have previously determine not to do it again, or even set goals to do better deeds; We would simply do them because that would be our nature. Then, what could Fung Yu-Lan have meant? Well, if we say that physical nature is good because it has the potential to be so, is it not more logic to suggest that the reason why it can become good is that it is not? If it is not (good), logic also says that, the reason it can become good is not of itself. Consequently that it can surrender its will to “moral nature” (principle), which is good; Only thus concluding that physical nature can possibly become good. Even then, I submit that physical nature may never change its nature; It will always take a conscious decision to follow inner light, instead of adhering to the other, evil nature. Choosing how to act implies that the needed requisites are met for one to freely make a decision and act upon it. If by nature men are totally good, it will be impossible to freely make a bad decision; Likewise, if by nature men are only bad, then it is impossible for any men to freely act in line with goodness.

This brings to mind Lao’s cosmic view of the Universe and its harmony. In each body there are two opposite forces, yin and yang; as such they fight against each other, so to speak. Yet both are needed to be able to enjoy what these forces, jointly, bring out. Yang represents day and Yin represents night, within one day the reason why we have day is yang and the reason why we have night is yin; At the same time, without either yin or yang neither night nor day would exist. If this law of opposites is true, and it is apparent from life itself that it is, then, it only makes sense that our physical and spiritual natures are different, opposing each other, so that either goodness or evil may exist or ensue.

I believe that what Fung Yu-Lan calls principle is human’s spiritual nature, which nature is good. Men’s physical body is not without its own nature also; Which nature is evil. The blending of them, since they are one (principle or spiritual nature) within the other (physical nature), calls for a balance to be found and worked on.

It shall be noted that Laozi does not say what goodness is, but he said that a person’s “highest good is like that of water” (Li et al.,)¹⁶. Therefore we can safely equate the way “water” conducts itself with goodness. Moreover, because of the relation between goodness and Dao, Naturalness

¹⁶ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 8.

and the Sage, as they appear in *Laozi*, there are tenets –from this metaphor (of water), concepts (Dao, Naturalness) and behavior of the ideal man (the sage)– that put forth what Laozi thinks will lead to goodness. Tenets such as: Being simple, inclusive, tranquil, etc.

Thus a deeper study of *Laozi* will enhance and or awaken one’s understanding of what is goodness. For the purpose of this work, it will suffice to say that, for Laozi, whatsoever comes from or is otherwise influenced by Dao is good. Therefore, as it is a gift of Dao, we may safely say that Fung Yu-Lan’s principle or Laozi’s inner light, is good. On the other hand, human nature does not cling to goodness. Despite each person’s particular attributes, we all share a need to make a conscious effort towards goodness. For instance, as the nature of woman is to give birth, and that of tigers is to kill, they spontaneously do so when they feel threatened; We humans don’t kill just because we feel threatened, we are rational beings and seek other ways to protect ourselves. Yet, despite that rationality, we would only kill better and always if we were made up of only “evil nature.”

I think it is important to show that the reason human nature is evil is that it is lazy, rather than willing to do according to the good nature within or dictates of inner light. This understanding seems to make sense even in light of the order of the Universe, a constant change worked on by opposing forces. Further, it possess that evil nature denotes a disposition to not do good; and that the power to choose to walk after the attributes (or influence) of Dao is still within the reach of mankind. Given that we choose to.

1.1.1 Stages Of Goodness

There are three kinds of people that comprise what I call the three stages of goodness; With the worst or even bad people, as we may label them, at the bottom. The best people, at the top of the chart, describe those who naturally act according to the dictates of their inner light. Next are “they [who are loved] and praised” (Li et al., 1992). Finally, at the bottom, the bad people; These are those who “are despised” (Li et al., 1992)¹⁷.

These stages of goodness are interesting; Further, been based on a comprehensive study of the *Laozi*, they seem to suggest that people are able

¹⁷ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 17.

to move upwards toward the top of the chart, rather than born predestined to fill in one of these stages. At this time, a relevant question that comes to mind for those who are not yet at the top of the chart is, what did they miss? Or, in other words, why are they not at the top?

Those who are loved: I think those who fall under this category are those who, though been “pretty good,” to use a modern term, still did not excel in their Way, meaning how they fulfilled their “natural duties” in life, as Laozi would say. Laozi criticized them for causing “[national] strife” (Li et al., 1992)¹⁸. This “strife”, as I suppose, was due to over speaking, by which their excess of words did not or could not match their acts. They said or promised more than they accomplished; as opposed to the Sage of whom “it is so hard at any price to get a single word” (Li et al., 1992)¹⁹. He seems to be made mention of by Laozi when he stated “He who knows others is wise;” as opposed to the higher level of knowledge, reserved for the best type of men, namely “he who knows himself” (Li et al., 1992)²⁰. Thus, utilizing his knowledge of others he uses “fine words [to] buy honor;” Hence his means for been loved, as the title suggests. With these characteristics, it is hard to keep one’s self “in the background” (Li et al., 1992)²¹; This been the case, how can one avoid arguing? This is significant because “He who proves by argument is not good” (Li et al., 1992)²².

Those who are feared: The word fear is an interesting term to describe somebody because it could have a positive or a negative connotation. In the positive sense, a person who is feared is a person who is revered and respected; Usually someone in authority. In this situation respect cannot be the meaning, as that term belongs to the upper stages of goodness. Whoever is in this stage, rather than admiration has shown disregard, for those around him hate rather than love him. Ruling trying to cover or overlook unfinished matters, in the end will cause harm, and is a way “To allay the main discontent, but only in a manner that will certainly produce further discontent” as Laozi taught (Li et al., 1992)²³. Hence, of

¹⁸ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 18.

¹⁹ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 17.

²⁰ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 33.

²¹ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 7.

²² Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 81.

²³ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 79.

these men I say that they tend to over-do. Perhaps they did their duty, but then continued on acting, by which they missed the mark. In their actions, these people do not act in pro of Dao or their inner light; as opposed to the Sage, whose “way is to act without striving” (Li et al., 1992)²⁴. This is illustrated by a Chinese story in which two men set out to see who would draw a snake first: One of them finished much sooner than the other, and thought to himself, I will adorn mine since I have time. In so doing he added legs, by which his final drawing became a dragon, certainly not a snake, and therefore he lost. In this sense, those who are feared miss the mark by competing. A second possibility, as mentioned, is for them to simply act for the wrong reasons; One instance would be a teenager learning Kungfu to be able to threaten, at school, the children who do not do what he wants. The opposite, that is, performing an outward correct action without proper respect, would also not be accounted as acting in line with one’s inner light. Such as Confucius’ admonition for filial piety and his warning that, caring for the physical needs of one’s parents without piety is like feeding a dog.

Those who are despised: These people deal harshly with men rather than in love and mercy. I think that looking at what the good person or ruler does not do, can help us understand this kind of people. Laozi said: “Weapons are ... *not* the instruments of a good ruler” (Wei Li, 1992, italics added)²⁵. To love and extend mercy to others, that is to forgive in a way that inspires people to want to be their best, is not easy. Actually, it requires a self-discipline as great as that we are able to extend. But those in this stage have given up on even wanting to try being better. Instead, they have earned their title of being despised by the “praise of victory,” which is “to delight in the slaughter of men” (Li et al., 1992)²⁶. Lao made a beautiful comparison of how the good and the bad man behave in relation to Dao; He said: “Dao... is the good man’s treasure and the bad man’s refuge” (Li et al., 1992)²⁷. To use something as a refuge here connotes using something for one’s own benefit and only because there is an immediate gain to be obtained from it. This bad man will likely use it without regarding it and

²⁴ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 81.

²⁵ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 79.

²⁶ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 31.

²⁷ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 62.

much less will he price it afterwards. It is worth noting how the reason why even the bad man enjoys some of Dao's "blessings," for lack of a better word, has nothing to do with his virtue but with Dao's pervasive goodness.

These three stages are also related to three types of men, of which Laozi speaks of in chapter 41. Why do they set aside Dao? And, What becomes of them?

1.1.2 Three Types Of Men

In *Laozi* we read of Laozi's three types of men. These are men who are ranked to be the "highest, average or lowest" type of men, based on how they act when they hear Dao. It reads: "When the man of highest capacities hears Dao[, h]e does his best to put it into practice. When the man of middling capacity hears Dao[, H]e is in two minds about it. When the man of low capacity hears Dao[, H]e laughs loudly at it" (Li et al., 1992)²⁸. Actually the highest type of men can be said to act, while the other two react to Dao. By "acting" I mean *compliance* with what one learns; While with "reacting" I mean a *non-follow through* type of attitude, whether it is due to judging the thing learned to be of little importance or as been unreasonably too difficult to perform. The highest type of men, upon hearing Dao acts on what he has heard, thus doing. The average man wonders about it, rather than doing it. The man of lowest capacity laughs at it, considering it to be of no value; Hence he also does not do or act upon what he has heard. Therefore the average man, by wondering about its value and the lowest man by laughing at its worth, both have reacted to Dao, not acted on it. These diverse manners in which people respond to Dao are significant. Particularly because we all have it in us to know right from wrong, we call it our conscience and it enhances our capacities to reason.

Laozi knew it and defended a pattern of decision-making that represented the spontaneous behavior which is in line with nature; Excess of laws would merely interfere in people's capacity to follow their nature so as to disturb harmony. In other words, what we call consciousness is that inner light that shows us the way of Dao; The capacity to reason, been tightly joined to our discernment of right and wrong, or good and evil, is used by the "average men" to override the dictates of inner light by talking too much; until he finds a lesser degree of compliance to Dao

²⁸ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 41.

justifiable (Li et al., 1992)²⁹. As for the “lowest men” (Li et al., 1992), he straightforwardly disregards the Way. Laozi hoped that men would use reason, as I suppose, to make the best choices; Said he: “He who having used the outer-light can return to the inner-‘light’ ”(Li et al., 1992)³⁰. But why do they laugh at Dao? Why do they set it aside? I am drawn to believe that it is because their hearts are set so much in the desires for the things of this world, that they cannot see nor prize “the highest spiritual level of life” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997)³¹.

1.1.3 What becomes of these three men?

We have looked at different responses and very briefly mentioned what each response did, namely: price Dao, merely think about Dao and laugh at Dao. Now, what is it that these attitudes do for these people? Where does it lead them?

Those who set aside the reality of goodness or its importance, what will they substitute it for? Without any “thing” to substitute it for we become animals, not higher than them, for the *raison d'être* of rationality is dismissed without the spiritual part of our persona. Whatever rationality is left over, if any, it equals to that of a dog, or any other animal; Capable to reason outside of the sphere of humanity or humane values, rather than within them. So, once again, those who set aside goodness, or its value in shaping an elevated form of human life, what do they substitute it for? Based on their answers, as Laozi put it, three possible answers seem to be congenial with their attitude: an all goes attitude, goodness is foolish or the belief that freedom is not goodness.

Those who do not hold to Dao will need to choose something else, since they either think about it, rather unsure of themselves, or laugh thoroughly at it I place them as follows. Those who wonder at Dao have an all goes attitude, which in actuality is close to saying that freedom is not found in goodness. Since this latter attitude will be discussed hereafter and seen it is already related to the former, I will not touch upon it at this point. As for those who “laugh heartily” at Dao, they regard goodness as foolishness. Let’s now look at them more in depth:

All goes attitude: Again, this attitude belongs to the person who would consider in his mind, “how interesting this Dao I hear is.” Yet, lacking a

²⁹ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 41.

³⁰ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 52.

³¹ Fung Yu-Lan. *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Physics*. Page 4.

profundity of spirit his mind doesn't quite settle for it. It takes both feet to be steady in the Way, this, I consider, is what Laozi meant when he stated "He who stands on tip-toe, does not stand firm" (Li et al., 1992)³². The fact that this person keeps wondering about it, is symptomatic of one who may wish to believe but who won't be devoted. To want to believe is not the same as been in two minds about Dao. He who wants to believe will actually try to experiment with Dao, whereas this person, after giving it some thought, already chooses not to follow Dao.

What he heard may or may not be at the back of his mind throughout his life; but his decision been made, unless he changes it, he will the more accept anything that pleases his whims. For a person who has considered Dao and then chosen to disregard it is likely easier to have an *all goes attitude*, than for a person who still has not heard it. Why would that be? Laozi sees only two things in life, Dao, representing truth, and otherwise anything that, in the end, is not true or corresponding to the natural endowment of Light. From this perspective, if one has already heard what, according to nature, he should follow and yet he does not, what else will there be to transform him into a natural, spontaneous rational being? Hence, once Dao has been dismissed, anything may more easily be taken as "ok" to do. This person may show respect, by word of mouth, for other people's way of life, but will in the same breath say that his way is not harming anyone; and that therefore, as it "makes him happy" it is "good" also. This "all goes attitude" is extremist in the sense that, though apparently tolerant of others; Yet, at the same time supports anything others do as acceptable. This only makes sense, since tolerance is his own justification for (his) not hearing Dao. In other words, the respect he shows for others is merely a justification for his own behavior. This attitude is avoiding, *not* solving the "problem" of goodness.

Goodness is foolish: This attitude towards goodness shows his disregard for Dao, as he laughs at it. From his disrespectful laughing at Dao, this person reveals himself as superficial, blind to the evidence of Dao and hardened against the influence of Dao. Because of his predisposition, this person can only laugh, hence that "If he did not laugh, it would not be worth the name of 'Dao' " (Li et al., 1992)³³. Precisely because he cannot perceive the Way, it is futile to use words, trying to help him "see." On the other hand, this "spiritual blindness" is not irreversible; Therefore, the day

³² Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 24.

³³ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 41.

this person “sees,” his attitude may show forth to be even better than that of the “all goes attitude” type of men. Such a person also seems important to Laozi, as seen in the way Laozi shows hope for him, perhaps, that he may recover his “sight.” This valuing of all types of people, seems evident in *Laozi* chapter 27: “He who does not take care of his stock-in-trade [a more imperfect person], much learning though he may possess, is far astray.” Still, this “goodness is foolish” type of attitude only mocks goodness; It does *not* offer an alternative to it.

2. The “Transcendental Level of Life”

I wish to take this point by looking at three different yet intertwined aspects of life. All have to do with the individual’s freedom to choose what kind of life he or she wants to lead; but it also has to do with the fact, that, it takes constancy of the will to obtain the best possible result (humanly possible). The first aspect is a reflection on the fact that not all things which are good are necessarily desirable or preferred. The second aspect of life I want to mention looks at the need to be watchful to make the best out of life. Finally, the last aspect discusses “the highest good” as a way of life, rather than merely representing particular times in one’s life.

2.1 Good, Better And Best

Amongst that which is good, there are three kinds of decisions just as there are three degrees of goodness. Thus some decisions are good, some are better and others are best. In life not everything that is good should take our full attention. There are many important decisions in life, in this case, *leading a higher spiritual life* will take ones best efforts to discriminate, and more wisely choose what activities will consume our time. To do this it is important that we understand that there is a difference between good, better and best.

Let’s take a university student who has a part time job and is married. Working to help provide for his family is a good thing; Studying is also a good thing and having a family is too a good thing. Work demands that he goes to work, school demands that he studies and his family needs him at home to nurture them emotionally as well. In light of so many good things, all of which are calling for his time and attention; Decisions ought to be prioritized. Since all things ought to be given attention and there are only so many hours in a day, it becomes necessary for this father to make conscientious decisions for how much time he will devote to each responsibility, as well as how will he spend that time. While the semester is not finished, this father will make a better decision by dedicating less time

to been at home and more time studying than when school is off. Likewise, been at home and letting his children see him is good, but taking them out to the park may be better, and yet coordinating with his wife how to help her with the children may be best.

Interestingly enough, too much of a good thing can be harmful. For instance, in line with the example of the student; Holding a part time job is good as it helps provide for the necessities of life, but working too much to were, needlessly, he is left without enough time to study is bad. Thus some decisions are good, some are better and yet others are best. This knowledge is likely a matter of logic for most of us, but it takes discipline to act accordingly. What's more, this example shows the need to understand "the invariables" of Laozi, in that lifestyle that leads to agreement with Dao. Otherwise, as Laozi warns us in the 16th chapter of *Laozi*: "Not to know it [the invariables], means to go blindly to disaster."

Fung Yu-Lan reminds us that while "things are ever changeable and changing, the laws that govern this change of things are not themselves changeable" (Fung Yu-Lan, 2007). One such law is Laozi's invariables. The word "invariable" in *Laozi* is the translation of 常(chang) "used to show... what can be considered as a rule" (Fung Yu-Lan, 2007)³⁴. It is the purpose of the invariables to preserve what is good; Without utilizing this law in our lives, any good quality would always revert and prove the limit to the end of one's activities. In other words, the law of invariables calls for a balance to be maintained in one's activities, thus protecting our ability to benefit from our activities. To better understand the invariables Fung Yu-Lan's explanation of it draws a clear picture. Firstly, let us remember that while everything is subject to change, Laozi's invariables a) governs the changes of things and b) is (itself) unchangeable. Although not explicitly stated in *Laozi*, Fung Yu-Lan believes that Laozi bases this law of invariables upon two principles, namely: subjective feelings and objective circumstances. In essence, given any human activity, the limit to one's progress hinges upon two types of circumstances: self-imposed and objective.

Fung Yu-Lan gives two examples to illustrate these fundamental principles, which he believes represent Laozi's understanding of how the invariables work in our lives. Subjective feelings, example: Isaac Newton, for example, felt that compared with the total universe, his knowledge of it was no more than the knowledge of the sea possessed by a boy who is playing at the seashore." Thus Newton "was still far from reaching the limits

³⁴ Fung Yu-Lan. A Short History of Chinese Philosophy. Page 156.

of advancement in his learning.” If, on the other hand, “a student, having just finished his textbook on physics, thinks that he then knows all there is to know about science, he certainly cannot make further advancement in his learning, and will certainly ‘revert back’” (Fung Yu-Lan, 2007)³⁵. Objective circumstances, example: “In overeating, what is ordinarily good for the body becomes something harmful. One should eat only the right amount of food. But this right amount [limit] depends on one’s age, health, and the quality of food one eats” (Fung Yu-Lan, 2007). Thus, acting as a regulator amidst the myriad changes in the world, conscientiously applying Laozi’s invariables greatly enhances one’s ability to make the best decision, leading to becoming one’s best self.

To know where your (spiritual) limits are is certainly to know one’s inner self. To know where your physical limits are (given one’s age, health,...) is to know one’s physical self. To know both, the limits to one’s spiritual and physical advancement is to be illumined. Coby Bryant had a terrible game and realized it was because he was only sleeping two to three hours. He began to know himself, physically. Both our physical and our inner being, like yin and yang, complement each other to allow us the greatest joy. We cannot disregard one and be ok, we will always feel like something in us or in our lives is missing.

2.1.1 Being Watchful

Deciding which decision will be good, better or best greatly depends on what we wish to achieve; Normally we want a better job, a spouse, a university diploma and so on. In this case the best decision is made clearer by sitting down, looking at where we are, what steps are needed to reach the goal and then making a plan of action that will allow me to reach my goal. As we have seen with Laozi’s description of those who hear Dao, obtaining to the “transcendental level of life” takes a different plan of action (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997)³⁶.

In reality, we may say that it takes the same kind of planning, namely sitting down, looking at where we are, what steps are needed to reach the goal and then make a plan of action that will allow me to reach my goal. The difference is that, improving one’s spiritual life is something that cannot be forced. One can work at it, but it seems to be something that is more granted than otherwise. One could force another one to marry him or her, though difficult yet it can be done; or print a university diploma, get a

³⁵ Fung Yu-Lan. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. Page 158.

³⁶ Fung Yu-Lan. *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Physics*. Page 5.

better job by connections rather than by merit ... On the other hand, Laozi speaks of the blessings or outcomes from “seizing on the Way[Dao]” (Li et al., 1992)³⁷; Blessings such as “to the end of his days suffer no harm” (Li et al., 1992)³⁸, or make choices within what is “Heaven’s Way” (Li et al., 1992)³⁹ by which is one “[does] not... strive but none the less... conquer[s]” (Li et al., 1992)⁴⁰. Who could force or secure such things upon himself or upon others? Certainly no body can. Thus, to gain such confidence from Dao, one must be watchful to make the best out of life. Is not the “tranquil” and “simple” person so of itself? Is it not from within that such confidence shows forth? Is it not confidence in Dao what Laozi taught? Thus I say “to gain such confidence from Dao.”

2.1.2 “The Highest Good” As a Way of Life

Goodness is the path of excellence towards the elevation of one’s spiritual life.

The path of excellence takes daily and constant effort in choice making. What we say and how we say it; As well as what we do not say, our actions, the way we dress ... Excellence is a choice, it does not just happen. Excellence is a lifestyle and a process of progressively becoming better. With the passing of time, the very act of not deviating from one’s efforts towards excellence makes a person better already. Excellence does not mean good but best. Thus, in the course of excellency, between good and bad a person will choose good; Between good and better a person will choose “better”; and between better and best a person will choose “best.”

In this sense, excellence is goodness; Were the best is always at heart, and were, when living below that standard is only due to the fallen condition of the world we live in. The following example illustrates what I mean: When giving food to a person on the street as a result of my “goodness,” rather than employing him, is merely because it’s out of my current possibilities to help him further. I did not choose the best, but it was the best I could do. And thus we see that goodness consists in pursuing a higher manner of life through individual, correct choice making.

To excel means to go beyond the call of duty. From Laozi, to excel, would simply mean going about one’s daily tasks doing them with simplicity of mind, naturally and spontaneously. It is interesting how this definition

³⁷ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 14.

³⁸ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 52.

³⁹ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 77.

⁴⁰ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 73.

about how to achieve excellence (goodness) seems to “not be enough;” Much as when Laozi stated “The ‘power’ that is most sufficient looks inadequate” (Li et al., 1992)⁴¹. Furthermore, these two latter definitions of goodness, going beyond the call of duty and going about one’s daily tasks, seem contradictory. Nonetheless I submit that they are not. I think Laozi, using his own words, means to include going beyond the call of duty within performing one’s daily tasks. How so? Well, one’s daily tasks can easily be understood as a series of physical chores even if we include the act of helping others. Therefore, going beyond one’s call of duty can also easily be understood as simply doing one or more things than regularly expected. Nonetheless, inasmuch as the nature of goodness has in it the free willed tendency to “always and in the most perfect way be helping others” (Li et al., 1992)⁴²; For the “good person,” whatever the situation calls for, that becomes that day’s task. Hence that going beyond the call of duty is so easy to do; While measuring the goodness in one’s activities, lies mainly in the willingness to act.

As one goes about his common affairs, it is the inner life that suffers the greatest change. In the performance of duties, while life around us remains much the same, the way one feels about the world around and how one handles himself is what has changed, as we gain inner peace. Love in one’s service makes that service complete. Without it Confucius said, even serving one’s parents becomes like feeding a dog, the same kind of routine. Love moves the person to act in an excellent manner, which is a type of Dao, at least for Laozi, who stated that “The highest good is like that of water” (Li et al., 1992)⁴³.

When considering excellence and how it has lead us to mention Dao again, we still ask ourselves about it. Although without a concrete understanding as to what Dao is, one thing is for sure, its influence is in us and in all things in this world. Indeed, Dao exemplifies goodness and its influence is the reason why, in our behavior, we may be more like it.

A mother used to say to his son, “if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well.” I once heard this sentence used to express the notion of seeking after excellence in one’s life. Laozi seems to agree with this saying of a mother to his son; his philosophy has no room for those who do not use their inner light – Dao given discerning power between right and wrong– to

⁴¹ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 41.

⁴² Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 27.

⁴³ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 8.

“return to the root” our origins or Dao nature (Li et al., 1992)⁴⁴. He wants harmony to rule amongst men and to that end he uses words of condemnation to those who, with their actions, neglect their (inner) nature; and pronounces words of blessings to befall those who “Seize...‘Dao’ ” (Li et al., 1992)⁴⁵. Truly, Laozi’s Way is to uphold the best possible life as a way of life. Indeed, such is the purpose of philosophy.

So, what might it take to be in that circumstance were, spiritually speaking, we have reached a “transcendental level of life?” As we have discussed: making the best choices, been watchful and making of the end of philosophy a lifestyle. Below I wish to discuss further how everyone can benefit from philosophy.

2.1.3 The Purpose of Philosophy: To Enable Men To Become Their Best Self

Fung Yu-Lan: “The content of the principles of all things cannot be learned merely by thinking, and learning to become a Sage does not require knowing the content of the principles of all things. *In seeking after the transcendental level of life, a higher self-consciousness and understanding of life are required*” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997, italics added)⁴⁶.

According to Fung Yu-Lan the development of one’s spiritual life depends upon “a higher self-consciousness and understanding of life.” This is good news because, through experience and Laozi’s concept of inner light (by which all know what the right thing to do is) we can draw on standards of behavior, if you will, that guide us to more fully act in line with Dao. Moreover, inasmuch as “to know the always-so is to be illumined” (Li et al., 1992)⁴⁷. and since being illumined is to know the essence of Dao (Li et al., 1992)⁴⁸, all one has to do is be persistent in acting on one’s inner light. This process may yield knowledge of the always-so –meaning natural law, the rule, the invariable or unchangeable laws– and will elevate the person to that “higher self-consciousness and understanding of life.” - I explain this process again with the following illustration:

⁴⁴ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 14.

⁴⁵ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 14.

⁴⁶ Fung Yu-Lan. *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Physics*. Page 5.

⁴⁷ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 16.

⁴⁸ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 14.



Supposing that this circle is Dao, that shapeless and nameless force that embraces all things that exist, if I was to draw how Laozi teaches us how to obtain knowledge of the essence of Dao, and in the process gaining Fung Yu-Lan's needed "*higher self-consciousness and understanding of life,*" (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997, italics added)⁴⁹ this is what it would look like.



⁴⁹ Fung Yu-Lan. A New Treatise on the Methodology of Physics. Page 5.

In chapter 21 of *Laozi* we read that within Dao is the essence, also translated as life-force. Laozi continues to describe how the essence is “very real,” and continues: “in it are evidences” as though he now wanted us to believe or search for them so that we may profit thereby. So in Dao there is the actual essence or life-force, from which come evidences; Following the use of logic, we deduce he is talking about the evidences of Dao. Dao as the source from which the Universe has sprang and that, to that degree, we are one.

Ideally this is what would happen, and reason seems to accord with this ideal. The question now is, how? We are rational beings and have Laozi’s inner light. But how do we act, so that we can experience “the transcendental level of life”? Laozi said: “My words are very easy to understand and very easy to put into practice. Yet no one under heaven understands them; no one puts them into practice” (Li et al., 1992)⁵⁰. Although his words were or might always have been as he said, “very easy to understand and very easy to put into practice” his philosophy was not something to be heard only, it was meant to be applied. It is in this application that true learning or the process of becoming (our best selves) begins; That is to say the elevation of one’s “spiritual level of life” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997)⁵¹. So that as we act on Dao (using inner light as our guide) we are lead to the essence in that process that elevates our soul. Again, to be illumined is to know the essence of Dao, and the progress we can experience is a consequence of gaining a more complete understanding of (Laozi’s) truth. However, it shall be noted that this understanding, with its gift of becoming our best self, comes *after* we first act; Always following our inner light, true to our De nature. We have it in us, to know good from evil and to choose good; Which also means that Laozi believes in an inclusive philosophy.

It is in this sense that obtaining “the highest good” is a way of life; Indeed, not only reaching one’s potential in this regard, but working towards and retaining “the highest good” is a manner of expressing who one is and what one believes in. Laozi’s words were so difficult to understand, I believe, simply because they were not applied for a long enough period of time, if at all. Professor Y. L. Chin, in expressing the seriousness of philosophy, said:

⁵⁰ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 70.

⁵¹ Fung Yu-Lan. *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Physics*. Pages 4 y 5.

“Chinese philosophers were all of them different grades of Socrates. This was so because ethics, politics, reflective thinking, and knowledge were unified in the philosopher; in him, knowledge and virtue were one and inseparable. His philosophy required that he live it; he was himself its vehicle. To live in accordance with his philosophical convictions was part of his philosophy. It was his business to school himself continually and persistently to that pure experience in which selfishness and egocentricity were transcended, so that he would be one with the universe. Obviously this process of schooling could not be stopped, for stopping it would mean the emergence of his ego and the loss of his universe” (Fung Yu-Lan, 2007)⁵².

As opposed to seeking to obtain knowledge through learning, studying Dao is done, in part, by acting according to an innate knowledge, which learning is of Dao. This spiritual learning consists in daily “subtracting” rather than increasing “day after day” as it is the case with knowledge (Li et al., 1992)⁵³. We could say Laozi fears knowledge, as it will fill people’s minds with desires leading them away from contentment. This is because doing more or less than following natural order threatens natural harmony, hence the potential threat Laozi sees in knowledge. Thus for Laozi, knowledge translates into “[going] against Dao” (Li et al., 1992)⁵⁴. By “increasing”, Laozi meant deviating from what he understood to be the natural course of life, which is the only course that can bring harmony; Whereas, by “decreasing” Laozi means learning to rely more on the spiritual side, on Dao, hence needing less physical commodities to be content in life. Consequently, Laozi says: “Banish wisdom, discard knowledge” (Li et al., 1992)⁵⁵. Making an exercise of recollection, we can remember how human nature is evil, unwilling to act in obedience to the natural endowment of light; On the other hand, our spiritual nature is eternal, of Dao, and is good. Thus it makes sense for Laozi to rely on notions that would help mankind hold on to a life towards goodness, seen how men are prone, by nature, to act in line with desire. What I mean to express is that, it takes *self-mastery* to lead a life that will result in the cultivation of the spiritual life.

⁵² Fung Yu-Lan. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, Pages.17-19.

⁵³ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 48.

⁵⁴ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 30.

⁵⁵ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 19.

I have just mentioned that studying Dao is done in part, by acting according to our innate knowledge (of Dao). I said in part, because knowing what the right thing to do is does not necessarily imply one knows how to do it. For instance, we all learn early in life that girls must be treated right, but for most people, if not all, learning how to treat them right is a process. Likewise, to do it well, taught Laozi, in helping others we must do so by means of “non-action;” Which is a principle of action for both the ruler and the governed, and by which freedom is protected. Thus philosophy, if taken seriously, through self-mastery and in time, will yield a better understanding of life as it elevates our spiritual sight with a higher self-consciousness and understanding. This can happen as we act on our natural endowment of light, which Laozi trusts will lead to harmony and to experience such an elevated form of life.

Conclusion

Lao Zi’s natural way poses that Dao has produced all things with their own natural way of growing, declining and behaving. Thus birds fly and fish swim, while efforts by men to interfere with this natural order causes a breach in harmony; Hence the importance Laozi ascribes to returning to our Dao nature (*De*), by adhering to Laozi’s inner light, -- our Dao given light to discern goodness.

For Laozi, Dao is the authoritative source of all truth for which reason our minds should be put at ease about trusting one’s inner light to be virtuous, to follow after goodness. For him Dao is both the ultimate example of correct behavior, and is the basis to make sense of the universe. Thus, in this paper, the concepts guiding us towards goodness have been based on Dao; Speaking of Dao as the law and that which influences all that is good, so that it can be good. One example is the invariables, a law by which we may determine, in our myriad activities, where the limits to our progress are; Thus avoiding reverting to a bad or harmful behavior. As with all that is good, Dao embraces Laozi’s law of invariables, meaning this law is found within and not without the boundaries of that which is good (or of Dao).

Using one’s light leads to a connection with Dao, precisely because that light is a portion of Dao in us. Thus, as we act on that knowledge we draw closer to goodness. Laozi believes that we all know what the right thing to do is; For him using this knowledge or inner light is a necessary means-to follow after goodness in search of what Fung Yu-Lan termed “the

higher spiritual level of life” (Fung Yu-Lan, 1997)⁵⁶. In the search of what Laozi called a person’s “highest good”(Li et al., 1992)⁵⁷, we soon find in life the duality or contradiction of our feelings, such as when we do something we are ashamed of recognizing. Such as feeling ashamed that while I want to exercise, five years later I still haven’t make it yet. The truth is that we all have to deal with a double nature, two contradictory forces to which ultimately we get to direct. Laozi calls desire those things which men are driven to do which are not in line with Dao. Therefore, acting on desire does not nurture the spiritual side of men; Thus keeping people away from the natural way of behaving; Which would be to follow one’s inner light because of our *De* (inner nature).

Making an exercise of recollection, we can remember how the blending of our spiritual nature, which is good, within the physical nature, which is evil, it being contrary to Dao; calls for a balance to be worked out. Now, how do we find harmony within our dual nature? Laozi said that “to understand oneself is to be illumined” (Li et al., 1992)⁵⁸; This understanding comes by adhering to Dao, as we learn to harmonize our inner self with our physical needs and desires. The way to harmonize them is by acting on the laws (such as the invariables) and light of Dao. Furthermore, this duality of the human being does not mean that nature must be understood as a mutable concept. Rather, the concept of human nature must be a fixed concept, the nature of a thing, animal or person cannot change; Although through choice making people can, in time, improve themselves. Understanding nature as a fixed concept allows us, in the first place, to be able to deal with it to our own benefit.

Philosophy can change our perspective. Thus we may look at desires as an opportunity to help us become a better person, that is, to help us develop new attributes. From this point of view, philosophy grants a perspective about life which looks at it as a time of growth. Indeed, Laozi’s Way is to uphold the best possible life as a way of life, which is the purpose of philosophy; A purpose which, according to Laozi, all can strive for given our Dao nature and our inner knowledge of what the right thing to do is (Dao having set that standard).

⁵⁶ Fung Yu-Lan. (1997). A New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics. Page 5.

⁵⁷ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 8.

⁵⁸ Laozi. *Laozi*. Chapter 33.

REFERENCES

- Fung, Y., 1997. *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics*. Beijing: Foreign language press. .
- Fung, Y., 2015. *A short history of Chinese philosophy* (Vol. 1). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Li, W., Ying, C., & Sheng, F., 1992. *The Chinese-English bilingual series of Chinese classics-Laozi: Vol. I-X*. Changsha: Hunan press.
- Wing, T. C., 1969. *A source book in Chinese philosophy (First Princeton Paperback Edition)*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

