

**"RESPONSIBLE NON-ACTION" IN A NATURAL WORLD :  
PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NEI-YEH, CHUANG-TZU, AND TAO-TE CHING**

Russell Kirkland  
University of Georgia

Once upon a time, several years ago, I had the opportunity to engage in a variety of team-teaching enterprises at Stanford University. At one time, my colleague Lee Yearley sought to impress upon students the differences between the thought of the Confucian thinker Mencius and the thought of the Taoist thinker Chuang-tzu. The starting point was Mencius' famous insistence that human nature is such that none of us would fail to be moved if we saw an infant facing imminent death, such as by falling into an open well; Chuang-tzu, meanwhile, presumably believed that humans are incapable of comprehending the true meaning of the events that constitute the context of our lives, and urged us to **refrain from** the delusion that we can correctly analyze those events and correctly govern the events that occur to us. To stimulate students' ruminations on these issues, Lee Yearley gave our students an assignment, to write a paper beginning with the following proposition: Mencius and Chuang-tzu are sitting together on a riverbank, when an infant was descried floating precariously on the river, apparently on its way to its death from drowning. The students' assignment was to describe what each man, in that situation, would do, and why. His assumption was that as students wrestled with the thought-content of each of the thinkers in question, students would have to grapple with the morally difficult imperative of Chuang-tzu's thought, which would ask us to forego intervention in the processes at work around us, even if such restraint should mean that innocent children should perish as a result. This presumed moral dilemma was intended to challenge students to wrestle meaningfully with the dilemma of the human condition: that is, that humans live with moral imperatives to do what seems to us to be good, at the same time that we realize that we cannot fully control the events that take place around us, and can probably not fully effect our will, despite our best intentions.

Such, at least, was the apparent moral quandary into which Lee Yearley worked to lead the students in our class. One of my own students, however, quickly answered the assigned question, in an unexpectedly easy fashion. The assignment was to explain what Mencius and

Chuang-tzu each would do, and why, so this student simply explained that Mencius would jump up to save the baby, for the obvious reasons, and that Chuang-tzu would do nothing whatsoever, because he had no reason to do so: Mencius was already out there saving the baby, so there was really nothing more for him to do.

This example came to my mind when I began to ponder what the Taoists of ancient China would say about the ecological problems of the late twentieth century. If, so to speak, planet Earth is drifting precariously in the direction of presumable disaster, what would be the action that Chuang Chou and his contemporaries would have us take? In other words, would "Taoism," in that sense, provide a solution to the apparent moral dilemma that faces our planet in our own day and age, and if so, what form might that solution take?

As some of the other presenters gathered here seem already to have suggested, it is commonly believed by some hopeful minds that Taoism provides a pretty solution to the presumed problems of the planet. But more careful thought suggests that Taoism might not offer happy solutions to the problems of the modern world. What if, for instance, the issue in the foregoing example was not a human baby floating in a river, but rather the species of the whooping crane, its continuance threatened by the encroachment of human civilization. If Chuang Chou were sitting by watching earth's species threatened with extinction, what would he really do, and why? The answer, I fear, is not certain to fill our hearts with sanguine certainty of the future of the cranes, or with sanguine happiness that Chuang Chou shares our desire to preserve them. In fact, the only logical answer to this latter-day challenge to Taoist values would seem to be that Chuang Chou would, as it were, watch the whooping cranes float down the river on their way to apparent extinction, and would do nothing whatsoever to interfere with the natural operations of the world. The only logical answer to this situation is that the Taoist sees no action to be required, for he trusts that the world is already operating as it is supposed to be operating, and all human activity — no matter how well-intentioned — can add nothing of value to such operation, and can logically only interfere with the course of nature as it is already unfolding. Just as Chuang-tzu would not dive into a river to save a floating baby, he would not take deliberate action to save the world from apparent destruction. It is, in fact, on this basis that one can, in fact, distinguish classical Taoists from classical Confucians: like modern Westerners, the Confucians generally assume that the world inherently tends toward chaos and requires the redemptive activity of human society, individually and collectively. But Taoists, as a rule, do

not share the Confucian (or Western) *fear* of the natural processes of life, and consequently do not fear the extinction of the whooping cranes, nor do Taoists enjoin deliberate action to save the cranes, or even Earth as a whole, from extinction. In fact, according to what I shall refer, for the moment, as Taoist moral reasoning, it is, in fact, morally objectionable for humans to presume that they are correct in their judgment of what constitutes an impending ecological danger, or that corrective action is called for to prevent an apparent natural catastrophe. On the basis on the texts of classical Taoism, I contend that the only possible Taoist position is that humans who foresee impending ecological disaster should, as it were, sit down and shut up, and let the universe work. While it is also true that those who lead an authentically Taoist life are unlikely to contribute in substantial ways to any ecological degradation of the planet, that fact alone does not justify the conclusion that Taoist principles can justify remedial action to correct the effects of less-insightful humans of past and present. The Taoist answer to ecological problems, I shall argue, is always to be found in going contrary to the Confucians, who assume humans to have a special wisdom that is nowhere else found among the living things of the world: whereas a Confucian, like Mencius, would feel morally compelled to jump up and dive into the river of life's events to save a threatened species of tall, noisy birds, a Taoist, like Chuang-tzu, would feel morally compelled to *refrain from* doing so. In what follows, I will attempt to explain the moral reasoning that would compel Chuang Chou to watch the cranes on their apparent way to extinction, taking no action, despite the disquiet that such a prospect might produce within his heart/mind. The fundamental principle involved is that humans are not the all-knowing beings that we usually take ourselves to be, and that the activities that humans have taken with the intention to govern or improve the world have almost always proven, in the final analysis, to have been misguided and unjustified, and to have actually done more harm than good. The ultimate Taoist principle, I propose, is that there is a reality beyond the comprehension or control of human thought or activity, and that humans of the modern secular age need to beware the arrogant assumption that we are, in Western terms, the "God" of planet earth. The Taoist position, I shall argue, is that planet earth has no "God," and needs none, not even — or more correctly said, *especially not* — ourselves.

### **Solicitude for Non-Human Life in Taoism**

A traditional interpretive error regarding Taoism should logically be addressed here. That error is the traditional assertion that Taoists are, ipso facto, concerned with the welfare of the self, rather than with the welfare of others. The philosopher Arthur Danto, for instance, has said:

...Taoism seems to dissolve any relations we may have to one another and to replace them with the relationship we have to the universe at large. The question it poses is... how to close the gap between the world and ourselves, how to 'lose' the self. Whereas it is just that gap that is presupposed by the moral questions of classical China and perhaps by the concept of morality itself. They suppose the gaps that need closing are those that separate us from one another. However, these are not relevant in closing the gap between the Way and ourselves, which is the source of the only kind of infelicitude thinkers like Lao Tzu regard as worth healing....Exactly the space that Taoism intends to collapse is what makes morality possible at all.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, I have analyzed Danto's position more fully, and assessed its validity.<sup>2</sup> In the present context, however, Danto's comments appear to raise a new range of issues, issues that pertain not so much to systems of interpersonal morality — the only kind of morality Danto seems to consider possible — as to systems of transhuman morality, i.e., systems of morality that pertain to the planet and other, nonhuman living things. If Danto were correct, it would be logically impossible for a Taoist to value nonhuman life, whether individual or collective, for he insists that the Taoist values only himself.

Naturally, there are many problems with Danto's arguments, problems that I cannot explicate fully here. I shall merely point out that his contentions about Taoism are ultimately grounded upon two assumptions. First, he assumes that the Confucians are logically correct to assume that interpersonal relations are the only logical field for moral activity. And secondly, he

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Danto, *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 118-19. (Danto's book was originally published in 1972.)

<sup>2</sup> "Ethical Reflection in the Tao te ching," *American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division*, 1996. An expanded version of that paper, entitled, "Self-Fulfillment through Selflessness: The Moral Teachings of the Daode jing," is in progress for Michael Barnhart, ed., *Varieties of Ethical Reflection: New Directions for Ethics in a Global Context* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield).

assumes that "the Taoists" (i.e., for Danto, "Lao-tzu" and "Chuang-tzu") essentially share the values that have traditionally been attributed to the ancient Chinese figure known as Yang Chu. Of course, it is actually impossible to discuss the values of Yang Chu himself, for no expositions of his own views survive, only the positions attributed to him by enemies like Mencius who were intent to convince us that Yang Chu was an immoral fool. But the issue that Mencius adduced to demonstrate Yang's foolishness is pertinent to our present considerations. According to Angus Graham:

The historical Yang Chu...seems to have held that, since external possessions are replaceable while the body is not, we should never permit the least injur to the body, even the loss of a hair, for the sake of any external benefit, event the throne of the Empire. For moralists such as the Confucians and Mohists, to refuse a throne would not be a proof of high-minded indifference to personal gain, but a selfish rejection of the opportunity to benefit people. They therefore derided Yang Chu as a man who would not sacrifice a hair even to benefit the whole world.<sup>3</sup>

Most twentieth-century analysts have, like Graham, argued that Yang Chu's rational egotism was quickly absorbed into Taoism, and revised and expanded by Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. That belief essentially follows the argument of traditional Confucians, who were just as happy to misrepresent and ridicule Taoist values as they were to misrepresent and ridicule those of Yang Chu. For the crowd who follows Mencius, it has always been very easy to see Chuang-tzu sitting by the bank of the river, unmoved by the floating baby, as a heartless egotist who would let baby or empire suffer destruction rather than take a responsible moral interest in them.

Is there any validity to such a critique, i.e., to the assertion that Chuang-tzu, when correctly understood, would actually have us let babies drown — or whooping cranes become extinct — rather than take the morally correct course of trying to save them? It is at this point that I wish to begin examining in some detail the assumptions implicit in such a critique, and the logic by which such conclusions have often been reached, whether by moralists like Mencius or by moralists like Arthur Danto. I shall argue, in fact, that when the moral positions of classical Taoism are properly understood, we will see good reason to reject those assumptions, and

abandon the concomitant faulty logic. I shall also argue, however, that in the final analysis Chuang-tzu will *never* dive into that river to save the baby, not because he is lacking appropriate moral compassion, but rather because his moral compassion is predicated upon a more complex vision of the nature of the world, a vision in which the only correct moral course is to watch the baby continue to float, and to take no interventional action. The basis for this argument is that there are, in fact, clear signs of implicit moral reasoning throughout the *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu*, and that the moral reasoning found there will logically lead any thoughtful person to sit tranquilly on the river bank, with heart/mind unperturbed by the apparent course of events. As seen from the *Lao-tzu*, *Chuang-tzu*, and even the *Nei-yeh*, a "Taoist sage" is someone whose insight into life is profound enough to override what he or she might characterize as the immature moral position that our impulses to take interventional action, action to save a child or a species or a planet from apparent death, are morally correct impulses. From the superior wisdom of such a sage, Mencius' argument that anyone seeing a threatened baby would feel alarm and concern is true only in regard to a person who has lost the Way, a person who falsely regards the emotional impulses that flash into being in the heart/mind as noble and trustworthy guides to proper action. Here, we see that Taoist moral principles contradict not only the moralism of Confucians like Mencius, but also the moralism of modern liberals, especially moralists who see the human being — individually and/or collectively — as the heroic savior of a threatened planet. From the Taoist position, it might even appear that the moralism of the Confucians is actually more tolerable than that of the modern liberal. At least Confucius did not commend sentimental concern for the horses that might be injured or killed when a stable burns: he reportedly reserved his moral concern for the lives of beings of our own kind (*Analects* 10:17).<sup>4</sup> Mencius, willing to commend a ruler's sentimental compassion for an ox on its way to slaughter for a sacrifice, is closer to the position of the modern liberal, in that he approves of the stirrings of the heart/mind raised by the imminent death of a supposedly innocent animal. But even Mencius, willing to extend approbation of such stirrings to serve as a moral guide for our actions toward both human and nonhuman lives, even he did not envision the modern romantic

---

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Graham, *The Book of Lieh-tzu* (London: John Murrar, 1960), 135-36.

<sup>4</sup> See my discussion of this passage in "Self-Fulfillment through Selflessness."

vision of the compassionate human as the romantic moral savior of entire nonhuman species, ecosystems, or planets. If Confucius admonished against giving thought about nonhuman spiritual beings, or about spirits of deceased humans, until we have dealt appropriately with the moral needs of the living humans around us, Mencius would seem to be prepared to go further, and to exhort us to make sure that we engage in appropriate moral action toward all the humans around us before we begin considering moral action toward other living things outside our species. The ideal of the Confucian sage-king is generally one who engenders moral harmony among human beings, not one who inflames our sentimental solicitude for cute puppies or adorable dolphins. Mencius supported the king who felt compassion for an ox not because oxen are inherently worthy of the sentimental compassion of beings like us, but rather because the incident could be turned to use to teach the king to rule his subject with appropriate moral concern. Notice that Mencius did not chide the king for having mandated the death of a helpless, innocent sheep. Modern sentimentalists, however, chide us for eating tuna because of the presumptive death of the charming dolphins caught in the tuna nets. Oddly, like Confucius when he failed to ask about the horses in the burning stable, today's sentimentalists have seldom asked about the moral shame of killing and eating the tuna themselves: as long as we save the mammals who live in the sea, there is no moral problem in killing the living things who lay eggs rather than give live birth to their young.

What would the Taoist position be in such matters? Well, I shall attempt to demonstrate that it would begin with the Confucian apathy toward horses being burned alive in a stable fire, and would proceed in a direction that will make perfect sense to any classical Taoist, but will probably shock and dismay the modern liberal who wishes to find within Taoism a justification for the romantic humanistic ideal of heroic intervention in the course of events that modern liberals have defined as appropriate moral concern, whether the course of events involves the life of a nonhuman species, the life of an ecosystem, or the life of a human facing apparent death. Unlike the modern liberal, who values actions to preserve such life as justified by moral absolutes, I shall argue that the Taoist sage envisioned by the contributors to the *Lao-tzu*, *Chuang-tzu*, and *Nei-yeh* will never under any circumstances advocate or engage in interventional action for the supposed benefit of another. I shall further argue that he or she would carefully and soundly justify this moral position, and would show reasons why the heroic moral imperative of the modern environmentalist should be considered and rejected as a viable

course of human moral behavior. The fundamental issue at stake here is the humanist assumption — shared by Mencius and the modern liberal — that the conscientious person is morally compelled to take action to intervene in events that seem to threaten "life." The Taoist moral position, I shall contend, is quite the opposite altogether: that even when "life" seems to be threatened, *the conscientious person is morally compelled to refrain from taking action*, to refrain from intervening in the events in question. To the Taoist, I shall argue, such commitment to what I shall call "responsible non-action" is the only moral course that is open to a person who truly understands and appreciates the nature of life itself. And to set aside such moral principles when one sees an ox or baby or flock of cranes endangered, simply because one feels stirrings within one's heart/mind, would be regarded as not only contrary to sound moral reasoning, but as a sign of what we might call both moral and spiritual immaturity.

### **Why It Is Wrong to Resent Unexpected Changes**

In *Chuang-tzu* 18, we find two famous stories in which a man experiences a sudden and deeply personal transformation, a transformation that strikes others around him as deeply troubling.<sup>5</sup> In one, the philosopher Hui-tzu goes to offer his sympathies to Chuang-tzu upon the event of the death of Chuang's wife. In the next story, a willow suddenly sprouts from the elbow of a fictional character. In each story, a sympathetic friend is shocked and dismayed to find that the first character in each story is not shocked and dismayed by the unexpected turn of events. In each story, the first character patiently and rationally explains the nature of life, and counsels his companion to accept the course of events that life brings to us, without imposing judgment as to the value of those events. In each case, the reader learns that it is foolish and inappropriate to feel emotional distress at such events, for a proper understanding of the real nature of life leads us to accept all events with the same equanimity, even those events that might have once sticken us as deeply distressing.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Kuo Ching-fan's edition in *Concordance to Chuang-tzu* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Yenching Institute, 1956), p. 46; and Victor H. Mair, trans., *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang-tzu* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), p. 169.



In the Taoist classic *Huai-nan-tzu*, one finds a famous story of a man who suddenly finds himself the unexpected owner of a new horse. His neighbors congratulate him on his good fortune, until his son falls from the horse and breaks his leg. The man's neighbors then act to console him on his bad fortune, until army conscriptors arrive and carry off all the able-bodied young men, leaving the injured young man behind as worthless. The lesson of the story is that when an event occurs, we are quick to judge it as fortunate or unfortunate, but our judgments are often mistaken, as later events often prove.<sup>6</sup> And one of the most heavily stressed lessons of the *Chuang-tzu* is that humans quickly judge events on the basis of what we accept on the basis of simplistic assumptions — e.g., that life is inherently better than death — and that the wise person learns to question and discard such assumptions, and forego such judgments regarding events.

When Chuang-tzu's wife died, Chuang-tzu does not argue that the world is a better place for her absence, or that his life is improved by his sudden new freedom. In fact, there is no issue in the passage of whether the world is better off with Chuang-tzu's wife alive or dead. The only issue in the passage is that people are born and that people later die, and to ignore that basic fact would display culpable stupidity. The very same lesson is impressed upon the reader of the previous passage, regarding the sudden transformation of a character's elbow. What we are taught in that passage is that life is a process of ineluctable change and transformation, and that humans would be profoundly wrong and clearly silly to object to such change. Another element of the lesson is that the nature of human life is not separate from, or other than, the nature of nonhuman life. When one says that "life is ineluctable change, and we must accept such change with serenity," one is speaking about "life" in such a way that it clearly involves the lives of individual humans just as fully as it involves the events that occur in the broader world, and vice versa. Imagine the story of the death of Chuang-tzu's wife involving, instead, the death of the species we call whooping cranes: Chuang-tzu would, in that case, patiently point out to his deeply caring but deeply shallow friend that he had indeed felt grief to see such beautiful birds come to their end, but had gone on to engage in appropriate rational reflection upon the nature of life, and had come to accept the transitory nature of all such creatures, just as in the present story Chuang-tzu had come to accept the transitory nature of his own spouse. If one must learn to accept with serenity the death of someone we love, someone without whose life our own life would have never been what it is, wouldn't the author urge us to accept that the death of some

---

<sup>6</sup> *Huai-nan-tzu* ????. Cf. *Lieh-tzu* 7: Graham, p. 168-69.

birds, birds that have never played a role in our lives the way that one's deceased spouse had done, is an event that we should accept with equanimity? If change catches up with us, even to the extent that the planet that we live on should become permanently devoid of all forms of life, the response of the author of these passages would logically be that such is the nature of things, and that crying over such a sudden turn of events would be very silly indeed, like a child crying over a spilt glass of milk, or the death of some easily replaceable goldfish. The only reason that a child cries over the death of a goldfish is that he or she has become irrationally attached to that creature as it exists in its present form, and has formed an immature sentimental bond to it. As adults, we appreciate the color and motion of fish in our aquaria, but seldom cry over the death of one of its inmates: we know very well that to cry over the death of such a fish would be silly and a sign of juvenile behavior. As our children grow, we teach them, likewise, never to follow their raw emotional responses, but rather to govern their emotions, and to learn to behave in a responsible manner, according to principles that are morally correct, whether or not they are emotionally satisfying. If, for instance, one were to see a driver accidentally run run over one's child or beloved, one's first instinct might be to attack the driver with a righteous fury, falsely equating emotional intensity and violent action with the responsible exercise of moral judgment. In general, we work to teach ourselves and each other not to respond in that way, to take a course of self-restraint, curbing emotion, lest it propel us into actions that will later, upon calm reflection, be revealed to have been emotionally satisfying but morally wrong. If I saw my child run down by a car, it might give me great emotional satisfaction to drag the driver from her car and beat her to death. But it might well turn out that she had in fact done nothing wrong, and had been driving legally and quite responsibly when a careless child suddenly ran into her path, giving her no time to stop or to evade the child. Because we have all learned that the truth of events is often not apparent to the parties that are experiencing them, we generally work to learn some degree of self-control, so that our immediate emotional reaction to events does not mislead us into a foolish course of action.

Now if we take these facts and transfer them into our consideration of Chuang-tzu and Mencius on the riverbank, that episode should, logically, be read as follows. If Mencius feels an emotional urge to jump into the river to save the baby, his emotional response to the baby's presence there must be seen as immature and irresponsible. After all, one might muse, one never knows, any more than the man with the horse, when an event that seems fortunate is actually

unfortunate, or vice versa. What if the baby in the water had been the ancient Chinese equivalent of Adolf Hitler, and the saving of young Adolf — though occasioned by the deepest feelings of compassion, and a deep-felt veneration for "life" — led to the systematic extermination of millions of innocent men, women, and children? If one knew, in retrospect, that Hitler's atrocities could have been totally prevented by the simple moral act of refraining from leaping to save an endangered child, would one not conclude, by sound moral reasoning, that letting that particular baby drown would have represented a supremely moral act?

How, Chuang-tzu constantly challenges us, how can we possibly know what course of action is truly justified? What if, just for the sake of argument, a dreadful plague soon wipes out millions of innocent people, and the pathogen involved is soon traced back to an organism that had once dwelt harmlessly in the system of a certain species of bird, such as, for instance, the whooping crane? In retrospect, one can imagine, the afflicted people of the next century — bereft of their wives or husbands, parents or children — might curse the day when simple-minded do-gooders of the twentieth-century had brazenly intervened with the natural course of events and preserved the cursed species of crane, thereby damning millions of innocents to suffering and death. We assume that such could never happen, that all living things are somehow inherently good to have on the planet, that saving the earthly existence of any life-form is somehow inherently a virtuous action. But our motivations in such cases are clearly, from a Taoist point of view, so shallow and foolish as to warrant no respect. If Mencius, or a sentimental modern lover of "life," were to leap into the river and save a floating baby, he or she would doubtless exult in his or her selfless act of moral heroism, deriving a sense of satisfaction from having done a good deed, and having prevented a terrible tragedy. But who can really know when a given event is truly a tragedy, or perhaps, like the horse that breaks a boy's leg, really a blessing in disguise. Since human wisdom, Chuang-tzu suggests, is inherently incapable of successfully comprehending the true meaning of events as they are happening, when can we ever truly know that our emotional urge to save babies, pretty birds, and entertaining sea-mammals is really an urge that is morally sound. The Taoist answer seems to be that we can never be sure, and even if the extinction of Chuang-tzu's wife or of the whooping crane really brought no actual blessing to the world, such events are natural and proper in the way of life itself, and to bemoan such events is to show that one is no more insightful about life than a child who sentimentally cries over the loss of a toy, a glass of milk, a beloved pet, or even her mommy, run over by a drunken driver. The Taoist lesson seems,

in this regard, to be the same in each case: things happen, and some things cause us distress because we attach ourselves sentimentally to certain people, objects, and patterns of life; when those people, objects, or patterns of life take a sudden or drastic turn into a very different direction, a mature and responsible person calms his or her irrational emotions, and takes the morally responsible course of simply accepting the new state of things.

### **"Life" in Different Early Taoist Texts**

A critic might object to the foregoing argument, saying that it reflects only one aspect of the thought found in the *Chuang-tzu*, and neglects certain other common themes in classical Taoist texts. For instance, numerous passages of all three classic texts clearly assume that there is indeed a value in preserving one's life, and that death is not a desirable event. There are passages in the *Tao te ching* that commend an attitude that in at least some regards resembles altruism — i.e., the *Tao te ching* commends behavior calculated to benefit others. And there are at least occasions in the later history of Taoism when leading representatives of the tradition displayed public concern for the welfare of other living things, and even received government subsidies for setting aside tracts to serve as a refuge for wildlife.<sup>7</sup> Surely, therefore, it would be inaccurate to say that Taoist principles forbid us to care about other living things.

This set of issues is complicated by the fact that the early Taoist texts not only disagree with each other, but also display internal complexities that deserve our attention. If, for instance, *Tao te ching* 49 suggests that the sage looks upon all the people as little children, another passage, the opening of chapter 5, suggests that the sage might have little or no concern as to whether such children should live or die. It reads:

Heaven and Earth are not "benevolent" (*jen*):

They take all things (lit., "the myriad things") to be [like] straw-dogs.

The Sage is not "benevolent":

---

<sup>7</sup> See Russell Kirkland, "The Roots of Altruism in the Taoist Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986), 72-74.

He takes all people (lit., "the hundred clans") to be [like] straw-dogs.<sup>8</sup>

Though interpretations of this passage vary, it is hard to miss the implication that one ought to live with no regard for others, just as, for instance, nature's rains will come regardless of whether any given living thing — or species — is thereby given more abundant life, or drowned.<sup>9</sup> The argument here, as I read it, is that while feelings that would seem to necessitate intervention — e.g., a feeling that one ought to act to preserve the whooping cranes — may be visible in some humans' lives, they are not evident in the broader world, beyond human society. Though "we" may be "caring" or "compassionate," Heaven-and-Earth show no respect, compassion, or shame when they send a typhoon toward human habitations, when they afflict a population (human or nonhuman) with an epidemic disease, or when they watch idly while humans alter the habitat of an endangered species. The lesson of *Tao te ching* 5 is not that one should emulate the impartial Tao except when someone or something is felt to be threatened. The lesson is that *one should emulate Heaven-and-Earth, not those human individuals who have cultivated such idealized emotional attachments as Mencius seems to have praised. If one judges human activity by how well it correlates to activity seen in "nature,"* then the Mencian "moral feelings," which are absent in "nature," actually appear quite unnatural. It thus follows that what we might esteem as "compassion for all living things" could logically be esteemed in Confucian terms, but makes no sense whatever in Taoist terms.

Here we see a key issue that separated the views of the ancient Taoists from those of the ancient Confucians. Confucians based crucial elements of their moral reasoning on the assumption that humans are the world's principal (if not only) agents of goodness: "nature," Confucians reason, may indeed be amoral, but human beings at times display compassionate feelings, and they ought to act upon those feelings. But the composer of the opening lines of *Tao*

---

<sup>8</sup> Translation mine. The term "hundred clans" here is exactly the same term (pai-hsing) found in *Tao te ching* 49, where the sage is said to treat them as children.

<sup>9</sup> I would argue that it is necessary to take into account here the intellectual history of ancient China, for "benevolence" is not just a term of ordinary discourse, but a technical term in the vocabulary of the classical Confucians, particularly that of Mengzi (Mencius). One can in fact read this passage as a direct argument against Mengzi's teachings that one

*te ching* 5, like the composer of many key sections of the *Chuang-tzu*, clearly challenge their reader to question and reject such Confucian assumptions. The common assumption of the Confucians — like the common assumption of modern liberals — is that the world, if left to itself, inherently tends toward chaos, and therefore requires the redemptive activity of human society.<sup>10</sup> Where modern liberals part company from the Confucians is that the latter reserve such redemptive activity for the "heroic" individual (or group), who boldly and morally do what the rest of society is too lazy or stupid to do: i.e., save the world.

If we leave aside such self-serving emotional baggage, and simply analyze the texts of classical Taoism as we have received them, I find there little support for the modern predilection for *salvific human action*, and no support at all for the modern ideal of *heroic* human action. The *Nei-yeh* unconcerned with such matters: its concern is with the internal correction of the bio-spiritual condition of the individual. The *Chuang-tzu* seems to laugh at the very conceit that humans can fully appreciate what is going on around us. And the *Tao te ching* seems to say something much more disturbing and uncomfortable to the modern mind: the *Tao te ching* seems to argue quite persistently that humans can not and ought not intervene in the world, because there is a greater than us at work in the world. This quiet but insistent teaching of the *Tao te ching* has generally been ignored or denied by modern interpreters, because it says something that the post-Enlightenment mind cannot imagine as conceivably being true: that is, that there is a real and active force at work in the world that is greater than that of human beings, however wise. The *Tao te ching*, in fact, contrasts the effectiveness of that power to the misguided, self-defeating human belief in the supreme efficacy of their own interventional action.

The *Tao te ching* asserts that the natural reality it calls the Tao is a perfect and ineluctable force for the fulfillment of life. Far from needing humans to complete its activity, that "Tao" is, despite appearances, the most powerful force that exists, and it *inevitably* leads all situations to a healthy fulfillment — *provided* human beings *not interfere* with it.<sup>11</sup> It is this assumption of a benign and wholly trustworthy natural order — seldom perceptible in the *Chuang-tzu* — that

---

ought to cultivate a set of moral feelings (compassion, respect, shame, etc.) that he alleges to be intrinsic to human nature.

<sup>10</sup> Such is clearly Xunzi's position.

provides a potential basis for a non-humanistic religious morality. From this perspective, Confucians — and modern liberals — *wrongly* fear that life will end in chaos without the redemptive activity of humanity: in truth, because of the beneficent activity of the natural force called the Tao, the *Tao te ching* teaches that we can rest assured that life will proceed harmoniously, except for the deleterious effects of misguided human activity. *Human activity* (*wei*) thus *is not — indeed, cannot be — redemptive at all*, but precisely the opposite. For that reason, our moral responsibility is to *refrain* from such activity, to desist from misguided interference in the inherently trustworthy tendencies of Heaven-and-Earth.

### **"Cultivating Life"**

The key issue here is that the texts of early Taoism see life, and our ruminations upon our duties to those around us, in terms that are fully comprehensible in their own terms, but utterly incomprehensible if viewed through the lenses of Confucian or Western values. For instance, a recurrent theme of Taoism through the ages has been the advocacy of *yang-sheng*, a term most often translated as "fostering life." The problem here is in the precise range of meaning of the Taoist term *sheng*, as compared and contrasted with the range of meaning of such modern terms as "Life." It seems clear from the texts before us that the ancient Taoists viewed the task of "fostering life" in terms very different from those of the Confucians. Even if Confucius would never have advocated letting the horses in a burning stable die, the preponderance of the data seems to indicate that the primary concern of most Confucians was with the welfare of human beings. But the term "life" clearly seems to extend beyond such a concern, for "life" is, as we generally see it, a characteristic feature of a broad range of "living things" beyond the human species. The question before us is that of whether the Taoist ideal of *yang-sheng*, or "fostering life," corresponds to any of our modern ideals. Does it, for instance, suggest that the follower of Taoist teachings ought to engage him- or herself in actions calculated to preserve the "life" of nonhuman species? My answer is that an honest reading of the classical texts leads to a very negative answer. That is, the Taoist concern with "life" is not only quite distinct with the concerns of modern environmentalists, but may even in some regards be antithetical.

---

<sup>11</sup> See further my entry, "Taoism," in *Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia*, edited by J. J. Chambliss (New York and London: Garland

The intriguing paradox seems to be that medieval Taoist literature abounds in stories of exemplary men and women who earned recognition — and on occasion, the boon of immortality — by secretly performing compassionate acts, particularly for people and animals disdained by others.<sup>12</sup> Is that because Taoists recognized "life" as a category that included the "lives" of nonhuman creatures, the way that modern environmentalists do? To argue in that manner would seem to argue ultimately that Taoists proceeded from Christian assumptions, i.e., that all living things are equally God's creations, and are therefore deserving of equal respect. The modern extension of that assumption involves the modern biological concept of "life": any creature, human or otherwise, is considered as living if it has been born, has not yet died, and is therefore capable of having a meaningful set of "life-experiences." But are such assumptions shared by the classical Taoists, or even compatible with the classical Taoists' understanding of the reality of which we are a part? In a 1979 publication, Norman J. Girardot argued otherwise: "Indeed," he stated, "the very idea of life or health, including as it does both physical and spiritual dimensions, evokes an archaic aura of religious meaning — that the fullness of life is supranormal by conventional standards."<sup>13</sup> Here Girardot raises a point of fundamental importance, that is, that from the Taoist perspective "life" is not a mere biological phenomenon — neither in humans or in nonhumans — but rather a meaningful process that extends into a dimension that extends beyond, and is logically distinguishable from, the visible dimension of biological activity of various human or nonhuman bodies. To argue for preserving the biological activity of bodies — individual or species-wide, human or non-human — is to deny the most vital aspect of the entire Taoist tradition — an enduring call to see our reality as extending into the unseen — and to embrace a definition of "life" that is ultimately materialistic and, for that reason, essentially irreligious.<sup>14</sup> What is so incredibly difficult for the modern mind to accept is that the Taoists of ancient China valued "life," but that they did not value what modern minds tend to define as "life." To Taoists, I have argued, the reality of a human being's life extends far beyond the

---

Publishing, 1996), 633-36.

<sup>12</sup> See further my entry, "Taoism," in *The Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 2nd edition (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 5: 2463-2469.

<sup>13</sup> Girardot, "Taoism," in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 1631-38, 1st ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 1631.

<sup>14</sup> See Kirkland, 1995 (see above, note 12).



biological activity of his or her body, and in those terms a medical model that defines "life" in strictly biological terms seems quite perverted. So when the Taoists urged us to "foster life," they meant something that was utterly different from a modern person's urge to keep Aunt Emily breathing, or to keep the whooping cranes breeding.

Our modern problem is that we often have trouble assessing such teachings rationally. We tend so often to invest all such discussions with emotion, especially the idealized emotion of "compassion" or "sympathy," whereby we deny the validity of death or extinction of one or more living beings, and validate human efforts to prevent such events. Imbued as we are with the values born of Judaeo-Christian doctrines — values that teach us that we violate our God-given life if we let others die — modern people tend to equate "saving the whales" with due and appropriate concern for living things other than ourselves. As hard as it may be for us to believe, the teachings of the ancient Taoists would have us believe otherwise. Just as Heaven-and-Earth does not care whether a tornado, earthquake or hurricane destroy any millions of living things, so the Tao of the *Tao te ching*, *Chuang-tzu* and the *Nei-yeh* provides all things with an environment conducive to a natural span of life, and also with an environment that gives all things a natural death. To oppose that arrangement, and rage against an environment that provides us with a natural death as well as with a long and natural life, is to deny the fundamental teachings of Taoism, and to deny the very existence of the fundamental reality for Taoists of every description — the Tao itself. If we read the Taoist classics honestly, we see that the Tao provides for a full a natural life for all things, and also for their deaths. And we see that the proper attitude of a human who understands these things is and must be to sit down, stop whining, and accept the natural reality of which we are a part.

### **"Compassion"? The Taoist Perspective**

Chapter 67 of the *Tao te ching* (in the traditional numbering) reads as follows:

I constantly have three treasures:

Hold onto them and treasure them.

The first is called "proper consideration" (*tz'u*).

The second is called "restraint."

The third is "not daring to be at the forefront of the world."

Now being considerate, one can be courageous.

Being restrained, one can be expansive.

Not daring to be at the forefront of the world, one can be the leader of the things that are completed.<sup>15</sup>

While the precise sense of the passage is open to argument, one plausible interpretation would be as follows: "*having the courage to hold back in regard to one's ideas-and-feelings makes it possible for one to be courageous in extending oneself in considerate regard for others.*" This passage is significant, because it seems to be one of the few passages in the Taoist classics that commend some sort of concern for others. A key element in the passage is the term *tz'u*, which is usually translated as "compassion." The term "compassion" has lots of baggage for Western interpreters, and no one, to my knowledge, has made any meaningful effort to explain what this passage really says. How can the reader of this passage be expected to be "compassionate," when he is elsewhere urged to treat the whole of humanity as "straw-dogs." The answer is that we must be careful not to explicate this passage on the basis of Confucian assumptions, or Christian assumptions, or even modern liberal assumptions. It would seem illogical to most of us to argue that we should look upon baby seals or whooping cranes as "straw-dogs," and nonetheless to advocate "compassion." The problem is that most of us today have tried to interpret the Taoist classics as though they are a part of our own cultural tradition, a part of our own philosophical and religious canon, rather than the expressions of an alien set of values of a non-Confucian component of Chinese society in an age several times removed from our own. If we take the texts on their *own* terms, rather than on *our* terms, it is not really difficult to make sense of most such passages.

The reader of the *Tao te ching*, for instance, is certainly enjoined not to practice *jen*, the Confucian ideal of "benevolence." Since Heaven-and-Earth do not practice *jen*, there is certainly no good reason for any of *us* to do so. If we see a baby tottering on the edge of a well, a hurricane heading for a village, or an environmental change that seems to threaten the existence of a natural species or its habitat, the Taoist response to all such situations is clearly the same:

---

<sup>15</sup> On the translation of the terms *jian* ("restraint") and *cheng qi* ("things that are completed"), see my textual notes in "Self-Fulfillment through Selflessness."

do not, *do not* take interventional action! Only a fool would think himself wiser than the processes of nature itself.

But doesn't such a position leave us with an apparent moral quandary? Wouldn't it be immoral to stand idly by and do nothing while a baby, a town, or a species is exterminated? Wouldn't inaction in such cases be immoral? Don't we have a moral responsibility to take heroic action to save those who are endangered, and thereby "foster life"?

The answer to all these questions is a resounding yes — provided, that is, that one is a Christian, Confucian, or modern liberal! For everyone in those traditions, it would be unthinkable to stand idly by and allow anyone — human or nonhuman, individual or species — simply to die. But I shall be radical enough to argue that there is another perspective from which to view such issues, the perspective of those in ancient China who actually took seriously three utterly preposterous propositions: those propositions are (1) that the Tao exists, and (2) that it operates wisely and reliably, without human input or assistance, and (3) that anything that any human attempts to do in the world will inevitably interfere with that operation, leading ineluctably to unintended but quite avoidable tragedy.

Such propositions are utterly at odds with certain fundamental assumptions of modern thought — secular or religious. To followers of Western religions, God created a world full of living things, then left them to fend for themselves, subject only to the stewardship of human beings, God's most intelligent creation. On the basis of that assumption, humans appear to have a moral responsibility to take action to protect and defend other creatures when necessary. Of course, such assumptions do not explain why God would create sentient beings and leave them at the mercy of processes beyond their control: for some unexplained reason, God — who is all-wise and all-loving — is unwilling or unable to safeguard his own living creations, and must rely upon his human creations to do that job for him.

The secular perspective, derived from the scenario just described, is that living things evolved without any input from higher forces, and are therefore at the mercy of natural processes and human actions. From this perspective, as from the Western religious perspective, there is no benign force that can be trusted to provide for the general welfare of earth's inhabitants, so when nonhuman creatures are threatened, there is no hope for them unless heroically beneficent humans take interventional action to save them. Humans who accept such assumptions and act upon them are widely regarded as "enlightened" and "compassionate."

But such perspectives on the nature of life on earth make certain assumptions that no Taoist is ever going to make. Notice, for instance, that from the modern perspective, "natural processes" are not inherently benign: they either pose threats, such as when one creature's expanding habitat threatens another, or they are too weak to withstand the effects of human activity. From the modern perspective, (1) *there is no force involved in life's affairs that is as powerful as that of human beings*, and (2) while there may be a wiser consciousness than ours, it does not systematically protect or care for living things, so *there is also no wiser involvement in life's affairs than our own*. Ultimately, these perspectives assume human power and wisdom to be supreme, and they assume that "nature" is guided and protected by no benign forces beyond ourselves.

From the perspective of the texts of ancient Taoism, all such assumptions are patently absurd, and reflect nothing more than the perpetual human glorification of itself. Some misinterpreters of Taoism happily assume that the only human intervention that is deleterious is "their" intervention, never "my" intervention. That is, the interventional activity of a construction crew building a dam on a river is regarded as an unwarranted imposition upon nature; but the interventional activity of a legislator or protest group intended to stop the building of the dam is somehow regarded as not being interventional activity at all. The interventional activity of the "enlightened" and "compassionate" hero is defined away in a self-serving defense of egotistical activity. If we recognize the ancient Chinese term *wei* as denoting "human action intended to achieve results," then it necessarily follows that action intended to stop the construction of a dam, the draining of a wetland, or the burning of a rain-forest is precisely such action. The only difference is that the developers and their opponents desire different results. And as everyone seems to know, the view of the ancient Taoists is that "human action intended to achieve results" is contrary to the Tao, whatever the motivation for such action.

So is the Taoist perspective on life that we ought to stop caring about the state of the world? The answer to that question is both yes and no. And in trying to understand those answers, we must be careful to remember the ancient Taoist assumptions about life, which are in certain basic ways utterly alien to all modern assumptions. In relation to the baby floating down the river, the true Taoist answer is not the answer provided by the student whom I quoted. Chuang-tzu would sit and watch the baby float down the river, I contend, not because Mencius

would already have jumped in to save the threatened child. Such an answer would be false because it assumes: (1) that the possible death of the child can and must be assumed to be a bad thing, and (2) that human interventional action is actually proper and necessary to prevent catastrophes from occurring to innocent, helpless living things. Neither of those assumptions would be in accord with the contents of the *Tao te ching*, *Chuang-tzu*, or *Nei-yeh*. From the perspective of ancient Taoists, there is no way to know whether any given event is "good" or "bad," for human ability to comprehend the processes of life is grossly fallible and often tragically mistaken. The results of our incomprehension of life is that we frequently take well-intentioned actions that are meant to achieve good results, but generally lead to results that are actually not good at all. From the Taoist perspective, it therefore follows that the only good actions are actions that are not taken, and the only good people are the *people who are thoughtful enough, considerate enough, humble enough, and brave enough not to take any interventional action at all.*

From the Taoist perspective, I shall argue, it is only such people who can truly be regarded as enlightened and morally responsible. The basis for my contention is that unlike all modern thinkers, the Taoists of ancient China took seriously an idea that all modern thinkers regard as preposterous. That idea is the idea that living things do not live in an uncaring world, in a world in which no higher power is at work in the lives of living things or the events of the natural world. "Nature" is not a morally insensate juggernaut that sometimes threatens the deserved well-being of innocent living things. A flood that profoundly affects the living inhabitants of a floodplain is not in any sense whatever a disaster or a catastrophe, and there is no sense in which human activity intended to control or prevent such events could possibly be considered wise or appropriate action. The reason for this fact is that — contrary to the assumptions of all modern interpreters, secular or religious — the contention of the *Tao te ching* is that the natural processes of the world are themselves guided and directed by a natural force that is not only utterly benign, but actually beneficent. Secondly, the *Tao te ching* argues clearly and repeatedly that that beneficent natural force is — despite our beliefs to the contrary — actually the most powerful force in the universe. Thirdly, the *Tao te ching* argues clearly and repeatedly that that natural force is — despite our beliefs to the contrary — continuously and ineluctably at work in all the processes and events of the world, whether we can perceive or appreciate it or not. "Returning to the Tao" in the *Tao te ching* means learning to see that force

at work in the world and to rely upon it, rather than our own beliefs or actions, for the fulfillment of the health and harmony of all living things, human and otherwise.

But doesn't the *Tao te ching* enjoin the reader to somehow do something to correct a world that is now in disarray? Doesn't the *Tao te ching* urge the reader to engage in new and different behaviors, so that the world may thereby be redeemed from the problems that currently afflict it.

The answer to these questions appear to be "yes." But note that neither question actually calls for humans to take any action to intervene in worldly events. Rather, the reader of the *Tao te ching* is enjoined to make a bold and meaningful change in the world by (1) beginning the bold and enlightened process of refraining from interventional activity, and (2) allowing the inherent beneficent forces of the world — forces that cannot be aided by human activity — to hold sway. The bold transition to new and different behavior that are urged upon the reader is a transition away from the assumption that humans can or ought to intervene in life's events. The only wise and beneficent behavior in which humans can engage is a behavior of humble and enlightened self-restraint, self-restraint that is necessary to ensure that we no longer interfere with the beneficent activity of the benign natural force called "the Tao."

In all modern thought, as indeed, in the thought of Confucians like Mencius, humans are morally required not merely to see themselves as meaningful agents, but also to act as agents, to act in such a way as to ensure that events take the most desirable course.<sup>16</sup> But from the Taoist perspective such assumptions are based upon a false understanding of the nature of life itself, and of the place of human beings in the natural order. In a nutshell, the proper role of human beings in the unfolding of life's events is no role whatsoever. *Humans are not, and can never be, agents of good in the world, and human actions can never enhance the conditions of life itself.* In the minds of many early Taoists, the wise and responsible person will, in the imagery of *Tao te ching* 80, live peacefully in a village that he or she never leaves, even though he or she hear the barking of the dogs, or the rumble of the bulldozers, in the next village. The Taoist perspective

---

<sup>16</sup> James Rachels defines "the conscientious moral agent" as "someone who is concerned impartially with the interests of everyone affected by what he or she does; who carefully sifts facts and examines their implications; who accepts principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure they are sound; who is willing to 'listen to reason' even when it means that his or her earlier convictions may have to be revised; and who, finally, is willing to act on the results of this deliberation." I respond more fully to this definition in "Self-Fulfillment through Selflessness."

is that the wise and enlightened person makes the moral decision to trust the natural forces of the world, and to refrain from interventional activity — activity that inherently assumes the non-existence of benign natural forces, and assumes the sovereignty of human wisdom and action in a senseless and chaotic world.

Because there actually is a benign natural force at work in the world, any extraneous action on the part of humans can logically only cause disturbance. So from the Taoist perspective, *the "conscientious moral agent" is actually someone who is willing not to act on the results of moral deliberation*. It is not that one should act *without* moral deliberation, or that one should not engage in moral deliberation. Quite to the contrary, one should deliberate appropriately, understand the nature of life correctly, and then bring one's behavior into accord with reality by *refraining from taking action*. A person who proceeds in this way is not a heartless villain who allows catastrophes to occur, but rather a person of enlightened restraint, by virtue of whose restraint catastrophes are prevented. In a world without human intervention, all things grow, live, and die in accord with the natural order of things, in a world where a benign natural reality called Tao provides for their welfare throughout the entire process.

But by this definition, the natural order, which we are enjoined to respect and uphold by means of conscientious non-action, is a natural order that includes death. In fact, it includes death as a universal event, an event that ends the life-process for all living things. By this definition, death is not a horrible destruction of a meaningful life-process, but the natural and correct completion of the meaningful life-process. Life, as *Chuang-tzu* says, is the companion of death, and vice versa. Neither can be demonstrated to be more meaningful or more desirable than the other, and both *Chuang-tzu* and *Lieh-tzu* are replete with characters who learn that existence after death is actually as good as, or even better than, existence in life. For the person who truly understands life, death is the ultimately natural event. And if this be so for individual lives, no matter how respected or beloved a person's life may be, it would logically seem to hold also for the life of a species, or even for the life of a planet. When *Chuang-tzu's* wife died, and even when old "Master Lao," died, the wise and enlightened characters in *Chuang-tzu's* text put the matter into correct universal perspective, restrain their emotions, and admire the beauty of a universe wherein death is a natural and proper aspect of life. To have done otherwise would have been to demonstrate one's inability to understand and appreciate the integrity of life itself and the meaningfulness of natural process. To have done otherwise would have demonstrated a

false and pernicious belief that the event that we call death is a nasty and undesirable event, an event that negates the value of what has gone before it. Such beliefs, the Taoist texts show, were common among the shallow-minded denizens of ancient China, just as they are common among both the religious and the secular minds of the modern world. The death of Chuang's wife, the death of "Master Lao," the death of the dinosaur, the death of the whooping crane: all of these are to be accepted with tranquillity, and with respect for the integrity and value of the natural processes of life, forces that ineluctably bring natural fulfillment to all living things, as long as humans do not disrupt the harmonious order of nature by interfering with it. If we see a baby floating down a river, we must learn not to impose our false impressions of wisdom upon the wisdom of nature itself, for nature is not cruel or insensate, but benign. It is only by an act of hubris and folly that we presume our human wisdom to be greater than that which is built into the operation of the world itself. The world itself is not merely designed wisely then left to run unattended. It is designed wisely and operated wisely, by a force that is like a caring mother. It nurtures and cares for all things, then at the end of their natural lives, they return to it. Treasuring tranquility, the conscientious Taoist observes that return, with awareness and due respect, and in due course he or she, too, follows the same course, returning without fuss to the immaterial state from which he or she originally emerged.

### **The Transformative Power of the Perfected Person**

The modern mind finds it easy to reject such interpretations, however sound, because they not only fail to help us solve our problems in a happy way, but they challenge us to question whether or not we really ought to try to solve those problems. Such implications can be deeply unsettling, because a fundamental thrust of Western humanism is that humans are different from and superior to banana slugs because humans can analyze problems and take action to solve them. From that perspective, refusal to engage in such problem-solving activity would reduce us to the status of the banana slug, and would thus constitute a shameful abnegation of our moral duties. Neither secular nor religious minds in the modern West can find justification for the proposition that the state of affairs in the world around us is, to be blunt, simply none of our business. That some Taoists texts tell us to see life in those terms is unacceptable to many, so rather than sacrifice the beauty of Taoist naturalism by rejecting Taoism as unhelpful, they simply redefine Taoism to suit their own sensibilities, denying the very presence of teachings



that offend our modern perspectives. How dare one suggest that the sage who follows the Tao would really take the same course as a banana slug, watching dispassionately as life's strange pageant unfolds around us? Surely humans are superior to the other creatures, like the slug, who allow life to proceed on its own course, because humans are *capable* of intervening in life's events. From the perspective of classical Taoism, Western humanism makes the mistake of assuming that the *ability* to intervene in life's events translates into a moral duty to do so. The constant and unmistakable teaching of the *Tao te ching* is that humans are indeed capable of intervening in life's events, but the evidence of life, which humans constantly ignore, is that such intervention is destructive to all involved, and that we therefore have a moral duty to *refrain* from taking such actions.

Such a perspective will strike many modern minds as a heartless and unthinkable one. But that is because we have modern minds, and our fundamental assumptions are utterly at odds with those of the producers of the Taoist texts of ancient China. We assume, for instance, that beneficent involvement with the world around us must inevitably involve interventional activity. But that is because we are not Taoists. A careful re-reading of the Taoist texts of ancient China, as well as of many later texts, shows that the Taoists who told us to leave the world alone were neither heartless nor defeatist: they merely advocated a form of beneficent involvement in the world that we today dismiss as impossible, because in our terms it is wholly inconceivable. That is the teaching that the transformation of oneself into a sagely being, in accord with the deeper realities of life, has a corresponding effect on everyone and everything around one, extending ultimately to envelope the whole world. As a matter of fact, when one transforms one's being into a state or process that is in harmony with life's true realities, that state or process has a beneficent effect upon the world around one, and facilitates the reversion of all things to a naturally healthy and harmonious condition. This teaching is vaguely suggested in *Chuang-tzu* and the *Nei-yeh*, more clearly suggested in the *Tao te ching*, and more fully adumbrated in texts of Han times and beyond. Many Chinese writers, starting with the editor of the *Tao te ching*, found it hard to resist the impulse to express such teachings as teachings that referred to the life of the ruler. The *Tao te ching*, of course, maintains quite clearly that when the ruler refrains from interventional activity and cleaves to the unitary unseen reality called the Tao, the world inevitably reverts to its natural and proper condition. Today, of course, we are all quite sure that such teachings are preposterous and unthinkable, and therefore we do not think them.

Apparently, there were similar responses to such teachings in ancient China, for the composer of sections of the *Tao te ching* laments that although his teachings are informed by a powerful ruling force, people do not believe in it, and therefore do not believe his teachings. He insists, nonetheless, that we *should* believe them, and the respectful reader today should at least ponder the shape and contents of such teachings.

A passage of the *Nei-yeh*, as usual, quite vague, sates that when one has attained a proper state of well-managed tranquility, one "sets in motion the vital breath (*yün ch'i*), and one's mental and physical processes become like those of Heaven."<sup>17</sup> The meaning of this passage remains unclear, but other passages more clearly suggest that the properly tranquilized individual can and does transform those around him/her:

To transform without altering the *ch'i*,  
To change without altering the awareness,  
Only the gentleman (*chün-tzu*) who clings to oneness is able to do this!  
If one can cling to oneness and not lose it, one can master (*chün*) the myriad things.  
The gentleman acts on things; he is not acted on by things.

---

<sup>17</sup> Translation mine. I use the edition reproduced in Tzu-shu erh-shih-pa chung (Twenty-eight Classical Texts; Taipei: Kuang-wen, 1979), I, 621-24. The passage in question (624 line 6) is found in section N of Rickett's 1965 translation (p. 167); section XIV.2 of his 1998 translation (p. 54); and section XXIV of Roth's translation (Lopez, p. 133; Roth translates *yün ch'i* as "revolving the vital breath"). See W. Allyn Rickett, *Kuan-tzu: A Repository of Early Chinese Thought* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1965); Guanzi: *Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, Vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Harold D. Roth, "The Inner Cultivation Tradition of Early Daoism," in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 123-38. Roth is currently completing a full translation of the text.

From the orderliness of having attained oneness  
He has a well-governed heart/mind (*hsin*) within himself.  
(Consequently,) well-governed words issue from his mouth,  
And well-governed activity is extended to others.  
In this way, he governs the world.  
When a single word is obtained, the world submits;  
When a single word is fixed, the world heeds.  
This is what is called "public rightness" (*kung*).<sup>18</sup>

This passage seems to maintain that a highly accomplished practitioner can, by what we might call meditational practice, achieve the ability to exert influence over the world. Such a teaching is so alien to anything found in our modern world that our first, and indeed second, impulse is to ignore it as the silly exaggeration of an unenlightened mind. But for hundreds of years — indeed, to some extent, throughout Chinese history — bright and thoughtful people untainted by Western rationalism or theism have found such ideas eminently sensible and worthy of being followed in our own personal lives.

Let me propose that what we see here is what we might like to regard as "the other side" of the Taoist rejection of interventional activity. The teachings of classical Taoism quite clearly tell us to keep our hands off the processes at work in the world: "the world," says *Tao te ching* 29, "is a spiritual vessel, and one cannot act upon it; one who acts upon it destroys it." Modern interpreters often like to think that such statements refer only to "bad" interventional activity, like that of the dam-builders, not to "good" interventional activity, like that of environmental activists. But the text of the *Tao te ching* cannot be read as supporting any such interpretation: interventional activity is interventional activity, and it is inherently destructive and improper.

But what of modes of human involvement with the world that do not involve interventional activity? What if, as the *Nei-yeh* and *Tao te ching* teach, a sufficient degree of personal self-cultivation can and will result in a beneficent transformation of other living things, a transformation that reaches ultimately to the furthest extent of the world? Such a

---

<sup>18</sup> Text, p. 622, translation again mine. Cf. Rickett 1965: 161 (section D); Rickett 1998: 44 (section VII.1). Roth's 1993 translation of the passage (Lopez, 133) is incomplete.

transformation, our texts seem to suggest, are benign and desirable, for they effect a therapeutic or salvific metamorphosis throughout the world, while avoiding the deleterious effects that are inherent in interventional activity. Some passages suggest that this can be so because the spiritual consciousness of the fully cultivated individual render that person wholly homologous with the benign unseen realities of the universe as a whole, the realities that are often called "Tao." A person who practices sufficient restraint can achieve a state of tranquility that is qualitatively identical with that of the beneficent natural force called the Tao, a force that achieves its ends without taking action, benefitting all living things without involving itself actively with them, a force as imperceptible and insipid as the live-giving force of the natural substance called water. In ancient China, readers of these texts were taught to have faith in the imperceptible existence and inexhaustible potency of such powers, and to rely upon one's cultivation of such powers to effect a positive transformation of all living things. Reader are warned that any other course of action, no matter how well-intentioned, would inevitably disrupt the subtle array of natural processes that are invisibly at work in the world, and would thereby harm the world rather than help it.

Chapter 35 of the *Tao te ching* says:

Grasp the "Great Form" and go into the world.

In going, no harm is done:

Peace and well-being [ensue].

Music and delicacies [can induce] wayfarers to stay.

As for talk of the Tao, how insipid and tasteless!

Looked for, it is imperceptible.

Listened for, it is inaudible.

Used, it is inexhaustible.

I propose that before we dismiss the message of such texts, we make sure that we carefully examine our own axiomatic assumptions. Before we conclude that Taoist teachings, when correctly understood, are impractical, we should re-examine our culturally constructed belief that there is no such thing as what the Taoists call "Tao," and no validity to their call for us to return to it, rather than attempt to manage the world through interventional activity. Redemptive human activity, these texts argue, is not only unnecessary, but totally impossible, and the sage is someone who accepts that fact, lets the natural processes of life go forth on their own

imperceptible courses, and accept the fact that we can do nothing to improve the world's condition, other than by restraining our impulse to act and our hubristic conceit that our actions are heroically salvific.